

USI Voter Registration & Reform Position Paper 2018

A chara,

The Union of Students in Ireland is widely recognised and acknowledged as a key and indeed, essential driver of youth voter registration in the Irish state.

During the 2015 marriage equality referendum, USI was the main organisation registering young people to vote and we conducted a large-scale direct voter registration drive (where we sent off 27,633 forms directly to local and city councils).

Every year, we hand out tens of thousands of forms to students via our local students' unions, and we have learned that there are many inconsistencies with the voter registration system in Ireland and much room for improvement. Between September and November of 2017, we registered just over 18,000 students with the National #GetRegd campaign.

It's important that we continue to engage these voters and improving the system will make it easier for persons who wish to be included in the register in future, as well as making it easier for organisations like USI to register students to vote to ensure and encourage active citizenship.

Voter registration and enfranchisement is an area concerning all political parties and public representatives and we urge you to raise this issue within your party or group.

We look forward to working with you on this issue.



Michael Kerrigan

President

Union of Students in Ireland



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Union of Students in Ireland

About USI

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the national representative body for third level students' unions in Ireland. Founded in 1959, USI now represents more than 374,000 students in 34 colleges across the island of Ireland.

The goal of the USI is to work for the rights of students and a fair and equal third level education system in Ireland. USI is also a member of the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI), which represents organisations working with over 380,000 young people nationwide, and The Wheel, the support and representative body connecting community and voluntary organisations and charities across Ireland.

USI has a positive relationship with the Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government in collaborating on national campaigns such as the Homes For Study campaign.

BACKGROUND

Every year over 60,000 young people turn 18 and become eligible to vote, yet our cumbersome and outdated system makes it difficult for many of them to get on the electoral roll. In 2015-2016, 43,460 new entrants enrolled into higher education in Ireland who fall into the 18-25 age bracket, meaning that incoming first years are a core demographic to target to register people to vote.

As one of the most mobile populations, students represent a real challenge for electoral administrators to keep them on the register. Despite this, USI has been a proud advocate encouraging voter registration and participation across Irish campuses over the past decade.

When we look at data from the Central Statistics Office (CSO), we can see that the student vote was only slightly behind the national turnout in 2011. However, up to 151,000 remain unregistered every year.

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) - which represents organisations working with over 380,000 young people nationwide - commissioned A RedC poll which found that 22% of those aged 18-29 were not registered to vote. Based on the most recent population data from the Central Statistics Office this would mean up to 151,000 young people in the state risk missing out on their right to vote. Below is a breakdown of this data by some key regions:

Dublin City and County	50,554
Cork City and County	17,445
Galway City and County	8,516
Limerick City and County	6,674
Waterford City and County	3,406

A report of the Joint Committee on the Environment, Heritage and Local Government in 2008 found that the process of voter registration is archaic and outdated. This process is one of the barriers to low registration rates and voter turnout.

Voter Reform

[Checktheregister.ie](http://checktheregister.ie)

The Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government oversees checktheregister.ie, a website where potential voters can check their registration status.

USI has noticed that new entrants to the register can be considerably slow to update – the register is not updated in a sufficiently timely manner to give comfort to a registrant on the supplemental register that they are registered.

Recommendations

- USI acknowledges the enormous body of work undertaken by local authorities to process applications in a tight timeframe. However, we notice that the timeframe in which a local authority updates its own individual register is inconsistent and their proficiency in updating this varies.
- USI recommends that checktheregister.ie be made largely the responsibility of the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government rather than a decentralised system in which checktheregister.ie simply redirects the user to their own local authority's website.

Online Voter Registration Facility

At the moment, those who wish to be registered to vote must apply by printed form and send the form to the local authority. This practice is becoming outdated.

The United Kingdom (excluding Northern Ireland) and some twenty US States have each developed an online registration system - and this group is ever-growing.

A report by the Joint Committee on the Environment, Heritage and Local Government titled 'The Future of the Electoral Register in Ireland and Related Matters' (April 2008) highlighted the need for this facility. It referenced Northern Ireland which abandoned the household registration system at the time of introduction of the UK's *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013*. It also references PPS numbers as an ideal measure to individually identify voters (e.g. those with the same name from the same town) which will combat fraud. For example, voter registration applicants in Canada can register by providing "the number from their driver's license or provincial ID card to confirm their identity" as a unique identifier.

Recommendations

- USI believes that if the Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government were to invest in such a facility, it would significantly ease accessibility for many wishing to register to vote.
- The link to the issued PPS number, assuming sharing of data between government departments, could go some way to obviating a risk of fraudulent registration.
- The report 'The Future of the Electoral Register in Ireland and Related Matters' also recommends that this facility be done by a 'rolling' or continuous register rather than periodic registration windows used currently. This has been successful in the UK.

Ministerial Guidelines and Voter Registration Promotion

During voter registration campaigns run by USI and local Students' Unions, we have observed significant and troubling inconsistencies in how local authorities process voter registration forms. For example, some city and county councils would not accept forms in

bulk and other would accept forms in bulk. While there may be good reason for this, USI found there was a lot of inconsistency between what different councils requested, and that, as a result, it is easier to be registered in some constituencies than others.

USI sees that promotion of key dates and information on voter registration to be the responsibility of Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government Referendum/Electoral Commission and relevant Local Authorities. While efforts have been made by them to promote these in the run-up to every polling day in recent memory, USI does believe that these relevant bodies could be doing more.

Many of those wishing to get registered to vote that we met were confused about the process overall e.g. that there were deadlines, if/how they could register for a postal vote, what address they should register from (college or home addresses) etc.

USI has also seen inconsistent processing features of each local authority. For example, on the RFA1 form, it requests the applicant to enter details for each member of the household eligible to vote. If the applicant only enters their own details, some local authorities have been known to remove other eligible voters in the household from the register.

We have also observed that local authorities have interpreted legislation in variable fashions i.e. in the Electoral Act 1992, it provides that a persons inclusion to the supplementary register must be stamped and verified by “the local garda station”. However, we have seen local authorities demand that the form be stamped by garda stations local to them as opposed to local to the person. Members of An Garda Síochána also communicated this confusion to us.

Recommendations

USI believes that a lack of standardization in the processing of registrations results in inconsistent outcomes for registrants. As a result:

- USI believes that guidelines on the acceptance and processing of these forms issued by the Minister would simplify access to voter registration. Guidelines to local authority staff could give comfort to registrants.
- USI would be happy to make recommendations to this end and would be happy to work with staff of the Department of the Environment, Community & Local Government in compiling this document, if needed.

- We believe this could simply be combated by sending out an information booklet to those who become eligible to vote from their local authority and published and compiled by the Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government. Census data could help inform the process.
- USI recommends that an online facility be set up by the Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government to identify the geographic location of polling stations for electoral districts.

Automatic Voter Registration

USI believes that Automatic Voter Registration at the age of eligibility should be undertaken by the Government and the Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government. Automatic Voter Registration at the age of eligibility would go a long way to encouraging younger people to exercise their franchise in Ireland. An opt-out could be offered for those who do not wish their details to be included.

Automatic Voter Registration has been proven to improve turnout and has done so in Germany, Finland, Israel, Italy, Switzerland and Chile. It is also currently being debated at the US Congress.

In the United Kingdom, registration is a duty – it is an offence not to provide an electoral registration officer with information – but enforcement is not strict.

Recommendation

USI recommends the Minister and Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government launch a feasibility study into this practice and its achievability in Ireland.

Voting Rights for Citizens Abroad

USI, as the national advocacy organisation for students and key stakeholders in the role of young people in Ireland, has seen droves of young people leave Ireland in recent due to emigration and seeking opportunities abroad.

We believe while they have left, many of those who have left have the desire to play a role in their native state and a country they may wish to return to. Notable campaigns such as #HometoVote and #GettheBoat2Vote during the 2015 marriage equality referendum only goes to highlight the efforts that the Irish abroad can make to play a part in their native country.

USI notes that anyone who still claimed residency in Ireland within 18 months of emigration can still return home to vote and still retain those voting rights for 18 months, yet must return home to exercise this.

USI believes that voting at Irish embassies abroad should be made available.

In the relevant constitutional convention, those participating voted 78% in favour of the question “Should citizens resident outside the State have the right to vote in Presidential elections?”

Recommendations

- Registered Irish voters overseas could be facilitated to vote at the Irish Embassy, or Consulate. There are currently 115 nations that facilitate voting for their citizens abroad in one form or another.
- We recommend the Minister responsible for the Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government strongly consider implementing this in the lifetime of this Government.

RFA Form Clarity

During voter registration efforts and campaigns, USI noticed certain elements of confusion with the RFA forms.

Recommendations

The reference to the ‘local Garda Station’ on supplementary registration form RFA2 is confusing. Some new form of words should be found to clarify that the Garda Station referred to is the station local to the address of the registrant.

Further, it may be worth considering removal of the apparently absolute requirement to attend a Garda Station to have a form stamped – this appears to obviate the possibility of temporary concessions to facilitate registration in other locations such as shopping centres or on campus.

Votes at 16

USI adopts the **position to support and advocate a national policy to extend voting rights to those after the age of sixteen**. We believe that enfranchising the demographic of those between the ages of sixteen and eighteen to vote will not only encourage those to be active citizens but introduces a capable and able age demographic to play their part in the democratic process and are appreciated in doing so.

Currently, countries such as Argentina, Cuba, Ecuador, Nicaragua, Brazil, Malta, Bosnia, Serbia and Montenegro, Austria, Switzerland, Scotland and half the regions of Germany all extending voting rights at 16. After enacting voting rights to those aged 16-18, countries such as Austria and Germany have reported that voter-turnout equals that of older age groups.

Recommendations

The Constitutional Convention passed a resolution in support of extending voting rights at 16 in February 2013. We believe that holding a referendum on this issue sooner rather than later and setting a date to this referendum should be a priority for this Government.

Voter Registration

Young people and students are prone to circumstantial absenteeism and can benefit from specific targeted activities designed to educate and communicate the importance of participation in civic life. They are disproportionately likely to voluntarily abstain from voting with students being among those with the lowest turnout⁴.

Policies and campaigns designed to reduce 'circumstantial abstention' include making the registration process as straightforward as possible and combining education with voter registration campaigns to make the first point of contact with the process (registration) part of educating students on the referendum or elections.

Despite efforts of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government to run voter registration campaigns which distribute “ten thousand posters” printed and posted to registration authorities, Members of the Dáil, youth organisations, third level student bodies and multicultural groups a more cost effective and targeted approaches needs to be adopted and funded in order to tackle the serious lack of understanding which prevents young people and students to register to vote and eventually go and vote.

Young people and students need to be targeted on their very own campuses and through the use of social media campaigning. This tactic has been adopted by USI over the past 5 years and has begun to see real return in students registered to vote.

USI has direct access to its membership of 374,000 students and to the 43,460 new entrants enrolled into higher education in Ireland each year through Freshers Weeks and first year orientations.

Scheduled Irish Referendums, General Elections, Local Elections, and European Elections

In early 2018 and 2019 there are a series of referendums planned and there could be a General Election called at any moment. To add, local and European elections will be coming up in June 2019. It is key that students and young people are registered in time for these key voting opportunities to increase turnout.

Referendum to remove blasphemy as an offence	<i>October 2018</i>
Referendum on women’s place in the home	<i>October 2018</i>
Referendum on whether Ireland should have directly elected mayors	<i>October 2018</i>
Referendum on giving Oireachtas committee more powers	<i>Late 2018</i>
Referendum to reduce the divorce term	<i>2019</i>
Referendum to extend voting rights to emigrants	<i>2019</i>
Referendum to reduce the voting age	<i>2019</i>
Local Elections	<i>June 2019</i>

Aims and Objectives:

Continue USI voter registration awareness campaign and drives:

- Register up to 20,000 students to vote by end of 2018;
- Increase awareness of referendums occurring in 2018;
- Increase voter turnout for referendums occurring in 2018;
- Work in partnership with other organisations;
- Work in partnership with Department for Housing, Planning and Local Government;
- Train 100 Students' Union officers in running voter registration campaigns;
- Establish the campaign as a year-long or month campaign;
- Create resources for staff and students in third-level;
- Build a centralised website for young people to find information;
- Reach 1 million people on Twitter and trend at #1.

Voter registration campaigns aimed at getting students and young people registered to vote have seen tens of thousands registered to with up to 10,000 students being registered in a single day in 2015.

Acknowledgements:

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