



Think-tank for action on social change

## TASC Policy Brief

Fit for Purpose: How can the Irish political system adapt to meet the needs of young people.



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## Executive Summary

This policy brief examines how the departments of the Irish government can implement reforms to counteract low turnout amongst young voters, improve young people's trust in the Irish electoral system and increase the responsiveness of government to the needs of Irish citizens aged 35 and under. Key barriers to participation for Irish youth currently include a sense of exclusion and distance from the world of politics amongst youth, lack of youth representation in institutions such as the Dáil and local government and the de-prioritisation by politicians of the issues that young people are most concerned with, which include climate change, housing, healthcare, and education, due to a culture of short-termism.

Recent developments in the Irish political sphere have shown immense potential for harnessing young people's political interest and energy and channelling it into greater electoral participation. Low youth participation in elections when analysed in isolation obscures the true state of youth politics in Ireland, which is promising. The current political climate amongst youth is characterised by rising participation in referendum campaigns and social movements. The opportunities presented by an erosion of conformist status-quo thinking in Ireland and the democratisation of campaigning through the internet should not be overlooked and should be reflected in new policies.

Following interviews with young Irish political actors and an analysis of where the potential for reform lies, the recommendations of this brief targets the education system and local councils as well as the electoral system and the make-up of the Oireachtas. The key policy recommendations are as follows:

1. Empowering local government
2. Greater investment in participatory budgeting and youth participation initiatives
3. Reform of civic education
4. Lowering the voting age
5. Youth quotas
6. Reform of the voter registration system towards automatic voter registration

## Research Methods

As a complement to the cited written material, the policy suggestions in this document have been informed by 12 interviews conducted with young people aged 17 to 35 who are involved various aspects of the Irish political sphere. Young members of Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael, Sinn Féin, the Green Party, the Social Democrats and People Before Profit were interviewed, as well as young housing and climate activists. Of those interviewed, seven were men, four were women and one person was non-binary. The interviews were conducted between August and September of 2020. In addition to these interviews, the brief draws on the contributions of the panellists at the discussion event organised by TASC on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2020 entitled 'Fit for Purpose: Does Traditional Politics Work for Young People?'.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Irish Times article covering the TASC discussion panel: <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/social-affairs/quotas-for-young-people-in-politics-suggested-to-attract-them-1.4351866>

## Introduction

This brief seeks to examine how to increase meaningful participation amongst young people in Irish politics, with a view to improving and strengthening the country's democratic institutions. Despite some encouraging trends in youth participation, young people are still the demographic least likely to vote in general elections in Ireland according to 2020 statistics<sup>2</sup>. This is consistent with international trends<sup>3</sup>. Low youth turnout is a long-standing issue in Irish politics, with data gathered by NYCI showing that in 1999, 14% of young Irish people were not registered to vote, with this figure rising to 30% in 2014<sup>4</sup>.

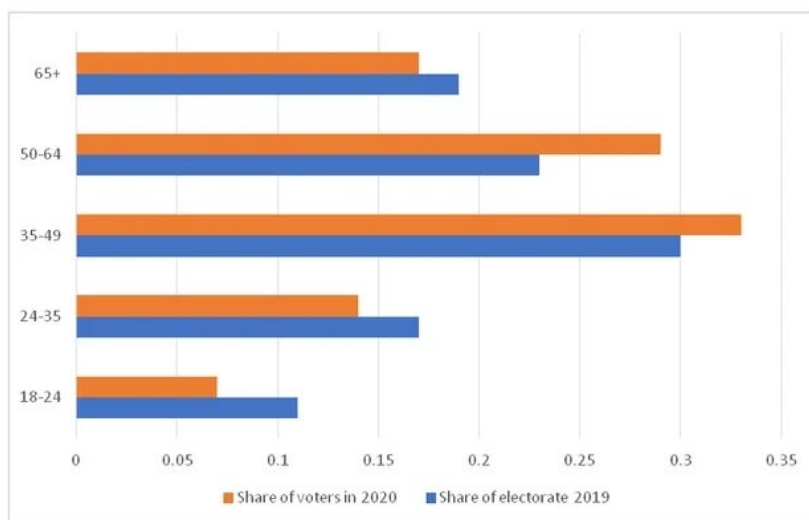


Figure 1- RTE Statistics for GE2020, 10.02.2020<sup>1</sup>

These trends of low youth turnout occur in the context of increasingly visible questioning about the stability and popularity of Western democratic institutions. The widespread calls for a second Brexit referendum in the UK illustrate this loss of faith. The second referendum was backed by both the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties in the 2019 general election and demonstrated a lack of confidence in the first referendum's results and the extremist policy approach to negotiating a withdrawal from the EU<sup>5</sup>. The intergenerational gap concerning Brexit was very stark, young people were against it and older people were for it but there was little government recognition of how much younger people, whose lives would be more affected by the decision, were against leaving the EU. Failure to act on other long-term issues like climate change and inequality, as well as the visible influence of private corporations on public decisionmakers have undermined trust in politicians and representative democracy in many Western democracies.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Marsh, Emeritus Professor, Trinity College Dublin, 'Did turnout make a difference this time?', Monday 10.02.2020

<https://www.rte.ie/news/election-2020/2020/0209/1114255-voter-turnout/>

<sup>3</sup> Abdurashid Solijonov, IDEA International Report 2016, Voter Turnout Trends Around the World, <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/voter-turnout-trends-around-the-world.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> NYCI Submission to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht, June 2015

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Goodwin, 'The prospects for a second Brexit referendum', The Financial Times, 18.10.2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/1f9cefa8-f0f2-11e9-a55a-30afa498db1b>

The perceived legitimacy of democratic institutions is crucial to their longevity and successful functioning. Should the discourse of lack of faith continue, it could well have a long-term destabilising effect on the governing institutions of democracies. It is vital that as a remedy Ireland and other democratic countries prioritise policies that cultivate trust and cooperation between citizens and their governing institutions from a young age. If this is not done, Western countries could face what British sociologist and political scientist Colin Crouch calls “post-democracy.” According to Crouch, “A post-democratic society is one that continues to have and to use all the institutions of democracy, but in which they increasingly become a formal shell”, and while we have not yet reached this state, we are in his view dangerously tending towards it.<sup>6</sup>

## **Sources of Alienation for Young People in Irish Politics**

### **Separation between the world of young people and the world of politics**

Amanda Adewole, a podcaster, and Black Lives Matter activist from Kildare argues that “What often makes traditional politics feel so far away from young people is that it seems so detached from this digital world, it feels very far away and is always predominantly powered by people of older generations, so it feels like you know you feel a bit removed from it almost.” The interviewees were extremely concerned that this perception deterred young people from seeking to access political information.

“In general elections, how many young people are actually going to read manifestos?” asked Stephen Kennedy, Chair of the Dublin Bay North branch of Young Fine Gael. “I think there’s an issue of parties struggling to solidly communicate to young people what they want to do if they get into government. I think that’s another reason why there’s a bit of disengagement, because voting in elections can seem a lot more intimidating and complicated than voting in referendums.” Youth wings of political parties and students’ unions are leading the way when it comes to bridging this gap by creating online content to present the manifestos and policies of parties to young people via social media in a way that is accessible and appealing to them. According to the NYCI and REDC 2015 Youth Empowerment Survey, social media is the primary means by which people aged 15-30 keep up to date with current affairs, with one in three citing this as their main method, so online engagement is critical to keeping young voters and citizens informed.<sup>7</sup>

The members of youth wings of political parties who were interviewed for this brief considered the youth branches to be an excellent merging of the worlds of both politics and young people, which instilled confidence and a sense of proximity to their representatives that helped them overcome barriers to participation as well as influence policy. Louis Brennan, active in the UCD branch of Ógra Fianna Fáil, provided an insight into the kind of engagement that occurs between senior parties and their youth groups. “A lot of the time you can submit things to the senior party, and they will read it, and although that doesn’t necessarily mean they’ll implement your ideas, they always encourage members to contribute towards policy discussions,” he said. “You do get consulted on things, in fairness. Before the programme for government was agreed the senior party were really proactive in speaking to and listening to Ógra. Each organisation was able to put together a short wish list of demands and submit it to the senior party. A lot of the policies did end up being used. For example,

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<sup>6</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/five-minutes-with-colin-crouch/>

<sup>7</sup> NYCI & REDC Youth Empowerment Poll, January 2015 <https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/youngvoices2015final.pdf>

the former Policy Officer who is now the president of Ógra Fianna Fáil pretty much wrote the senior party policy on insurance for young people.”

Stephen shared that in his experience, youth party membership took away the “mystique” around politics that can often make young people feel either that they are unqualified to contribute or are viewed that way and thus will not be taken seriously. “I think I’m more inclined to consider running to be a councillor for example now than I was a year ago. I think a lot of it has to do with confidence,” he reflected. “Richard Bruton is my local FG deputy. Beforehand I would have been hesitant to contact my local representatives if I had a problem I wanted solved. I think being involved in youth politics you don’t hold your local politicians on a pedestal as much and feel like you can reach out to them a lot more. You see someone on TV and you think they’re a completely different standard of person to yourself. Then you meet them in person and you go ‘Oh, he or she is a person just like me.’ The mystique goes away.”

### **Lack of youth representation**

The feeling that politicians and politics are out of touch with the world young people inhabit is unsurprising given the age demographics within Irish politics. Research by the UN’s Not Too Young To Run Campaign, launched in 2016 at the first United Nations Forum on Human Rights, Democracy and the Rule of Law taking place at United Nations Geneva<sup>8</sup>, found that “51% of the world’s population is under 30, but only 2% are members of parliaments.”<sup>9</sup> Ireland is unfortunately no exception to this trend, with the average age in the 33<sup>rd</sup> Dáil at 48.5 and only three TDs in their 20s, one of whom was elected aged 29, making up just 2% of all representatives.<sup>10</sup>

A 2018 report published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union revealed that in 2017, Ireland ranked 65th out of 150 countries for overall percentage of parliamentarians aged under 30. Norway, the top country, had only 13.61% of representatives aged 30 or under.<sup>9</sup>

### **Deprioritisation of issues most affecting youth**

The young people interviewed by TASC declared climate change, housing, healthcare, and education to be the most pressing facing the younger generations, which is reflected in their voting choices, with the majority of young people voting for parties who ran on a platform of radical change such as Sinn Féin and the Green Party. Those interviewed frequently cited feeling unable to meaningfully affect change as one of the main demotivating aspects of Irish politics for young people. There was a broad consensus amongst interviewees that the issues most important to young people are frequently neglected in the policy decisions of the Dáil, leading to disillusionment and disengagement.

‘Young people are interested in issues like BLM, climate change, car insurance, housing, and issues that affect young people,’ says Fianna Fáil Senator Malcolm Byrne. ‘The challenge is for political

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2016/11/launching-global-campaign-promoting-rights-young-people-run-public-office/>

<sup>9</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union Report, ‘Youth participation in national parliaments: 2018’ <https://www.ipu.org/resources/publications/reports/2018-12/youth-participation-in-national-parliaments-2018>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/the-shape-of-the-33rd-d%C3%A1il-gender-and-age-1.4172965>

structures to be able to respond to that. The problem is for parliamentary democracies we've been operating in pretty much the same structures for two centuries.'

Political correspondent at the Irish Examiner Aoife Moore echoes this sentiment that political institutions have thus far been lacking in their response to the interests of youth. "We have so many passionate campaigners, but they tend to turn away from the political parties at times because they don't see themselves reflected or they don't think they can get their goals achieved," she points out. "You can't really blame them because with marriage equality and with Repeal the 8th the public were so much further ahead than the politicians were, it was the public who drove those campaigns."

With many of the issues most concerning youth requiring long-term solutions, interviewees also cited short-termism as a deterrent for engaging young people in politics. However, no one denied the complexity of this issue. As Stephen Kennedy of Young Fine Gael conceded, "I don't wholly blame government for that. I think there's always a push from the outside towards short termism as well. Voters also want to see quick solutions. It's the nature of politics and just human nature. Everyone wants to see the quick fix and just to make things easier to comprehend people want to simplify solutions as well." As will be discussed later in this brief, civic education can play a huge role in tackling issues caused by unsustainable outlooks such as excessive short-termism and individualism.

## **Opportunities for encouraging greater youth participation**

### **Changes in voting behaviour and the erosion of the status quo**

The 2020 general election marked a distinct change in the voting behaviour of the Irish public. For the first time, the traditional position of Fine Gael and Fianna Fáil as the two mainstream parties was challenged by a three-way tie with Sinn Féin, with these three parties receiving 20.86%, 22.18% and 24.53% of first preference votes respectively<sup>11</sup>.

The rise of Sinn Féin to the status of a mainstream political party in Ireland, a phenomenon that would have been unthinkable ten years ago, would not have been possible without a surge of youth support for the party, with young people making up a significant portion of their voter base. Exit polls on election day showed that 31.8% of young people aged 18-24 voted for Sinn Féin, with only 13.6% of voters within this age group voting for Fianna Fáil and 15.5% voting for Fine Gael. The 25-34 age group showed a similar pattern, with 31.7% voting for Sinn Féin, 15.2% voting for Fianna Fáil and 17.3% voting for Fine Gael. This is in marked contrast to the voting behaviour of older generations, with those aged between 35 and 64 voting for Fianna Fáil, Fine Gael and Sinn Féin in relatively equal proportions of between 21% and 23%. The most clearly delineated difference was between those aged 24 and under and those aged over 65. 29.7% of those aged 65 and over voted for Fianna Fáil, while the majority of this group, 30.2%, voted for Fine Gael. This illustrates how shift away from the traditional two-party system can be seen as one looks down through the generations.

Following 8 months of the COVID-19 Pandemic, a Red C poll on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2020 showed similar patterns to those seen at the 2020 General Election, with 23% support for Fine Gael, 31% support for Sinn Féin and 15% support for Fianna Fáil amongst the 18-34 age group. The demographic aged 55

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<sup>11</sup> 2020 General Election Results, Irish Times <https://www.irishtimes.com/election2020/results-hub>

and over polled with 38% support for Fine Gael, 19% support for Sinn Féin and 20% support for Fianna Fáil according to this set of statistics.<sup>12</sup>

Since GE 2020, Sinn Féin have been the second largest party with 37 seats out of 160, only one seat behind Fianna Fáil<sup>5</sup>. In light of this victory and the seats gained by other left wing and change-oriented parties such as the Green Party and the Social Democrats, the interviewees felt that seeing their preferences reflected in the new Dáil may motivate young people to vote in greater numbers and become more involved in all aspects of politics.

While it is common for there to be a liberal-conservative generational divide between voters<sup>13</sup>, Sinn Féin still enjoyed a notable rise in support not only amongst young voters but also those aged 35-64, where they tied with the traditionally dominant parties. The stark contrast between the voting behaviour of younger people and that of older generations suggests a possible reduction in the tendency of Irish people to vote in line with family tradition<sup>14</sup> and a move towards issue-based voting. Whether or not this is the case, shifting away from the entrenched moderate two-party system that has dominated Irish politics since the foundation of the state may counteract political disenchantment and encourage young people to engage more with the political system.

Callie Crawley, Chairperson of the UCD branch of Ógra Sinn Féin, suggested that decision-making regarding voting has changed significantly for the younger generations of today in comparison with their predecessors. “My family just kind of accepted things and didn’t see politics as a way to change things. I think it’s because Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael had been the main people on charge for so long, it makes people less likely to think they can challenge things. There was very much a sense of ‘that’s just how it is’ whereas now it’s really changing. I think now people are fed up completely,” she said when asked about the shifting electoral patterns.

When speaking about the success of her party specifically in the 2020 General Elections, Callie put it down to the privileging of the issues of “housing, health and education” in their manifesto, as well as a greater willingness amongst young people particularly to challenge the status quo. “People aren’t afraid of things anymore in Ireland. There was a huge conservative culture that people aren’t scared to challenge anymore,” she stated. “I think the growth in youth participation is definitely partly because people have seen what kind of change is possible when you go out and vote and become active because of the success of the marriage equality referendum and repeal the eighth.”

### **Rising participation in referendum campaigns and social movements**

Youth participation has risen sharply in the past five years within movements for social justice such as the campaigns for the yes vote in both the Marriage Equality referendum in 2015 and the referendum to repeal the 8<sup>th</sup> amendment to the constitution (ban on abortion) in 2018. Following the great success of these movements and the wide margins by which these referendums passed, youth-driven movements such as climate activism and the Irish Black Lives Matter movement have been gaining momentum.

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<sup>12</sup> <https://redcresearch.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Business-Post-RED-C-Opinion-Poll-Report-Jan-2021.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2019/12/how-britain-voted-and-why-my-2019-general-election-post-vote-poll/>

<sup>14</sup> Michael Marsh, Trinity College Dublin, 2003, ‘Party identification in Ireland: an insecure anchor for a floating party system’, <https://www.tcd.ie/ines/files/partyid.pdf>

Aoife Moore notes, “It’s not that young people are not interested in politics. They are, they’re incredibly well read. It’s that they’re just not interested in the Dáil I think at times,” She adds,

We’ve seen it with the water charges, marriage equality, Repeal the Eighth, housing campaigns, now Black Lives Matter and #Metoo, younger people are involved in activism, they are the core of activism a lot of the time, it’s usually not middle-aged people marching, it is young people. When something affects you directly, like for example housing affects literally everyone my age, we see a lot of activism, but we aren’t seeing that translated into party politics, and I think that’s where Ireland falls down.

Leighton Gray, the Campaigns and Engagement Officer for UCD Students’ Union, also suggested that the youth activism we have been seeing recently is seen to be undertaken out of necessity by the young people involved, due to a distinct lack of external support in dealing with issues that directly affect them. “We do need to create some more allyship with people and allow other people to take the reins sometimes so that the responsibility doesn’t always fall only on those directly affected by an issue. Self advocacy of minority groups is huge and it’s exhausting for them,” they cautioned. Rather than further alienating young people within the political system, and especially those from already marginalised groups, the government should be engaging with the issues they are passionate about on more than a ‘tick the box’ level. Meaningful consultation and rewarding youth activism should be prioritised. It must be recognised by the government that in the context of so much youth activism, the stereotype of young people as politically disengaged is untrue and outdated.<sup>15</sup>

### **Democratisation of campaigning through the internet**

While online disinformation can threaten trust in government and undermine democracy<sup>16</sup>, social media and the dissemination of information online have also offered young political activists and candidates’ opportunities not afforded to their predecessors. Beyond raising their profile and that of their movements, they can access crowdfunding. This was instrumental to the success of progressive candidates challenging established politicians in the 2018 US Congressional elections, including candidates such as Democrats Alexandria Ocasio Cortez and Rashida Tlaib<sup>17</sup>. The power of grassroots donations is undeniable, as was illustrated when Presidential candidate Senator Bernie Sanders famously raised \$10 million in less than one week during his 2020 election campaign, predominantly through small individual donations.<sup>18</sup>

The benefit of crowdfunding goes beyond just the financial, as grassroots donations allow political candidates to run their campaigns in a way that makes them more accountable to their communities than elite donors. It enables candidates who lack powerful connections and generational wealth to compete with those who do, thereby removing barriers facing young people and those from oppressed groups who wish to run for office. Crowdfunding therefore creates the potential both to

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/meet-the-new-student-activists-1.3992005>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/04/05/fake-news-is-bad-news-democracy/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.huckmag.com/perspectives/opinion-perspectives/why-crowdfunding-is-now-the-lefts-most-effective-weapon/>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/25/us/politics/bernie-sanders-10-million.html>



diversify the political class demographically speaking and to put the priorities of young people on the agenda of governments by challenging the dominance of elite interests in the realm of policymaking<sup>19</sup>. When used as a tool for rebuilding trust and legitimacy in this way, grassroots funding campaigns are a potent antidote to the hopelessness felt by young people which often manifests itself in political disengagement due to a lack of faith in the potential for systemic change.

Crowdfunding has been employed by young progressive candidates in Ireland in the recent 2020 general election, including Green Party candidate for Cavan-Monaghan, Tate Donnelly, who ran for election at the age of only 21. “An issue for young people entering politics can also be funding and I definitely wouldn’t have been able to campaign so effectively if it weren’t for fundraising,” he says of his own campaign strategy. “Online fundraising was my most effective and I got lucky with a video going viral the day I announced. Because I had been previously politically engaged that helped me get support more quickly and I was very lucky with support on social media with people sharing my content and a donation link.”

## Policy Recommendations

### 1. Empowering local government

The majority of political power in Ireland is based in the Dáil in Dublin, with local authorities engaging in a much lower proportion of government spending than in other European countries<sup>20</sup>. In data gathered by Eurostat on EU member states, Irish local authorities raised the second lowest level of tax of all EU countries, above only Malta, and were responsible for only 7% of public spending.<sup>21</sup> Social Democrat and UCD student Ruairí Power, originally from Clare, pointed out in his interview that even without taking age demographics into account, the growing urban-rural divide has led to the electorate in many areas outside of Dublin already feeling neglected. A general local feeling of disaffection, combined with the divide between predominantly older Irish politicians and young voters, creates a breeding ground for disengagement in rural Ireland, especially amongst the youth.

“Stronger local government would definitely help in terms of young people feeling that the political system doesn’t serve them at all,” Ruairí argued. “We’ve got very weak local government structures here, so I’d like to see that improved. I really like how decentralised countries like Germany are. Other European countries do have those decentralised models of power and I think that’s something we should be moving towards.”

Many of the greatest concerns of young people, including climate change and housing, could arguably be dealt with better on a local level, with the help of local politicians who are based in the area rather than in Dublin who are familiar with the specific opportunities and weaknesses of the place they represent. “If we want to solve the climate crisis, we need a decentralised approach. We need to trust our local communities, to empower our local government and in Ireland I think we have a very top-heavy approach with only a handful of

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<sup>19</sup> IDEA International, Political Party Innovation Primer 2, ‘Online Political Crowdfunding’  
<https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/publications/online-political-crowdfunding.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/diarmaid-ferriter-why-irish-local-government-is-so-useless-1.4092165>

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.irishexaminer.com/opinion/commentanalysis/arid-30885177.html>

people at the top making some of the biggest decisions,” asserts youth climate activist Tota Daly. “Coming from a young person I think we need to be more brave, to lead with gusto, to be creative, to take risks. The public are ready for that, I think the COVID crisis has shown that.”`

## **2. Greater investment in participatory budgeting and youth participation initiatives**

The Comhairle na nÓg initiative, which brings young people under the age of 18 from different schools and youth groups together to act as a consultative forum for both local and national policy, is an excellent avenue to engage young people with decision-making processes<sup>22</sup>. Unfortunately, despite the fact that Comhairlí have existed and advised on public policy since 2002, in the NYCI Youth Empowerment Poll, conducted in January 2015 with REDC<sup>7</sup>, politicians and the government were the component of the Irish political sphere in which participants aged 15-30 expressed the least trust, with over four in ten saying they could never be trusted. With this in mind, it would be worth re-evaluating the level of publicity given to the work of Comhairlí. A campaign to increase public awareness of their work, combined with increased funding, may be a path to rebuilding trust between youth and their representatives in government.

One policy option with the potential for helping young people to feel they have greater control over public spending is participatory budgeting, an anti-poverty measure whereby citizens have direct input into municipal spending which originated in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 1989 and led to a near 20% reduction in child mortality.<sup>23</sup> The 300k-have-your-say participatory budgeting initiative, which was the first scheme of its kind in Ireland, was initially successfully trialled by South Dublin County Council in the Lucan electoral zone, to which Adamstown and Palmerstown also belong, in 2017. The following year the project was repeated in Clondalkin, with the intention of its continuation in the latter half of 2019 following local elections in May.

In the pilot years of this project in South Dublin, suggested community projects were put forward by members of the electoral district via an online portal and then reviewed by a steering group elected according to criteria agreed with the same community in order to create a shortlist. Following this, citizens from the area could vote either online or in person at designated sites such as libraries to decide to which projects funding would be allocated, which was followed by the implementation of projects with the input of citizens. This all took place over a three-month period, allowing citizens to see the effects of their work and the funding allocation being enacted promptly.

Community workshops were considered one of the most important parts of this process, and feedback from them included the suggestion by participants that use of existing networks such as the Public Participation Network and Comhairle na nÓg should be maximised, as well as greater inclusion of local schools in the process to involve young people more. The first report on these trials of participatory budgeting initiatives even

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<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ops2020.gov.ie/app/uploads/2019/09/Case-Study-Comhairle-na-n%C3%93g.pdf>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.participatorybudgeting.org/what-is-pb/>

stated that “greater involvement of younger people should be encouraged, as this process does not have any restrictions on who can vote. It was also noted that where young people did participate in previous years, their inputs were seen as valuable and innovative.” (p. 17)<sup>24</sup>

The report that followed the initiative outlined certain challenges such as that of inter-party co-operation and deciding on measures of success. However, the success of these projects for South Dublin County Council was deemed to be evident in that 90% of participants surveyed felt they had a good understanding of the participatory budgeting process while involved and over 150 organisations and groups engaged with the scheme in Clondalkin in 2018. In comparison to other modes of public consultation engagement and reach was much higher, with 131 workshop attendants and a total reach of 400,000 people via social media.<sup>24</sup> The success of these schemes in Dublin has shown the great potential of participatory budgeting as a measure to counteract the overly centralised nature of the Irish political system and the lack of power given to local councils.

From the report there appears to be under-explored potential in greater County Council engagement with constituents for more effective use of funds due to the benefit of local knowledge and the building of trust in institutions. Greater financial investment in participatory budgeting schemes in local councils across the country, especially in areas with low voter turnout and in rural areas who suffer most due to political centralisation should therefore be explored. A study of voting patterns in the trial districts for the 300k-Have-Your-Say scheme would be useful for determining the effects of the scheme on participation in local and general elections. In order to optimise youth participation it would be worthwhile to perhaps allocate an amount from this budget specifically for projects that will benefit young people, to be decided upon by a youth forum made up of representatives from Comhairle na nÓg, local schools and local higher education institutions in order to carry out participatory budgeting on a smaller scale for young people in particular.

### **3. Reform of civic education**

Interviewees mentioned inadequate civic education as a cause for weak youth political engagement. Yet, in 2019, Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE) was removed from the Junior Certificate course as an examinable subject, to be replaced only by an optional Leaving Certificate subject, Politics and Society.<sup>25</sup>

While CSPE will still be taught at Junior Cert level, it has been made part of a general Wellbeing course along with SPHE and PE, with greater school discretion on how the course is designed and taught at each school. It is acknowledged in the new Junior Cycle Wellbeing Course guidelines<sup>26</sup> that ‘without CSPE, there is the risk that discussion of wellbeing can feed

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<sup>24</sup> <https://www.ops2020.gov.ie/app/uploads/2019/09/Case-Study-300k-Have-Your-Say.pdf>

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/education/exams/pupils-asked-for-their-views-on-changing-status-of-subject-38186417.html>

<sup>26</sup> Junior Cycle Wellbeing Guidelines Document, National Council for Curriculum and Assessment <https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0?ui=2&ik=350f002dba&attid=0.1&permmsgid=msg-f:1678836652780736025&th=174c6d0a74e6ce19&view=att&disp=inline>

into individualism and miss the opportunity to make links between individual wellbeing and collective wellbeing, between the personal and the political, and ultimately between our wellbeing and that of the planet' (page 46). Superficially, this sentiment would make it seem that the new course is tending in the right direction. However, the guidelines also say that the content of the new wellbeing and CSPE courses will be designed with 'the unique context of the school and the resources available' in mind (page 56). It would appear therefore that there is a risk that there will be great disparities in the civic education that students now receive depending on the resources available at their school. The influence of resources may then result in widening the gap between students at private schools and students in disadvantaged areas. Teachers consulted by the Irish Times on the topic expressed a concern that this demotion would result in a general devaluation of the subject.<sup>27</sup>

At a time when online disinformation is increasingly creating detrimental distortions within political discourse, and professional politicians are lacking incentives to resolve long-term issues rather than working on the basis of short-term election goals, high quality political and civic education should be mandatory for all secondary school students. All students, not just those fortunate enough to attend well-resourced schools, should have access to the same information rather than a course that is decided upon with a high level of teacher discretion. Based on the views of interviewees, compulsory modules on critically engaging with online disinformation, understanding how to vote in general and local elections, and examining the relationship between tax and government spending would be especially beneficial.

When asked about their own civic education, interviewees expressed the view that the existing CSPE curriculum that they were taught was already distinctly lacking and was not taken seriously even as an exam subject. The view was expressed by many that there was a lack of emphasis on understanding the electoral system and the processes of the Dáil which particularly did young people a disservice.

"We need a massive political education in this country on taxation. We can't have better health services, better housing and action on climate change that young voters want without more taxation," argues Tate Donnelly. "There are a lot of misconceptions out there about this area. There's an issue with people not feeling like they get value for money in terms of where their taxes go. A lot of people want to pay less tax and still somehow receive better services. People should be encouraged to look at where government spending goes and see that this isn't possible. Either government revenue has to increase or spending can't increase."

Interviewees put the greater participation in referendums amongst young people down not just to their potential for momentous change but also to the fact that making an informed decision is much easier when it comes to single issue voting. In general elections, when many issues are on the table for discussion and much broader policy areas are up for debate, it is easy to become overwhelmed by what feels like a barrage of information in the form of multiple party manifestos that usually consist of rather long documents. Rather than reading

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/education/junior-cert-cspe-addressed-core-concepts-1.3915839>

these extensive documents, many turn to second-hand information on social media sites like Twitter to inform themselves in a more accessible way. With the growth of social media, using Twitter instead of traditional news outlets is becoming the new norm, which unfortunately often gives disinformation an opportunity to run rife. In conjunction with parties prioritising accessibility and engagement with voters via social media, the study of party manifestos and the way in which social media sites can shape political discourse under a compulsory CSPE curriculum would be extremely beneficial in preventing the problems of disengagement due to barriers to access and increasing polarisation.

Given the benefits of youth party membership for political engagement raised by interviewees, it would be prudent for the school curriculum to encourage young people to engage with them and join. This could be achieved most effectively by empowering young people to determine exactly where they stand politically so that they are well placed to choose the party they most align with, something that interviewees stressed the previous CSPE curriculum lacked emphasis on.

Ireland is a country that prides itself on its historical fight for self-determination and the creation of its own independent democratic institutions. Taking pride in this history is emphasised throughout the school curriculum in subjects such as history and the Irish language, but CSPE courses have previously missed the opportunity to translate this important aspect of the national identity into a sense of civic duty. The legacy of Ireland's fight for independence should be a pride in equitable and well-run democratic institutions, nurtured by an education system that prioritises participation and equality of access. This would be best achieved by creating a core module that is taken by all students at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate level alongside English, Irish and Maths to ensure that no person grows up in Ireland without the knowledge and skills to participate in its democracy.

#### **4. Lowering the voting age**

Though 16 and 17 year olds are legally able to work and are subject to income tax, they cannot vote. Given the principle of 'no taxation without representation' and the fact that these people are unable to vote on long-term decisions that will have more impact on their lives than those of older voters<sup>28</sup>, combined with the popular discourse that young people do not deserve to be taken seriously, it is no surprise that a sense of distrust and distance exists between young voters and their representatives. Young people are stakeholders in the running of the country just like all other groups yet are not treated as such<sup>29</sup>.

While young people are often painted by politicians and the press as ill-informed and not equipped for political participation<sup>30,31</sup>, this is more due to them being denied the tools to

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<sup>28</sup> <https://iea.org.uk/iea-debate-should-the-voting-age-be-lowered-to-16/>

<sup>29</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/six-reasons-why-uk-parliament-should-have-youth-quotas/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/young-people-vote-4972190-Jan2020/>

<sup>31</sup> <https://www.thejournal.ie/voting-age-seanad-3917448-Mar2018/>

participate, as discussed above, than it is a wilful ignorance. The growth of youth activism in recent years, facilitated by greater access to resources and organising tools through the internet, suggests that young people are actually well able to defy stereotypes and participate in political movements when given increased access to resources. As discussed at the TASC Youth Politics Round Table on September 10<sup>th</sup>, the most recent evidence suggests that the problem is more that young people feel that they are denied a voice in the realm of party politics than that they are completely unwilling or unable to participate.

The young people interviewed by TASC for this brief often cited feeling inadequately equipped to affect change as one of the primary causes of political disengagement amongst younger age groups. The short-termism pervading the current political culture is one of the main barriers to tackling the long-term issues at the top of the youngest generation's list of political priorities, especially climate change. Enfranchising young people in greater numbers may lead to prioritising long-term goals in policy, as politicians respond to groups voting in larger proportions. In turn, young people would perceive greater influence, leading, in a virtuous circle, to greater participation.

Lowering the voting age would also be a useful instrument to increase the effectiveness of civic education at school and encourage engagement with political structures from an early age by bringing CSPE closer to students' practical reality. The way in which CSPE was previously taught created a disjunction between the end of the Junior Cycle programme in third year and students turning 18, by which time most are in 6<sup>th</sup> year and have forgotten most of the information they learned in that Junior Certificate Course as they were not required to use it. A more practical programme with a heavier focus on electoral participation, taught in the context of students' imminent enfranchisement, would encourage students both to take the subject more seriously and allow them to start as they mean to go on, setting the tone for a lifetime of informed participation.

## 5. Youth Quotas

Youth quotas would provide models for engaging in politics and ensure that young people are represented in policymaking. Seeing other young people being elected to office may even encourage more youth to become politically active themselves. As the saying goes, "you can't be what you can't see." The importance of such role models has been particularly noted in post-conflict societies such as Somalia.<sup>9</sup>

Like crowdfunding, quotas also mitigate the fact that younger candidates are economically disadvantaged when running for election when compared with their older counterparts who have had more years to accumulate wealth and networks. They guarantee that at least a certain number of young representatives will be elected and not beaten by older politicians with more resources.

Countries that have already implemented youth quotas have done so in a variety of different ways<sup>32</sup>:

- In Uganda, five parliamentary seats are reserved for people under 30. One of these seats must be occupied by a woman.

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<sup>32</sup> <http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/yt/yt20/quotas-for-youth>

- In Kenya, 12 people, who must consist of alternating male and female representatives, are nominated by political parties to the legislature to represent special interest groups including young people, people with disabilities, and workers.
- In Rwanda, the National Youth Council is permitted to elect two members of parliament.

Youth consultation processes by the Inter-Parliamentary Union have brought up additional suggestions, including the importance of taking intersectional concerns such as gender and other forms of oppression into account, and the need to account for relative youth population size and statistics when creating quotas. It was also suggested that youth quotas would “not be limited to parliamentary seats but expanded to cover parliamentary leadership positions, committee assignments, and party and special interest caucuses.”<sup>9</sup>

## **6. Reform of the voter registration system towards automatic voter registration**

The January 2015 NYCI and REDC Youth Empowerment poll showed young people to be particularly amenable to electoral reform, reporting positive attitudes amongst young people aged 15-30 towards online voter registration, although one in four did express reservations about the voting itself being carried out online. While voting online brings up complex questions around data protection and the integrity of results<sup>33,34</sup>, automatic and online voter registration when turning 18 or changing address would not pose such a risk to the accuracy of the outcome and would remove much of the complicated bureaucracy that can disenfranchise young people.

Designed at a time before the Irish population, and university-age youth especially, were highly mobile, the Irish voter registration system has long required updating<sup>35</sup>. Research conducted by NYCI in 2017 found that nearly a quarter of young people, an estimated 22%, were not registered to vote<sup>36</sup>. Meanwhile, recent trials of automatic voter registration in the US states of Alaska, California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Vermont before the 2018 elections added approximately 2.2 million voters to the register in those states. While there are caveats to the statistics on turnout of these newly registered voters, such as that we cannot be sure that the people who voted would not have registered themselves anyway, social science research by universities and AVR advocacy groups has shown that automatic voter registration has played a positive role in boosting participation in states where it has been implemented.<sup>37</sup> There has since been a drive to move towards automatic voter registration in many other US states, and research is being conducted into what are the most effective ways of implementing this policy. This is an unexplored avenue that could prove valuable for boosting participation in Ireland.

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<sup>33</sup> <https://www.newstatesman.com/spotlight/cyber/2019/05/electronic-voting-political-risk>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.govtech.com/security/Risks-Overshadow-Benefits-with-Online-Voting-Experts-Warn.html>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.thejournal.ie/readme/opinion-young-people-should-be-automatically-registered-to-vote-at-18-3712275-Nov2017/>

<sup>36</sup> NYCI & REDC Polling, conducted 15th-23rd February 2017

<sup>37</sup> <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/what-happened-when-2-2-million-people-were-automatically-registered-to-vote/>

## **Conclusion**

Young people are the future of the Irish political system. Neglecting them and failing to impress upon Irish citizens from a young age that our democracy can and should function for the good of everyone endangers the future functioning of that system by eroding participation. It is unrealistic to expect young people to be able to participate sufficiently in a system that is biased against them, from the way voting is organised to who is able to secure election into political office and which needs are prioritised. The policy recommendations outlined above take a holistic approach to fostering greater inclusion of young people in Irish politics, and if implemented would empower youth with adequate education while removing systemic barriers to participation.





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