

Ireland has moved to improve electoral integrity – other countries should follow suit

On 13 July, Ireland passed an Electoral Reform Bill aimed at improving the country's electoral integrity. [Harsh Vasani](#), [Toby S. James](#) and [Holly Ann Garnett](#) assess the likely impact of the bill and the potential lessons other countries could draw from it.

Throughout the world, there have been concerns democracy has been 'backsliding' and that electoral integrity is under threat. A [Summit for Democracy](#) was hosted by the United States in December last year to 'set forth an affirmative agenda for democratic renewal and to tackle the greatest threats faced by democracies'. Countries have been asked to make commitments to how they will improve democracy and elections.

[The Irish government committed](#) to establishing an independent statutory Electoral Commission. Academic [research on electoral integrity](#) and international best practices are clear that those involved in running and regulating elections should be independent from those standing for elections. However, many countries retain a system whereby government ministers have considerable control over electoral watchdogs, which compromises their independence. When Ireland gained independence from Britain, [it established a system whereby elections were in the portfolio of a government minister and department](#) – most recently the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

This commitment to establish a statutory, independent Electoral Commission for Ireland was honoured when an [Electoral Reform Bill was passed](#) on 13 July. But the Bill went further. The bill also promises the regulation of online political advertising with the [aim](#) of ensuring 'transparency during electoral campaigns and... that our elections remain free from hidden influences on how we vote'.

The legislation came amidst calls to [ban cryptocurrency](#) donations to political parties. Given the identity of donors can be concealed when using cryptocurrencies, there are concerns such donations could create an avenue for foreign funding to influence election results. Donations made to political parties will also be scrutinised and the leader of each political party will have to [declare](#) to the Standards in Public Office Commission all donations to the party from outside the state, including all contributions, whether in cash or kind. Political parties will also be required to declare all the properties they own.

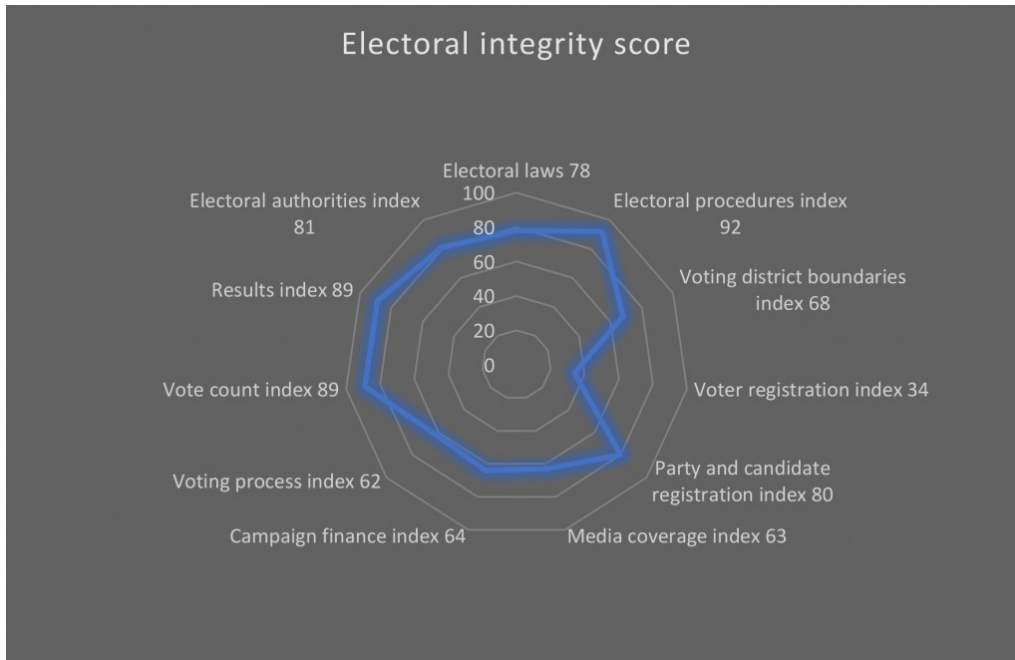
These reforms are important, too. The wider context is that there are major concerns about the possibility of foreign interference in elections. The alleged [Russian interference](#) in US elections cast light on the dangers of foreign interference in elections and manipulation of the electorate. It has been suggested that we have therefore entered an era of '[cyber elections](#)'.

Ireland's electoral integrity weak spots

The legislation has been in the news for many weeks vis-à-vis electoral funding, foreign interference, online disinformation, and empowering the election commission. But does it speak to the problems that Ireland actually faces with elections?

The Electoral Integrity Project recently published the [2022 Electoral Integrity Global Report](#) that scores countries on the quality of electoral integrity around the world. The report evaluates all aspects of elections – from the laws through the campaign and voter registration. The report is based on a rolling survey of 4,591 experts across 169 countries. Figure 1 illustrates Ireland's areas of strength and weakness over the past decade. The data from the Electoral Integrity Project is available online [here](#).

Figure 1: Country-level scores for electoral integrity in Ireland

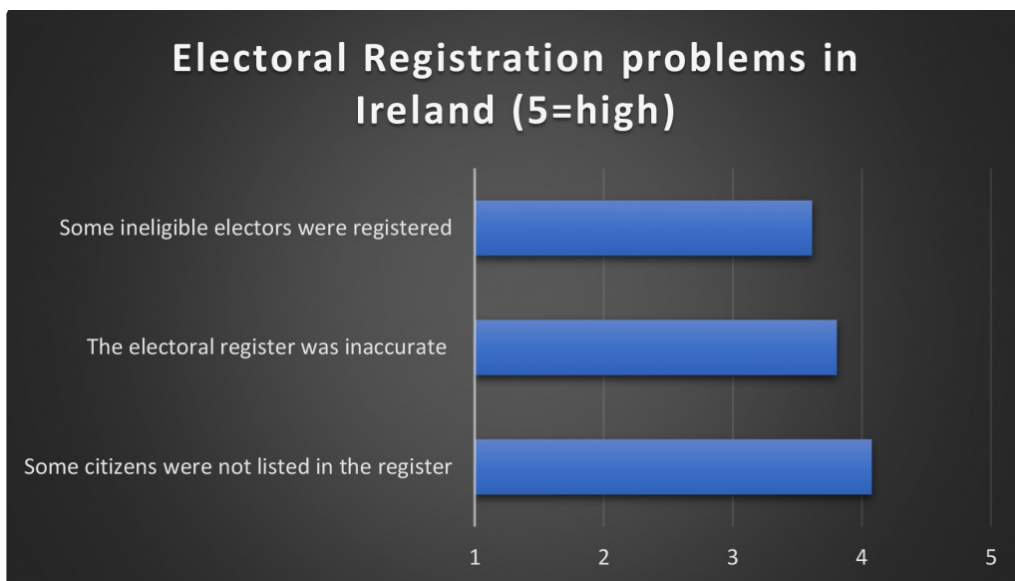


Note: The figure is based on the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI-8.0) index, 2012-21.

The data shows that Ireland scores the poorest on voter registration. The scores on voter registration were 34 for the period of 2012-18. A comparison with Finland (95-96), Sweden (88-90) and Denmark (93-91), the three highest scorers on the perceptions of electoral integrity (PEI) index, illustrates just how poorly Ireland fares on perceptions of voter registration.

The voter registration index is measured on indicators such as whether some citizens were not listed in the register, the electoral register was inaccurate, or some ineligible electors were registered. Figure 2 illustrates the extent to which these were a problem on a five-point scale. Citizens missing from the electoral register was the greatest problem – but it was also the case that the register contained ineligible electors.

Figure 2: Electoral registration problems in Ireland



Note: The figure is based on the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI-8.0) index, 2012-21.

The good news is that the Bill also contains [provisions to improve voter registration](#). These include a move to continuous registration based on an individual application, data sharing to assist registration authorities in updating and maintaining the register, and annual reporting by registration authorities to the newly established Commission.

The establishment of the Commission could therefore play an important role in redressing these problems in the coming years. In particular, the legislation enables the Commission to undertake research on the accuracy and completeness of the register – research which has generated important insights in the UK to reveal the extent of the ‘[missing millions](#)’.

Other dimensions of electoral integrity have fared better in Ireland. Vote counting and results work very well. The electoral finance index is more troubled with a score of 64. But it is worth noting that problems with money and elections are a huge problem worldwide – the Electoral Integrity Project report found that it was the weakest aspect of elections worldwide. The world should therefore watch closely to see if Ireland’s new legislation works – and whether there is an improvement in future report scores.

Looking forward: automatic voter registration?

Given that voter registration is the main weakness, it is notable that there are, however, policy fixes which are not legislated for, which should be considered in future years as the Electoral Reform Bill beds in. Many countries have recently moved to introduce some aspect of automatic voter registration. Rather than relying on individual applications (a requirement [for individual applications reduces voter registration](#) levels), voters can be registered by the authorities without requiring electors to take action. [Comparative research](#) shows that this can improve completeness and does not affect accuracy.

It is difficult for countries like Ireland to introduce this system without a civil population register. A more appropriate approach, as a [recent voter registration report](#) shows, is therefore to automatically enrol the population when they reach critical life moments such as becoming eligible to vote for the first time. Nonetheless, Ireland has been proactive in responding to the call to strengthen democratic electoral institutions. Other countries should do the same, and the Electoral Integrity Report can help them to do so.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, not the position of EUROPP – European Politics and Policy or the London School of Economics. Featured image credit: [European Council](#)
