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Complacency is a threat to true democracy

By Nora Owen

The recent revelation by the Minister for the Environment that the electoral registers contain more than 30,000 mistakes did not come as a big surprise to the Democracy Commission, writes **Nora Owen**

As we met groups and individuals, a recurring theme as to why people didn't vote or couldn't vote was the process by which one got their name on the electoral register.

Despite the advertisements in the media and leaflet drops by county councils, there is still a great deal of confusion and ignorance as to the where, the how and the when of getting your name on the register.

It is clear that the present publicity methods are NOT working and new ways must be tried so that the most basic element for participating in democracy, ie voting, is available to all.

Popular participation lies at the core of any democratic society. The commission has been particularly concerned with examining the reasons for disconnection from the political process by the under-25s and those living in socially disadvantaged areas.

Disconnection is best exemplified in the declining rates of electoral participation. Ireland has been experiencing falling electoral turnout in recent decades.

Over a 25-year period, turnout in Irish general elections has dropped from 76 per cent in 1977 to about 63 per cent in 2002. In the recent general election, Northern Ireland was the only region within the UK to experience a drop in turnout.

The Central Statistics Office figures published this week bear out these findings. In Ireland just over 40 per cent of young adult respondents aged 18-19, and only 53 per cent of those aged 20-24, indicated that they voted in the 2002 general election. In the 1999 local and European elections, almost 67 per cent of those aged 18-25 did not vote.

The same is true for young people in Northern Ireland. In the 2003 Assembly elections, 49 per cent of voters aged between 18-24 voted compared to an estimated 80 per cent turnout among the over-55s.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that apathy and a lack of interest lie behind the low turnout of young people.

The commission's findings show that of non-voters in the 20-24 age category, 47 per cent didn't vote because of procedural obstacles ("not registered", "away", "no polling card") as opposed to the 39 per cent who didn't vote due to "no interest", "disillusionment", "lack of information/knowledge" and "my vote would make no difference".

Procedural issues such as registration and the day of polling thus appear to be the major block to youth participation.

Electoral turnout also tends to be lower amongst the less affluent in society. The Electoral Commission in the North found that in the 2003 Assembly elections, 61 per cent of unskilled manual workers, the unemployed and those in receipt of long-term state benefits voted, compared with 79 per cent of middle-class or professional voters.

There is evidence that voter-education programmes based in the community have a positive impact on turnout. For example, in Fatima Mansions in Dublin city, turnout levels have increased steadily as a consequence of such programmes and urban regeneration programmes.

Voter-education programmes run by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice were also one of the factors contributing to the high turnout rate for non-EU nationals in the 2004 local elections in the Portlaoise region.

Turnout levels in rural areas tend to be higher than in urban ones. A variety of explanations, including stronger sense of community, stronger political organisations and traditions, as well as an older population have been put forward.

However, a disturbing finding illustrates that high population mobility in the new commuter belts around Dublin has a negative impact on turnout in these areas.

From my own experience, large numbers of new residents in these new suburbs in Dublin, Meath and Kildare never register their vote, or if they do, it might be three or four years after they have moved there.

This lack of participation by so many of the young people of Ireland - the future leaders in our society - distorts the results in any election and the politicians must implement innovative means to overcome this growing trend.

The Democracy Commission has made a number of recommendations, some of which I list here, which if implemented, we feel will lead to greater voter participation across all sectors of our societies, North and South, leading to a healthier democracy:

automatic registration through personal public service (PPS)/national insurance number;

extension of the postal voting option to all registered voters, including prisoners, in Ireland;

the commission believes that despite the bad experience Ireland had with the first attempts at e-voting (and my own personal experience!), it is a system well worth introducing for the benefits it will bring.

It is imperative that such a system is introduced in a way that promotes confidence in the integrity of the system.

It is also essential that the system staggers the counts, which are part of Irish political culture and play a role in generating interest in politics and preserves the information provided by them;

introduction of legislation which gives homeless people, Travellers and others with a transitory lifestyle, the right to register using an address near a place where they "commonly spend" their time;

establishment of an independent electoral commission in Ireland.

Having participated in monitoring elections in a number of African countries, it was heartening to observe the sheer excitement of people who were voting for the first time and the efforts and hardships they endured to get to polling stations. Irish voters, in many cases, have become complacent about using their vote and such complacency is a threat and danger to a true democracy.

Hopefully, the report and findings of the Democracy Commission will act as a wake-up call to us all to re-engage in the democratic process in Ireland.

Nora Owen is a former minister for justice and a member of the Democracy Commission, an initiative of TASC and Democratic Dialogue