

Ireland – Young Population, Old Political System

EAMONN WATERS

Irish politics is facing a potential crisis that has become increasingly obvious in recent years. Fewer people are voting and quite a number of those abstaining are young. Strangely for a country with the youngest population in Europe, Ireland's political profile also looks relatively old. Three from a total of 166 Dáil Deputies are under 30 years of age, while nobody under this age sits in the 60-member Seanad. The average age of a TD is 50, the average age of a Cabinet Minister is 49, and the average age of a Junior Minister is 52!

A generation ago, most of the current party leaders were getting involved in elected politics. John Bruton, Mary Harney and Bertie Ahern were all in their early 20s when entering the Oireachtas. With so few young people making it into national politics, we can justifiably ask, where will the leaders of tomorrow come from? In terms of the present tense, we can also ask, how representative is a democracy where up to half of the population (the young half) is virtually excluded?

Last year, the country went to the polls in the local government and European parliament elections. There were the usual winners, losers, and surprise packages. What was more significant, perhaps, was the turn-out. 1999 may have marked the centenary celebration of county councils in Ireland, however, it also witnessed a 50 per cent turn-out, the lowest ever in those 100 years. A report published by the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) showed the turn-out of young voters to be even lower still. For every person under 25 years of age who voted, there were two who did not. These statistics are not an isolated phenomenon. Record numbers of people are not voting, and young people make up a sizeable proportion of them. The 1997 presidential election saw the lowest turn-out ever, and the general election turn-out of the same year was the lowest since 1923. Recently, the nadir for democratic participation came in the Dublin South Central by-election which had the lowest turn-out in a ballot ever recorded. Over seven in ten voters stayed away on polling day.

In quite a few countries the numbers of people who vote are falling, so Ireland's situation is not unique. What does set Ireland apart in an unflat-

tering way is the participation rate among young first-time voters, which is the lowest in Europe. This is even more significant given the relative youth of Ireland's population, 41 per cent of Irish people being under 25 years of age. In fact the biggest single cohort in the Irish population are in their late-teens.

The statistical data is there, but the enigma in all of this is why? Some contradictions begin to emerge. The NYCI's research has found that young people are in fact interested in politics and feel it is important to get involved in making their community a better place. However, the conventional party political structure is increasingly seen as not offering the means to do this. In relation to voting, the issue of political skulduggery and corruption is a factor, but surprisingly not the main one. A huge number of young people do not vote because they find it increasingly difficult to do so. One in three are not registered where they live. On polling day last year thousands of young voters were also preoccupied with exams, work and travel.

It would seem that Irish life-styles, particularly among the young, have changed. People are travelling further to work, changing addresses more often, participating in night courses, and generally have more commitments in their spare time. My own recent experiences are not atypical; in a single year I changed addresses three times. One election involved a trip from Dublin to a school hall in Kilkenny to vote, which is fine if you are genuinely interested. I suspect most people in the same situation would not bother.

Our system of voting was largely inherited from the British, and has experienced little alteration in the last 80 years. It was devised in a different age, for a different society, and needs to be changed. Ideas like postal voting, proxy voting, weekend elections, an independent electoral commission, automatic registration, and year-round, non-party, political information campaigns have yet to reach Ireland.

While the mechanical process of voting is important, there are also deeper issues of democracy and representation. Any political system in which a large section of the population is either unwilling or unable to participate is not fully representative. There is a wider problem of a downward cycle emerging, whereby candidates and parties focus their attention on groups who are likely to vote, to the neglect of those groups with lower turn-outs. Evidence of this trend has emerged in the United States in relation to young people, the poor, and ethnic minorities. There is also the possibility that if non-participation based on alienation and apathy is not addressed at an early age, some young people may get into a lifelong habit of not voting.

Young people have different political interests than older sections of the population, and it is important that these interests are represented.

However, this is not currently happening in national politics at any rate. Some of the fault and responsibility lies with politicians and political parties. Stories abound of once keen, but now disillusioned, young activists who have experienced being sidelined or shafted at party meetings by their older colleagues. Politics needs to become a more welcoming place for young people – if it does not it is in trouble. There are also issues around the credibility of politics that will have to be addressed by parties and politicians.

Probably the biggest single threat and challenge to Ireland's democracy in the new millennium will be ensuring that it is relevant to, and involves young people. In this way, a possible outcome will be a more inclusive and representative structure. The alternative will be governments elected by a small minority of people with a questionable mandate to call themselves democratic, and to govern. The consequences in this scenario are quite disturbing.

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**The Republic,
The Ireland Institute,
27 Pearse Street,
Dublin 2,
Ireland**