

UNEQUAL DEMOCRACIES

WHO DOES (NOT) VOTE IN IRELAND?

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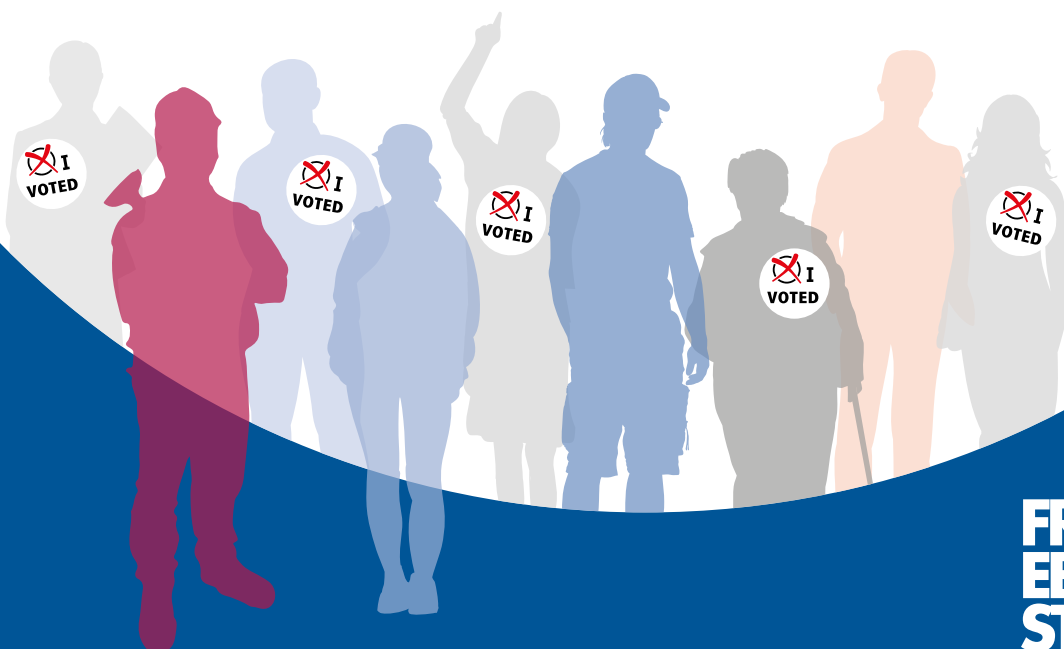
Voting is a crucial factor in a democracy. This paper analyses voter turnout trends in Ireland, particularly focusing on the sharp decrease since the 1990s. Understanding voter participation helps identify key factors contributing to this decline, which are critical for guiding policy reforms.



This report shows that voter turnout is especially low among younger populations and in deprived urban communities with low rates of home ownership. Rural dwellers, particularly farmers, are more likely to vote. Increased education results in higher turnout, but is less of a factor than age.



To combat declining turnout, the paper recommends modernising voter registration, reforming civic education, and enhancing political engagement through targeted social media strategies, early voting options and introducing youth quotas to encourage broader electoral participation.



Content

INTRODUCTION	2
LOW VOTER TURNOUT: WHY DOES IT MATTER?	3
IRELAND: POLITICAL TRUST, VOTER TURNOUT TRENDS, ELECTION SYSTEM, THE REGISTRATION PROCESS	4
WHO ARE THE NON-VOTERS?	8
SUMMARY: WHAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT THE PROFILE OF THE NON-VOTER IN IRELAND?	15
RECOMMENDATIONS	16
References.....	19

INTRODUCTION

Liberal democracy is founded on political equality, where every person's interests deserve equal consideration in political decisions. This principle mandates that all adults have the right to participate in making decisions that affect them, achievable only in a fully democratic system (Dahl, 1996, p. 639). This underscores the sanctity of free and equal voting rights. Nevertheless, voter turnout in the West is declining, with fewer people voting today than a generation ago (Dalton, 2017, p. 4). This trend may undermine democracy's quality and functionality.

Ireland is no exception, with voter turnout in general elections dropping from 76 percent in 1981 to 62.6 percent in 2002, rebounding to 69 percent in 2011, before falling again to 65 percent in 2016 (Cunningham & Marsh, 2018, p. 156, p. 375). The 2020 general election saw another low of 62.9 percent (Figure 1).

This report explores the implications of low voter turnout from moral, social, and economic perspectives, examining how democracy is compromised as more people abstain from voting. Non-voting marginalises large population segments from influencing social and economic state policies. The paper presents a thorough analysis of voter turnout in Ireland, beginning with the importance of voting, followed by a historical overview of turnout patterns, and a scrutiny of the country's distinctive electoral mechanism, proportional representation: single transferable vote (PR-STV) system. It investigates short- and long-term factors contributing to low turnout, such as registration issues, socioeconomic and geographical aspects, political mobilisation, and campaign exposure. Local elections and referendums are also discussed, using data from the Unequal Democracies Comparative Data Set¹ and the Irish National Electoral Study (INES). The report concludes with findings and recommendations to improve voter turnout in Ireland.

This report is part of the Unequal Democracies (UD) Series on voting inequality in Ireland. The UD series' comparative reports (Elsässer et al. 2022; Wenker 2024) show that voter turnout is decreasing across North America and Europe,

driven primarily by the working class, youth, and less-educated individuals. This report investigates whether the same trends apply to Ireland.

¹ The UD Comparative Data Set combines and harmonizes Comparative Data Sets such as the European Social Analyses and National Election Studies. For more details consult the comparative study in Elsässer et al. 2022

LOW VOTER TURNOUT: WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Normative theories argue that equality of rights is fundamental to liberal democracy, with participation, especially voting, as the most crucial right. Voting is key to influencing government actions and is considered the primary citizen right (Verba, 2003, p. 663). It also fosters more engaged citizens, who are informed, aware, and attuned to the complexities of democracy and the needs and rights of others (Dalton, 2017, p. 5).

When everyone votes, governments better understand society's needs. Voting expresses public opinion, and if certain groups abstain, their influence on policy diminishes. This can marginalise vulnerable groups that need government support (Dalton, 2017, p. 5). The link between social class and political participation highlights this risk, with evidence revealing lower turnout among those with less education and income (Lijphart, 1997; Gallego, 2007).

A drop in turnout often reflects fewer disadvantaged voters participating, which affects election outcomes and policy directions, usually favouring right-leaning parties (Dalton, 2017; Lijphart, 1997). Politicians are under no obligation to prioritise the needs of people who do not vote: those who do not vote have no say in policy matters. This imbalance impacts resource allocation and policies on welfare, employment, and social security. It also influences other issues along fault lines like gender, age, religion, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, and geography. Low turnout can distort the relationship between government and the governed, leaving some social groups unheard (Verba, 2003).

Research by Elsässer et al. (2022) shows declining turnout in many countries in Europe and the Western world, linked to socio-economic inequality. Social class, age, and education predict election participation, especially among those under 30. In contrast, gender has little impact. The effects of age and education on turnout vary across Europe and Anglo-Saxon countries.

IRELAND: POLITICAL TRUST, VOTER TURNOUT TRENDS, ELECTION SYSTEM, THE REGISTRATION PROCESS

POLITICAL TRUST AND VOTER TURNOUT TRENDS

In 1981, the first year for which data is available, trust in political institutions in Ireland was high by European standards. From then until 1999, trust declined due to multiple parliamentary scandals (Fahey et al., 2005). Between 2002 and 2006, trust in Ireland's parliament, political parties, and politicians remained stable but dropped sharply with the onset of the economic crisis, continuing to decline during the recession. Prior to the crisis, satisfaction with democracy and government in Ireland was among the highest in Europe; post-crisis, it fell to some of the lowest levels (Breen and Healy, 2016). These studies are based on the European Value Survey and the European Social Survey.

Laurence et al. (2023) analysed Eurobarometer data and noted that satisfaction with democracy was high and stable in Ireland between 1998 and 2006, at around 70 to 80 percent. In 2007, it sank to under 40 percent, recovering gradually from 2009 to 2014, though remaining lower than pre-crisis levels. From 2015 onwards, satisfaction increased rapidly, peaking at 83 percent in 2023, the highest in 25 years (Laurence et al., 2023, p. 33). This is compared to a 56 percent average in other European countries (Kenna, 2022). Differences based on age and education were minimal, with slightly higher satisfaction among older and more educated individuals (Laurence et al., 2023, pp. 34–38; Kenna, 2022).

From the inception of the state, voting was not given a high priority, and turnout has been lower than in other established democracies. This can be attributed to several factors, including the Irish Civil War (1922–1923), which caused political fragmentation and disillusionment among the population. Ireland's economic struggles, marked by widespread poverty, contributed to lower political engagement and voter turnout. These aspects combined to create an environment where many citizens were either unable or unwilling to participate fully in the electoral process. The main parties, Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil, had similar, centre-right ideologies that represented the overall consensus of Irish society, which was mostly agrarian and conservative (Coakley, 2018). This could also have led to voter apathy.

Unlike industrialised nations with strong trade unions and Labour parties, Ireland's agrarian economy and focus on

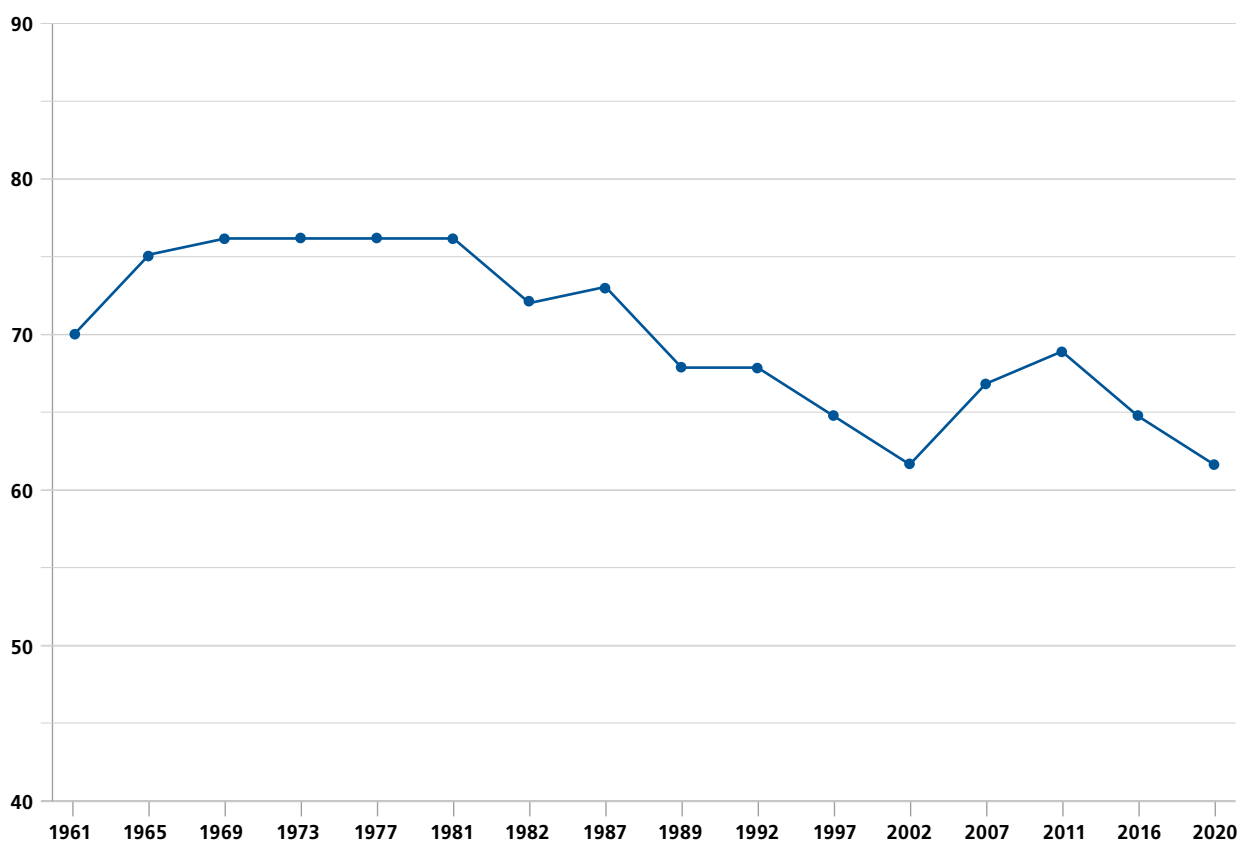
national independence overshadowed class-based politics. The Labour Party, founded in 1912, aimed to represent the interests of workers, but its influence was often secondary to the dominant nationalist political issues. This meant that while there was some mobilisation of voters, it was not as significant as in other European countries where the Labour movement was a major political force (Garvin, 1977).

These historical elements may explain part of Ireland's low voter turnout today. However, more contemporary factors are likely more significant. In the 1960s and 1970s, voter participation was notably high, with approximately 75 percent of eligible voters consistently turning out to cast their ballots. This period was marked by a robust engagement in the democratic process, reflecting a strong commitment to civic duty and political involvement among the electorate. Numbers declined by about 10 percent over subsequent decades, with some recovery during the 2008-2013 recession following the subprime mortgage crisis and the collapse of the Fianna Fáil government. Until this point, Fianna Fáil had been the dominant party in Irish politics, governing for 60 of the 79 years since 1932, their first year in office (Weeks, 2018; Blais, Galais, and Reidy, 2017, p. 173). This increase could be associated with greater interest and involvement of the electorate in politics due to the controversial bailout plan and the economic meltdown. Participation dropped again in the 2020 election (Figure 1).

ELECTION SYSTEM

Ireland employs the PR-STV method for elections to ensure proportionality between voter share and seat allocation, enhancing the significance of each vote and incentivising higher participation (Farrell & Sinnott, 2018, p. 96). Enshrined in the constitution in 1937, this system allows voters to rank candidates by preference, ensuring accurate representation. The architects of the system were sceptical of the influence of political parties. Consequently, party affiliations of candidates were omitted from ballots, possibly reflecting a deliberate effort to promote individual candidate assessment over party allegiance. This design aimed to reduce partisan influence, encourage independent thinking among voters, and foster a more candidate-centric electoral process. However, from 1965 onwards, party affiliations were included on ballots to reflect political realities and improve

Figure 1
Turnout in Ireland, 1961–2020



Source: Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), data: <http://www.idea.int/>

voter understanding and decision making (Farrell & Sinnott, 2018, pp. 90–91). PR-STV is rare globally; Malta uses it for its lower house, and Australia still applies it for some elections (Farrell & McAllister, 2006).

From the standpoint of the electorate, the process is straightforward: Ireland is divided into 39 constituencies, each with a unique list of candidates. Voters rank candidates by preference, marking their first choice to validate their vote and optionally listing additional preferences. This method provides a clear view of voter attitudes and ensures accurate reflection of their opinions. The approach is recognised as an equitable way to elect independent representatives and form multi-party coalitions, at times resulting in so-called ‘rainbow’ governments comprised of parties from various parts of the political spectrum with diverse ideologies and interests. Criticisms include a perceived overemphasis on local issues by Teachta Dála (TDs), potentially neglecting broader national concerns (Farrell & Sinnott, 2018, pp. 94–110).

VOTER REGISTRATION SYSTEM

Ireland’s lower turnout can be partly attributed to its individual voluntary electoral registration system, which faces accuracy issues (O’Malley, 2001). Despite efforts to improve since the 2000s, the system remains largely unchanged due to

differentiated local interests, and worries about its growing inaccuracies linger (Blais, Galais, and Reidy, 2017, p. 174). It is expected that the newly established Electoral Commission (An Coimisiún Toghcháin) will implement a modernised and systematic process to oversee the registration procedure (The Electoral Commission, 2023).

Top of FormBottom of FormBefore examining the manifold of factors that affect voter turnout in Ireland, further explanation is required regarding the apparent inaccuracy presented in the Irish voluntary voter registration system (O’Malley, 2001). Since the actual registration is at local authority level, there is the possibility of substantial variation in accuracy in different localities due to divergent administrative practices used. Local councils do not always have a full-time, professional staff to facilitate the process: temporary hires may not have the qualifications required (O’Malley, 2014). Rural areas generally have more accurate registrations compared to urban areas, where anonymity can lead to errors (O’Malley, 2001). Resource disparities among the 31 local authorities also contribute to registration issues, affecting voter participation and representation, particularly in regions with limited financial resources (Citizens Information; O’Malley, 2014).

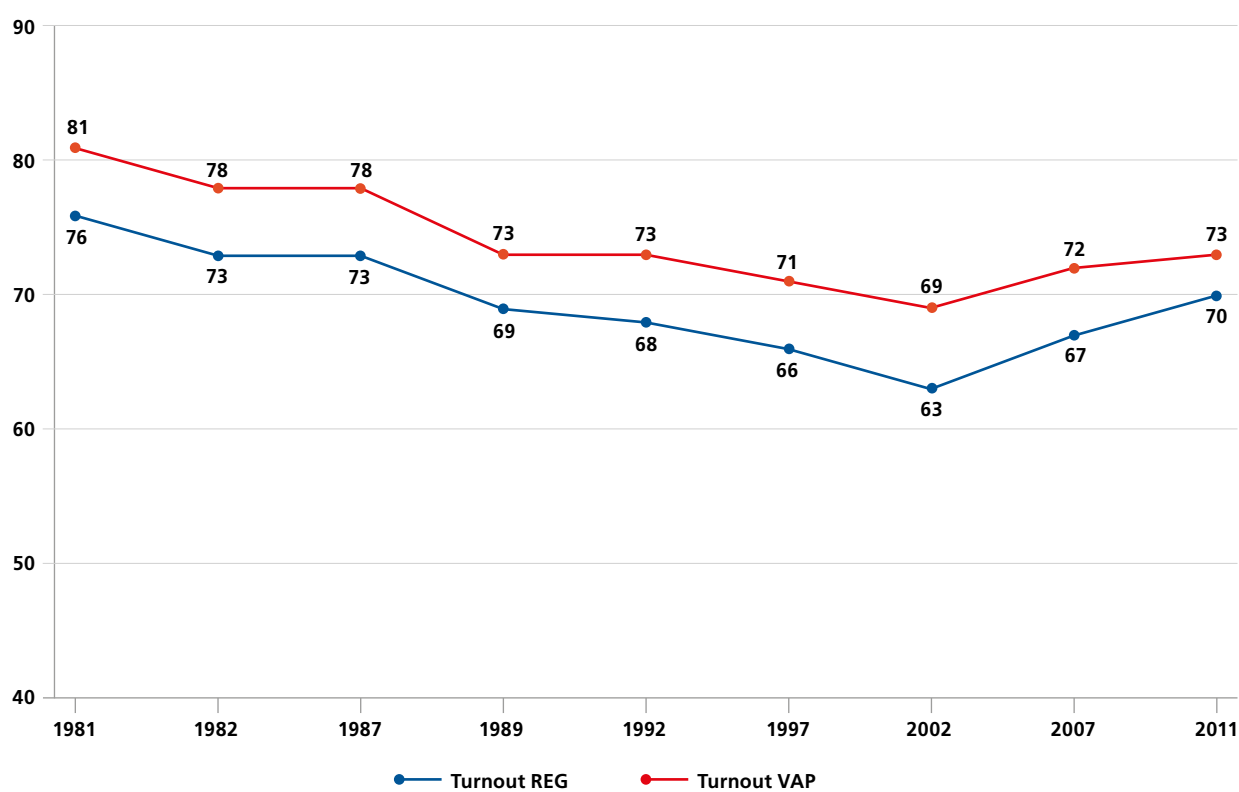
Inaccuracies in the electoral register could include double counting (multiple addresses for the same person e.g. college students), and inclusion of deceased or overseas indi-

Table 1
Number of electors on the register and estimated voting-age population

Election Year	Number of Electors on Register	Estimated Voting-age Population (Number)	Register as % of Real Electorate
1981	2,275,450	2,144,862	106%
1982	2,335,153	2,177,924	107%
1987	2,445,515	2,286,993	107%
1992	2,557,063	2,390,054	107%
1997	2,741,262	2,563,285	107%
2002	3,002,173	2,739,999	109%
2007	3,110,914	2,912,197	107%
2011	3,209,244	3,074,898	104%

Source: Oireachtas Library & Research Service. Election Turnout in Ireland: measurement, trends and policy implications.

Figure 2
Turnout General Elections 1981–2011 as proportion of the Register and of the Voting-Age Population (VAP, in %)



Source: Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016

viduals. While adding to the register is easy, there is no systematic mechanism for verifying individuals included therein or removing invalid entries, leading to inflated registration figures and a perceived lower turnout (Table 1). This chronic issue distorts actual voter turnout, especially in more mobile areas, mainly Dublin and other large cities (O'Malley, 2001). One estimate suggests there are up to 500,000 more individuals on the register than there are eligible voters (Blais, Galais, and Reidy, 2017, p. 174; McMorrow, 2006).

An alternative approach, using the estimated voting-age population (VAP) as derived from the census, suggests that Irish voter registration exceeds official records. Election data spanning 30 years shows a 3 to 5 percent difference in the results for the two methods (Figure 2). Regardless of the method chosen, it is clear that Irish election turnout has markedly declined since the 1980s and, despite recovering from a 2002 all-time low, has yet to return to the levels observed in the 1981 election (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016).

WHO ARE THE NON-VOTERS?

LONG-TERM AND SHORT-TERM FACTORS FOR LOW TURNOUT

When analysing the factors behind low voter turnout in Ireland, it is essential to differentiate between short-term and long-term reasons for abstention. A study from the early 1990s identified short-term reasons such as recent relocation, being too busy, illness or disability, or not being registered as common causes for not voting (Marsh, 1991, p. 4). The author was relatively sanguine about these short-term non-voting factors, referring to them as transient, and indicating that this type of absence from voting has minimal impact on the overall health of the political system. On the other hand, consistently abstaining from voting in the long-term was viewed as detrimental to the vitality of political institutions and the electoral process. Contributing factors included a disinterest in politics, lack of confidence in parties' capabilities to provide effective solutions, failure to register to vote, and a pervasive distrust in the overall political system. Such disengagement can lead to weakened democratic processes and reduced accountability among elected officials. The study found that Irish non-voters were roughly evenly split between short-term and long-term reasons, with a slight bias towards short-term non-voters (Marsh, 1991, p. 12).

Nearly two decades later, the same researcher revisited the issue of circumstantial abstention, finding almost identical causes in somewhat similar numbers. Analysis of the 2002 election revealed that more prevalent grounds for not voting were being away from home for holidays, work, or medical needs. Voluntary non-voting, arising from factors including disinterest, mistrust, or simply a lack of information in politics and political systems, was less common. The ratio of circumstantial abstention to voluntary abstention was two to one. It was also noted that individuals strongly identifying with a political party, or whose parents share the same affiliation, are less likely to abstain voluntarily. Exposure to political campaigns and messaging can further mitigate voluntary abstention by engaging voters and reinforcing their sense of political identity and participation (Marsh et al., 2008).

SOCIOECONOMIC AND GEOGRAPHICAL FACTORS

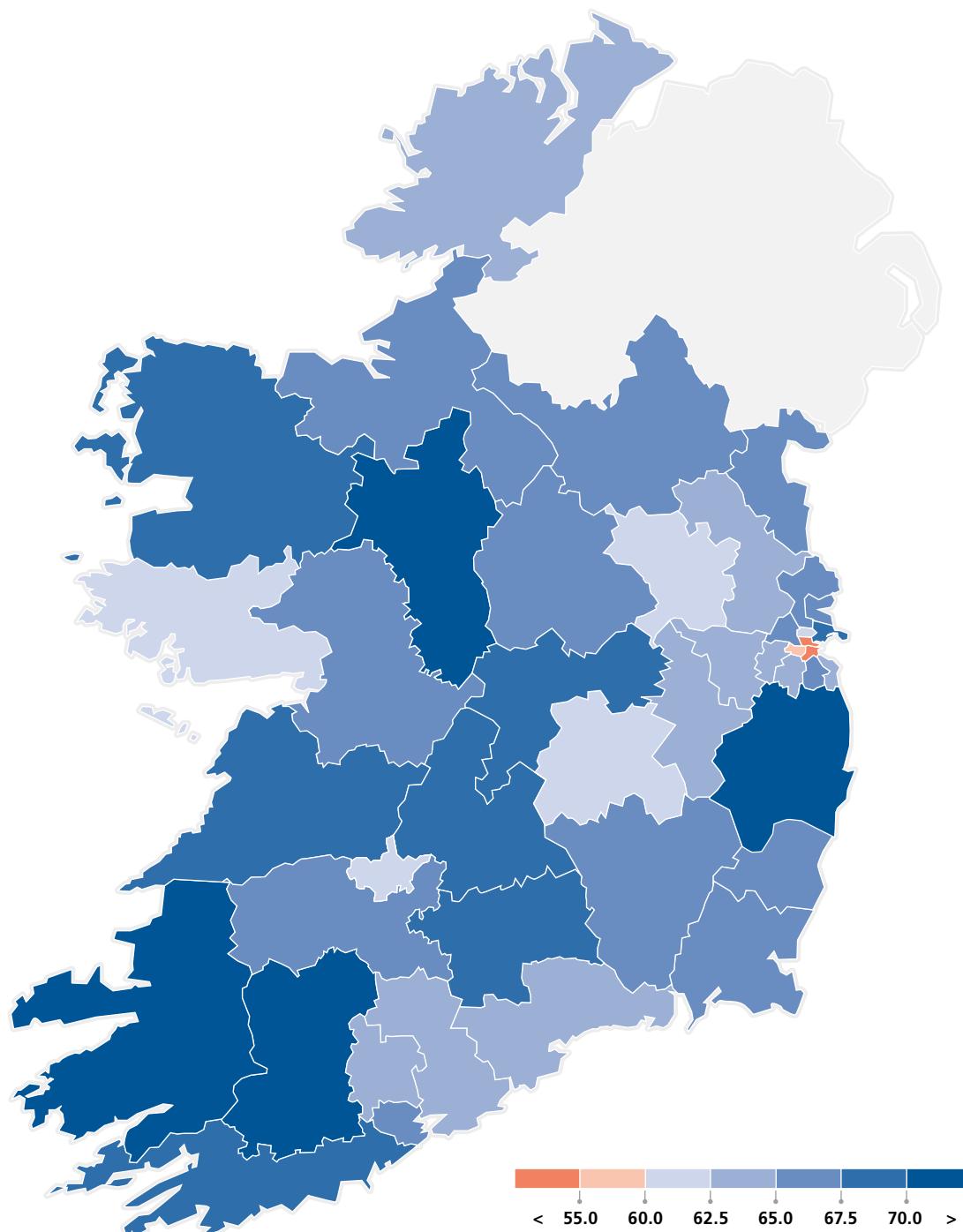
The two primary strands of socioeconomic research on voter turnout in Ireland are the urban-rural divide and the advantaged versus the disadvantaged. When viewing the country as a whole, it can be seen that turnout in Dublin and other cities tends to be lower than that in rural areas (Kavanagh, 2004;

Table 2
Constituencies with highest turnout as % of REG and % of VAP (2011)

Share of Register		Share of Estimated VAP		
	Constituency	%	Constituency	%
Highest Turnout	Roscommon-South Leitrim	78.6%	Roscommon-South Leitrim	84.9%
	Tipperary North	77.2%	Kerry South	84.5%
	Kerry South	74.9%	Cork North West	82.5%
	Wicklow	74.8%	Tipperary North	82.3%
	Dublin North Central	73.1%	Cork South West	82.0%
Lowest Turnout	Donegal North East	64.9%	Kildare South	66.3%
	Meath West	64.7%	Dublin North West	63.6%
	Dublin South Central	64.5%	Dublin South Central	61.0%
	Dublin Central	61.6%	Dublin Central	54.8%
	Dublin South East	60.5%	Dublin South East	53.8%

Source: Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016

Figure 3
 Voter turnout level (%) at the 2016 general election by Dáil constituency



Source: Map based on analysis by Dr. Adrian Kavanagh, Maynooth University Department of Geography

Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016). For example, during the 2002 general election, the average turnout in the Dublin region was much lower, at 56.3 percent, than the overall turnout of 65.2 percent for the rest of the country (Kavanagh, 2004, p. 4). The same was true for the 2011 general election (Table 2), in which four out of the five constituencies with the lowest turnout were predominantly urban, whereas three predominantly rural constituencies recorded the highest voter turnout (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016, p. 7).

In 2016, the same pattern emerged once again, confirming notably lower voter turnout from the three constituencies situated within the inner city of the capital: Dublin Central (52.4 percent), Dublin Bay South (54.8 percent), and Dublin South-Central (58.1 percent). In contrast, largely rural constituencies boasted the greatest participation statistics, with Roscommon-Galway (71.6 percent), Wicklow (70.9 percent), and Kerry (70.9 percent) leading the way in turnout (Figure 3).

The second strand of research, focusing on the advantaged versus the disadvantaged, specifically focuses on Dublin, the largest metropolitan area in the Republic. Depending on how it is defined, the greater Dublin area is home to between one-quarter and half of the Irish population. Therefore, a detailed and nuanced appraisal of voter turnout within this specific area is particularly pertinent. Research points to a considerable correlation between voter turnout and various socioeconomic factors such as demographic composition, social well-being, population mobility patterns, and housing tenure. In general, areas within Dublin characterised by higher levels of affluence, demographic maturity, and residential stability tend to have elevated voter turnout rates, while regions with younger populations, higher residential mobility, and lower socioeconomic status experience reduced electoral participation (Kavanagh, 2004, p. 23; Kavanagh & Durkan, 2020). Lyons and Sinnott (2003) identify non-voters as predominantly young, single, students, working-class, unemployed, and living in urban areas with low levels of home ownership (Blais, Galais, and Reidy, 2017, p. 176).

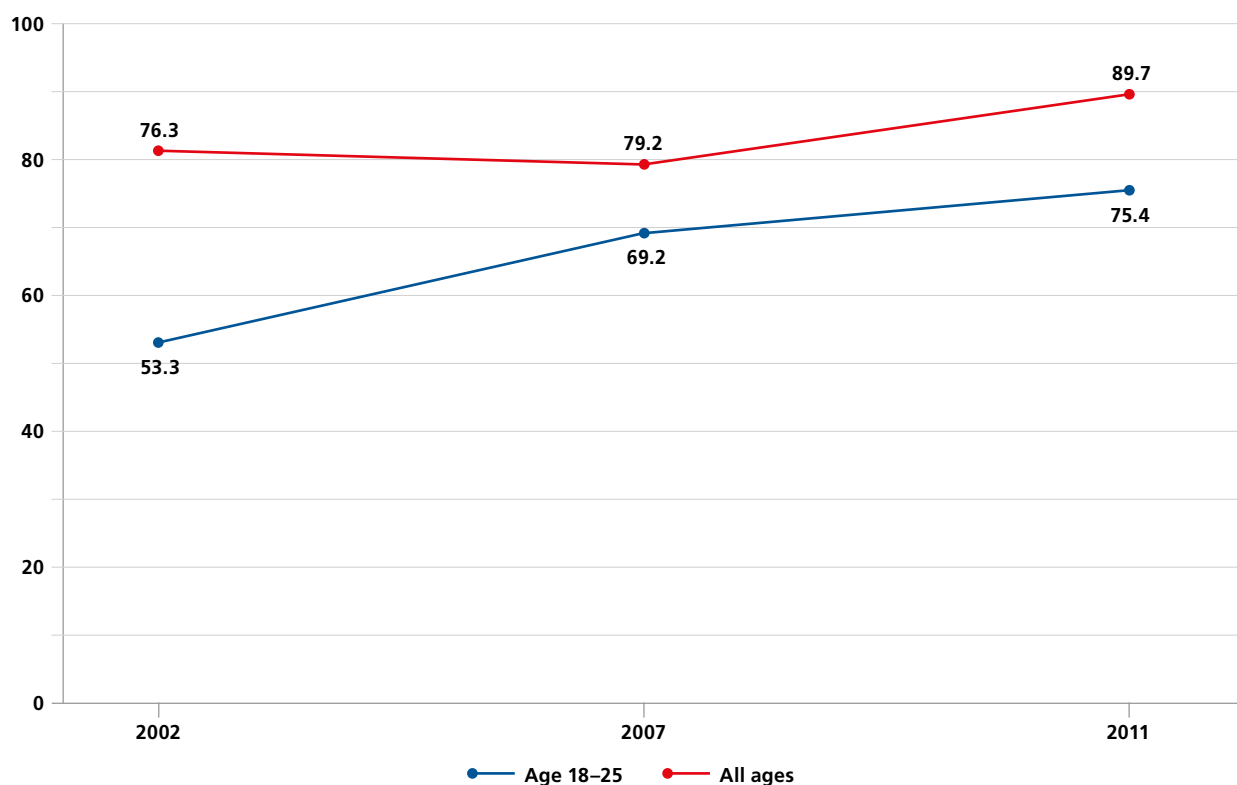
This trend was again observed in the 2011 general election, where higher turnout was correlated with the middle class and those in areas with little population movement. Older, more settled working-class communities also exhibited higher turnout. Lower turnout was again experienced in areas with a more deprived population and greater mobility

(Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016, p. 7–8). The same tendency was also observed in the 2016 general election, although the gap between middle- and working-class areas had narrowed considerably. This shift could be related to the diminishing influence of social class and the increasing importance of residential mobility, where individuals from working class backgrounds can relocate to more affordable areas for homeownership (Kavanagh & Durkan, 2020).

Furthermore, rural areas, typically associated with an older population and less mobility, usually have higher attendance at polls (Kavanagh, Mills & Sinnott 2004; McKenzie and Delaney 2005). The Irish National Electoral Study (INES) suggests a pattern of lower turnout in general elections for the youngest eligible voters, those aged 18 to 25 years, although information is only available for the period from 2002 to 2011 (Figure 4). A similar pattern is evident in the European Social Survey, where a gap of approximately 30 percent exists between the younger group and those aged 60 or above, with the higher participation rates in the older group (Figure 5). Further analysis reveals that voter absenteeism is even higher among young people with minimal education (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016, p. 8).

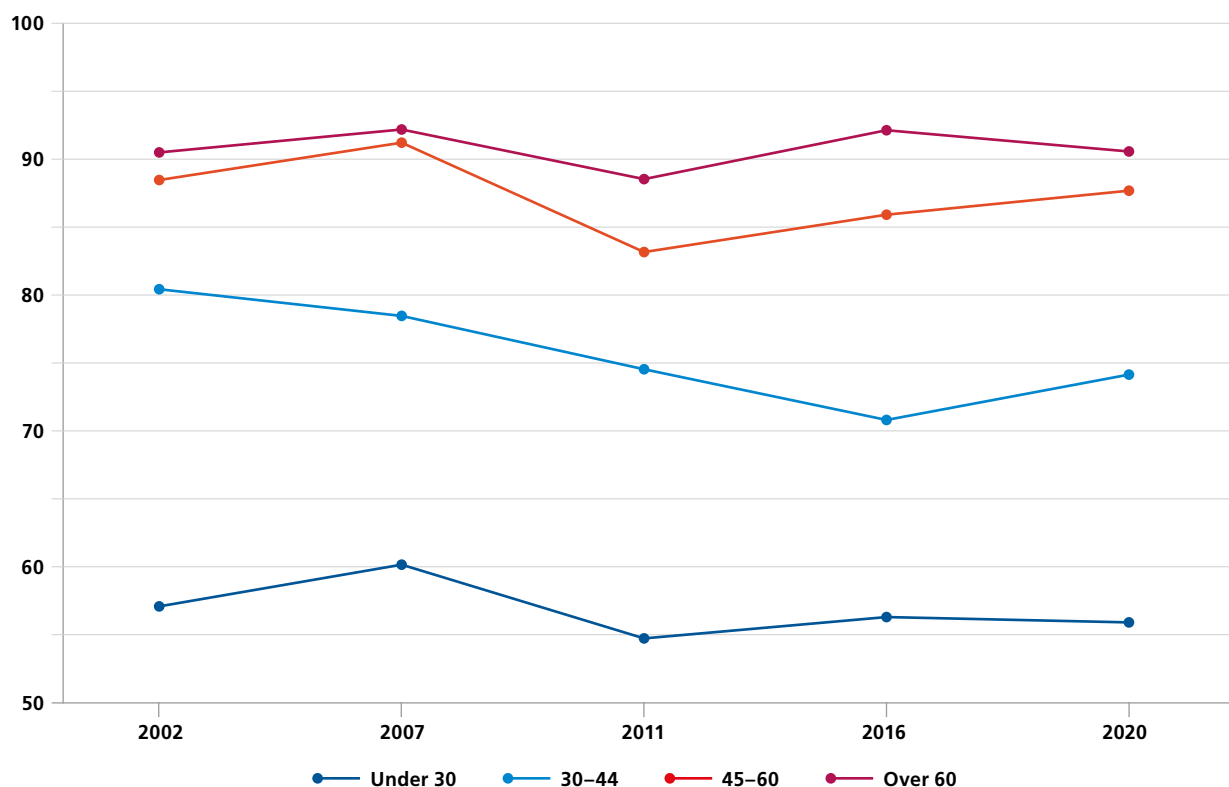
Another key element that potentially has a strong bearing on higher voter turnout in rural areas is the “friends-and-neighbours effect”. In the Irish context it is aptly described

Figure 4
Self-reported turnout of 18–25 age group versus all ages (in %)



Source: Irish National Electoral Study

Figure 5
The age effect in voting participation (in %)



Source: UD Comparative Data Set / ESS

as ‘parish-pump’ (Carty, 1983) where voters will put more trust in, and thus overwhelmingly support, candidates who hail from their locality (Gimpel et al., 2008). A more formal definition is ‘the propensity for a candidate to receive a greater proportion of support around his/her home area than elsewhere in a constituency’ (Johnson, 1989, p. 93). This phenomenon is an important consideration when analysing Irish voting behaviour (Gorecki & Marsh, 2011; Kavanagh, Durkan & D’Arcy, 2020, p. 198).

In 1981, Marsh indicated that this phenomenon was the primary determinant for close to one in four voters. Although this number has decreased since then, recent evidence illustrates a resurgence in the importance that voters place on local issues, leading voters to favour candidates who prioritise these in their campaigns (Gallagher and Suiter, 2017).

Studies have shown that the local factor affects attitudes more strongly in rural areas (Sacks, 1970; Parker, 1982) but also to some extent in urban areas (Johnson, 1989). For instance, in an RTÉ exit poll for the 2016 election, five times as many voters from the rural Connacht-Ulster region cited a constituency matter as their top voting issue as did their cohort from the capital. In another survey, 35 percent of Dublin voters prioritised candidates who would address the needs of the constituency, in contrast to 42 percent of those from Connacht-Ulster. The 2020 election further underscored the significance of localism in Irish politics as

candidates won their highest levels of support in and around their local areas (Kavanagh, Durkan & D’Arcy, 2020, p. 216). This ongoing preference for local representatives highlights the potential importance of local mobilisation and campaign exposure.

POLITICAL MOBILISATION AND CAMPAIGN EXPOSURE

Evidence suggests that political mobilisation centred on local candidates can significantly impact voter turnout (Kavanagh, 2002). An example of this was seen in the Laois-Offaly constituency during the 2002 election, where turnout varied considerably between different areas. Provincial towns that were focal points of candidate activity experienced higher voter turnout compared to other towns in the area (Kavanagh, Mills & Sinnott, 2004, pp. 184–185).

Geographical canvassing was a prominent tool for political mobilisation and campaigning in the 2020 election. Parties and independent candidates recognised the importance of localism and the socioeconomic makeup of specific areas within different constituencies, tailoring their campaigns accordingly to mobilise voters. Success stories include local candidates in Louth, specifically the towns of Dundalk and Drogheda, and in the Limerick constituency. Left-wing candidates fared better in working-class areas of Dublin, while

right-wing candidates had more success in middle-class districts of the capital (Kavanagh, Durkan & D’Arcy, 2020, pp. 204–216).

GENDER AND EDUCATION FACTORS

Gender does not appear to affect voter turnout significantly (Figure 6), with the exception of the friends-and-neighbours effect, but evidence suggests that male candidates generally attract more votes than female candidates. This observation raises concerns about the potential impact of mandatory female quotas on the perceived effectiveness of localism (Brennan & Buckley, 2017; Mullaney, 2019). Introduced in 2012 as part of an amendment to the Electoral Political Funding Act, gender quotas mandate that funding for political parties will be halved unless their candidates for the general election are at least 30 percent women and 30 percent men. This quota was enforced starting with the 2016 general election and increased to 40 percent in 2023 (Buckley & Mariani, 2024).

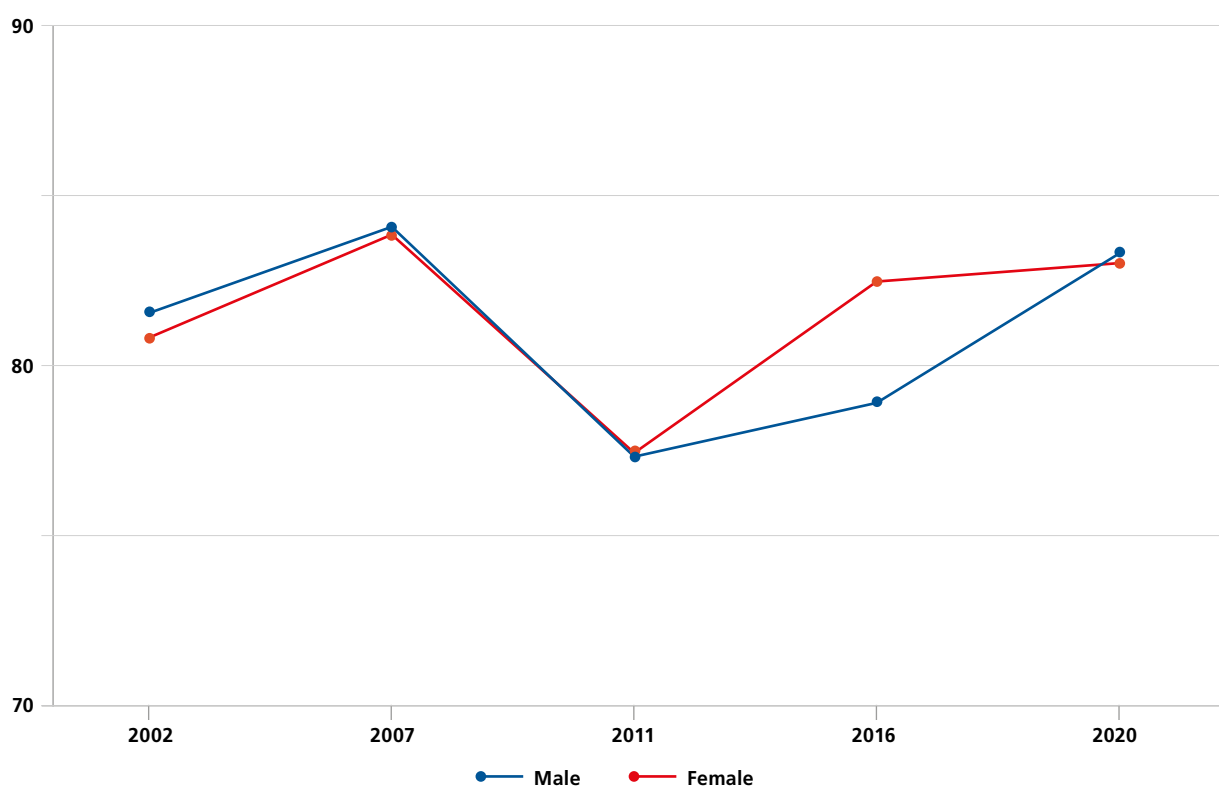
In relation to education, as mentioned above, studies suggest that the poor turnout of youths is linked to lower levels of education, typically seen in socioeconomically deprived areas. However, the picture becomes more complex when taking into account the increased voter turnout in rural areas, which typically have older populations and farming commu-

nities, two groups that are traditionally less educated. This suggests that age may be a more significant factor in voter turnout than education (Blais, Galais, and Reidy, 2017, p. 175; Kavanagh, Mills & Sinnott, 2002, p. 185). The European Survey also illustrates fluctuations in the complicated relationship between turnout and education (Figure 7). Potential reasons age might outweigh education as a factor in voting could be the sense of civic duty, where voting is seen as a moral obligation of good citizenship; or the importance of localism, which is more pronounced in rural areas.

LOCAL ELECTIONS AND REFERENDUMS

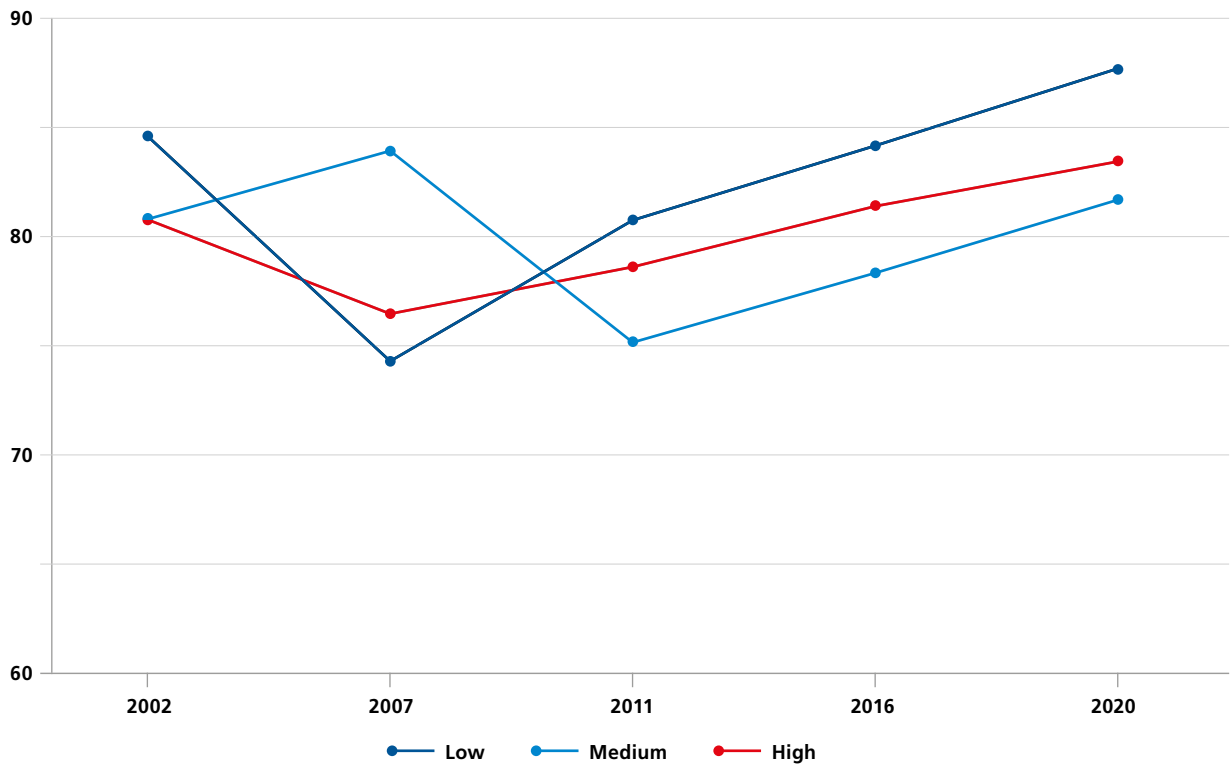
Voting trends in local elections mirror those in general elections with similar patterns exhibited among non-voters, who are primarily located in working-class areas. For example, Tallaght South, a Dublin suburb, recorded just 27 percent turnout (Kavanagh, 2019). Turnout in local elections has fallen considerably from 67 percent in 1967 to around 50 percent in 2014. Evidence shows that in local elections, there is a less pronounced gap between the level of turnout when measured as a proportion of the estimated voting-age population (VAP) and turnout as a proportion of the register (figure 8). This is because more people are eligible to vote in local elections, making the register turnout more accurate, although concerns about the accuracy of the local electoral register persist (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016, p. 9).

Figure 6
Willingness to vote by gender in general election (Ireland, in %)



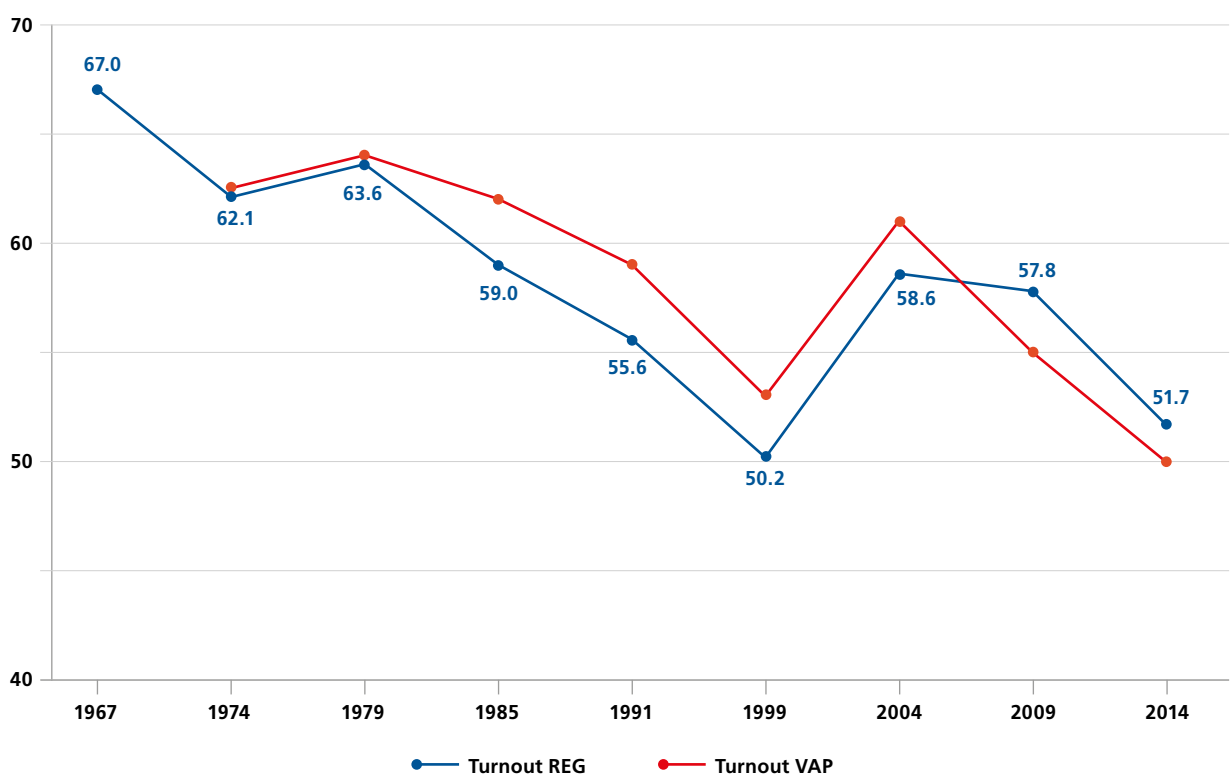
Source: UD Comparative Data Set

Figure 7
Willingness to vote by education level in general election (Ireland, in %)



Source: UD Comparative Data Set

Figure 8
Local elections 1974–2014: Turnout as % of Register and by Voting-age Population



Source: Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2016

Rural communities continue to have higher turnout, while Dublin and its suburbs recorded the lowest turnout in the 2014 local elections at just 43 percent (Kavanagh, 2014).

Referendums are common in Ireland due the mandatory requirement stipulated in the 1937 constitution that any proposed amendment be decided by popular vote (Gallagher, 2018). Additionally, there are ordinary referendums that do not involve constitutional amendments. Since 1937, 44 referendums have been conducted (Coakley & Gallagher, 2018, pp. 380–381; The Electoral Commission, 2024), making them a crucial decision-making tool in Irish politics (Barrett, 2017; Munley, Garcia-Rodriguez & Redmond, 2023). Irish referendums can be divided into two main categories: those addressing social issues and those concerning administrative and legal matters (Munley, Garcia-Rodriguez & Redmond, 2023, p. 372).

Turnout for referendums varies significantly, often influenced by the issue's salience and public profile. Social and European issues tend to attract higher turnout than administrative and legal referendums. Examples of high-turnout referendums include the 1972 referendum on accession to the European Community (70.9 percent), the 1992 referendum on abortion (68.2 percent), the 1995 referendum on divorce (62.2 percent), the 2004 referendum on citizenship (60 percent), the 2009 referendum on the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty (59 percent), the 2015 referendum on same-sex marriage (60.5 percent), and the 2018 referendum on abortion legalisation (64 percent). In contrast, low-turnout examples from Referendum Ireland include the 1996 referendum on refusal of bail (29.2 percent), the 2001 referendum on Ireland joining the International Criminal Court (34.8 percent), and the 2013 referendum on abolishing the Seanad and creating a criminal court (39.2 percent).

Unlike general and local elections, middle-class urban constituencies typically record the highest turnout in referendums (Kavanagh, 2013). Regular referendum voters tend to be older, have higher incomes, and hold conservative views (Munley, Garcia-Rodriguez & Redmond, 2023, p. 387). This may be because, in the absence of extensive door-to-door canvassing, common in general elections, especially in rural areas, individual voter characteristics take precedence. Those who see voting as a civic duty or moral obligation and those with access to information and higher education are more likely to vote without direct outreach (Blais, Galais, and Reidy, 2017; Cunningham & Marsh, 2018, pp. 157–158).

SUMMARY: WHAT CAN BE SAID ABOUT THE PROFILE OF THE NON-VOTER IN IRELAND

Irish voter turnout has decreased substantially over the past several decades, reaching an all-time low in the 2002 election, with another notable dip in the 2020 election. The voluntary registration system is plagued by inaccuracies, potentially leading to the inclusion of 500,000 non-existent voters on the register. Even when allowing for this erroneous count, a reduction in the percentage of voters persists. This trend is apparent both in local elections and referendums, albeit to varying degrees depending on the issue at hand. Due to the uniqueness of Ireland's electoral system, which heavily emphasises localism, certain key factors can be inferred.

Elsässer et al. (2022) identified that the main groups abstaining from voting are those with lower education levels and working-class backgrounds. Their research also highlighted that social class further amplifies the gap in voting participation, particularly among those under 30. While the study on Ireland supports the finding that older people vote more, it also reveals important differences, particularly concerning social class in rural areas. There is a tendency for people with lower education and social class (specifically farmers and small business owners) to vote more in these areas.

A distinct urban-rural disparity exists in voter turnout, with higher attendance rates observed in predominantly rural constituencies compared to urban regions. Underscoring this, voter turnout is lowest in the Dublin metropolitan area, particularly in the Inner-City regions. This pattern stems from the predominance of older voters, farmers, and homeowners in rural areas, who tend to vote more frequently. Conversely, younger individuals, the working class, and renters are more concentrated in urban areas and exhibit lower voter turnout rates. Contributing to this differentiation, the friends-and-neighbours' effect also impacts voter turnout, with local candidates garnering greater support, particularly in rural areas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Declining voter turnout in Ireland has motivated academic circles to offer potential solutions, one relating to the timing of elections. However, it was found that neither weekend voting nor the time of the year of the election reflected any noteworthy change to voter turnout. This could be explained by changing work patterns that allow people more flexibility over their schedules. The same was true for the extension of the polling day hours (Quinlan, 2015). Therefore, recommendations need to be directly related to voter registration.

MODERNISING THE ELECTORAL REGISTRATION

In February 2023, an independent electoral commission began organising and coordinating all issues relating to election matters. This followed persistent calls to overhaul the previous fragmented election system, which required extensive modernisation (Farrell 2013, 2014; Reidy, 2014). The newly founded commission's main functions include reviewing constituencies, registering political parties, reporting on elections, conducting general research, and engaging with the public (The Electoral Commission, 2023).

The Commission will also serve as a permanent referendum committee, facilitating all aspects of organising votes (The Electoral Commission, 2023). A key function of the Commission is to modernise the Electoral Register, setting standards for its maintenance and keeping it updated. More accurate voter registration will provide a clearer picture of actual voter turnout and the main trends derived from it. A possible avenue could be the introduction of an automatic voter registration that could help reduce the inaccuracies currently present in the voter registration, specifically with younger voters who are usually more mobile and are less comfortable with the current bureaucracy involved (Daly, 2021, p. 14)

VOTER EDUCATION

Before the formation of the Electoral Commission, there was no central national system to organise the information needed for voters to be informed about upcoming elections and referendums. Little information was provided about the functions of parliament, European institutions or how to vote at polling stations (Reidy, 2014). The Electoral Commission

has launched the Learning Hub, a platform designed to compile all relevant information about Irish democracy, the constitution, the country's voting system, and the importance of voting. The Commission also plans to deliver educational programmes to raise public awareness of and participation in the democratic process and electoral events (The Electoral Commission). The introduction of civic education programmes, starting in schools, could enhance awareness of the importance of voting (Quinlan, 2015, p. 500).

Reform of civic education in schools: Civic, Social, and Political Education (CSPE) is a subject taught in the Irish education system for Junior Cycle only (ages 12–15) (O'Brien, 2023, p. 8). However, it was removed from the Junior Certificate as an examinable subject in 2019, and replaced with an optional Leaving Certificate subject (ages 16–18), Politics and Society (Donnelly, 2019). Young interviewees reported receiving a substandard civic education, adding that the curriculum lacked detail including an insufficient emphasis on understanding the electoral system and function of the Dáil (Daly, 2021). Teachers of the subject indicated that the subject had a low status compared to other subjects, and that there was a notable gap between the way CSPE was conceptualised and the way it was implemented (O'Brien, 2023, p. 16). This gap stemmed from a lack of financial resources and teachers without proper qualifications, ultimately meaning only the well-resourced schools offered the subject in a comprehensive manner (Daly, 2021, p. 11).

Enhancing social media involvement and presence: low turnout is especially present with younger voters, who often draw their knowledge from social media rather than from traditional media sources. Social media outlets are often more prone to dangers of disinformation and manipulation, therefore it is of vital importance to increase the involvement of official institutions and to provide fast, clear, and accurate information.

EARLY VOTING

Postal voting in Ireland is limited: it is only available to diplomats and their spouses living abroad, full-time members of the defence forces, and people with a unique and rare set of circumstances (Citizen's Information). Relaxing the restrictions and introducing early voting could have a positive influ-

ence on voting, specifically for anyone abstaining from voting due to circumstantial reasons such as being abroad (no way of voting, even for those on short trips), illness or disability (very strict conditions), and students who live far from their registration constituency (Marsh, et. al, 2008; Reidy; 2014).

THE INTRODUCTION OF YOUTH QUOTAS

Running for election is time-consuming and requires considerable financial resources. Young candidates are usually at a disadvantage compared to their older counterparts who have had more years to accumulate wealth and social networks. The introduction of youth quotas will ensure that young people are playing an active part in policymaking and can inspire their peers to become more involved in politics (Daly, 2021). This is especially important in a country like Ireland, which exhibits strong localism.

In conclusion, by reforming civic education, expanding early voting options, and introducing youth quotas, Ireland can pave the way for a more engaged and inclusive democracy. With these measures in place, the nation can empower its citizens, particularly its youth, to actively participate in shaping the future of their country.

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WHO DOES (NOT) VOTE IN IRELAND?



Why should the Irish care about turnout?

Voting is a crucial factor in a democracy. This paper analyses voter turnout trends in Ireland, particularly focusing on the sharp decrease since the 1990s. Understanding voter participation helps identify key factors contributing to this decline, which are critical for guiding policy reforms.



Who are the Irish non-voters?

This report shows that voter turnout is especially low among younger populations and in deprived urban communities with low rates of home ownership. Rural dwellers, particularly farmers, are more likely to vote. Increased education results in higher turnout, but is less of a factor than age.



What should be done?

To combat declining turnout, the paper recommends modernising voter registration, reforming civic education, and enhancing political engagement through targeted social media strategies, early voting options and introducing youth quotas to encourage broader electoral participation.

