

Submission to Public Consultation on the Proposed Electoral Commission

March 2019

Introduction

The Immigrant Council of Ireland has long advocated for increased migrant engagement in the electoral process in Ireland. At a local level Ireland has one of the most inclusive policies in the world when it comes to involvement of different categories of residents in local elections. All people regardless of their nationality or type of immigration status can vote and run in local elections in Ireland. This is a policy tool of enormous potential in terms of promoting migrant integration in Ireland. However, in practice participation rates of migrants in elections are very low. This is evidenced by the low registration rates of non-Irish citizens in every local authority in the country. These rates range from 50% to 33% of eligible non-Irish citizens that are registered to vote. Of our 949 elected Councillors only 3 are of a migrant background – this is 0.3% of the Councillor population despite non-Irish citizens making up 15% of the population.

In recent years the Immigrant Council of Ireland has been engaging with migrant communities, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, Local Authorities across the country, other NGOs, international experts and the political parties with a view to increasing migrant involvement in politics and elections. We have delivered over 30 political participation workshops to migrant groups in the last two years, we have co-organised a number of large Migrant Mobilisation events, we have run numerous community based political participation events, we have run a successful Councillor-Migrant Internship scheme in five different local authorities, in conjunction with the Department we developed 10 multi-lingual electoral rights videos that got 100,000 views in their first month online and we have been providing one to one support and training for 15 migrants planning to run for local election this year.

Proposals

Political participation is identified as a key element in the National Migrant Integration Strategy¹ and is one of the agreed Common Basic Principles on Migrant Integration at the EU level². As mentioned, Ireland has a very inclusive policy in respect of non-Irish citizens and local elections in particular. However, as the above figures outline the gap between

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http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Migrant_Integration_Strategy_English.pdf/Files/Migrant_Integration_Strategy_English.pdf

² <https://ec.europa.eu/migrant-integration/librarydoc/common-basic-principles-for-immigrant-integration-policy-in-the-eu>

the policy and practice is very significant and the Immigrant Council of Ireland believes that an Electoral Commission can play a huge role in bridging this gap.

The Immigrant Council of Ireland's submission focuses on two proposed functions of an Electoral Commission which we believe are urgently needed:

- Research and policy function
- Public awareness and education function

Research and policy function

There is a huge shortage of hard data on electoral participation of the 15% of our population who are non-Irish citizens. We have evidence the registration rates of EU and non-EU citizens are very low and we also know that the rate of migrants coming forward for local election is very low. Beyond this we have little data. There are many unanswered questions such as:

- To what extent do migrants and different categories of migrants know about their right to vote and run in elections
- If migrants know their rights why they don't register
- Of those migrants that do register, do they vote? If not, why not
- Are there particular demographics of migrants who are more likely to engage with the electoral process
- What are the voting patterns and rates of naturalised Irish citizens whose migrant background is somewhat invisible on the electoral register?

The Immigrant Council of Ireland sees an Electoral Commission having a key role in answering these key questions. Answers to these questions are crucial in developing and implementing effective public education and voter registration programmes

Public awareness and education function

The Immigrant Council of Ireland strongly advocates for a central public awareness and education function in an Electoral Commission. During our work we have observed several clear reasons as to why the electoral participation rates of migrants is very low. Primary of these reasons is simple lack of knowledge. In our experience most migrants simply do not know that they can not only vote in local elections but also run in local elections. Local and national attempts at awareness raising in this regard have been piecemeal and generally weak. Awareness raising campaigns of the scale and reach of those run by the Referendum Commission are required well before each local election. In addition, because all residents (regardless of nationality or immigration status) can vote in local elections these campaigns need to be multi-lingual to effectively reach all eligible voters.

State efforts at public awareness to date have overly focused on electoral register deadlines and printed posters. An Electoral Commission needs to embrace social media as a means of raising public awareness and not just at election time. The success of the Immigrant Council of Ireland's electoral rights videos is a testament to this.

There is also a deeper education function that the Commission can play in terms of helping the public at large and migrants in particular understand the electoral process in Ireland. The majority of migrants come from countries where there is not a PR-STV electoral system. It has been our experience that once explained many migrants are impressed with the robustness, transparency and representative nature of the electoral process in Ireland, particularly if they come from a country where legitimacy of elections is often debated.

- It is proposed that the Electoral Commission designs and implements multi-lingual voter education programmes and campaigns. These measures should be ongoing throughout the year not just at election time
- It is proposed that all migrants to Ireland would have free access to a short voter education training session, rolled out at the local level. These measures should be ongoing throughout the year not just at election time
- Ahead of local elections the Electoral Commission should carry out an additional multi-lingual national voter education campaign similar in scale, scope and reach to referendum campaigns run by the Referendum Commission
- It is proposed that a fund is created to support civil society groups to develop innovative ways of educating and encouraging registration of some hard to reach groups or groups that tend to have low voting rates such as migrants

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