

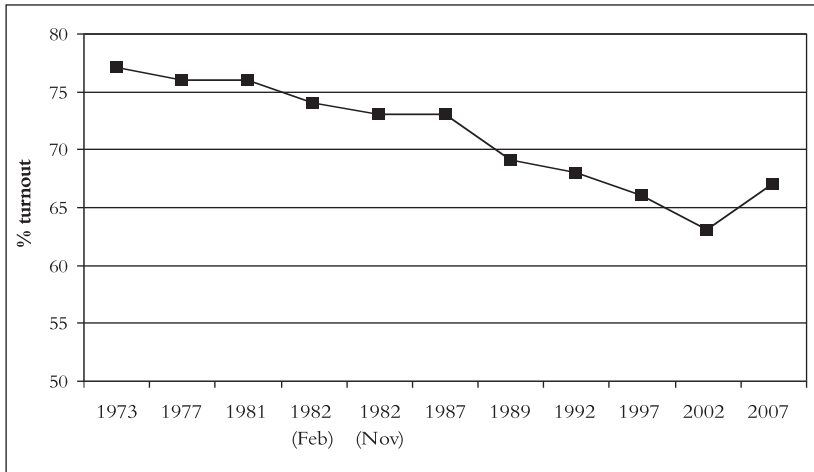
3.9 Participation

CORE POLICY OBJECTIVE: PARTICIPATION

To ensure that all people have a genuine voice in shaping the decisions that affect them and to ensure that all people can contribute to the development of society

The changing nature of democracy has raised many questions for policy-makers and others concerned about the issue of participation. Decisions often appear to be made without any real involvement of the many affected by the decisions' outcomes. Voter apathy is widespread and as chart 3.9.1 shows turnout has been falling over much of the last three decades. The 2007 turnout, at 67 per cent, was an improvement on the historically low 2002 figure. However, it still remains somewhat below the average turnout achieved by other European countries at 72 per cent (CSO, 2003:36).⁷²

Chart 3.9.1: Percentage turnout in Irish General Elections, 1973–2007.



Source: CSO (2003:36) and Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2007).

⁷² The 2006 review of the accuracy of the electoral register may suggest that these official figures are somewhat understated.

An insight into how people regard the electoral process was revealed by the results of a CSO quarterly national household survey module on voter participation and abstention issued in April 2003. It examined participation in the May 2002 general election and found high levels of non-participation among young people.⁷³ Just over 40 per cent of those aged 18–19 and only 53 per cent of those aged 20–24 years voted in the 2002 election. This contrasts with participation figures of well above 80 per cent for older voters aged over 65.

The survey also examined why people did not participate in the election and found that 20.4 per cent of non-voters said they had “no interest”; 10.6 per cent were “disillusioned” with politics; 3.7 per cent felt that their “vote would make no difference”; and 2.9 per cent were “lacking understanding/information” and so did not vote. Other reasons for not voting were: *not registered* (21.8 per cent); *away* (15.6 per cent); *too busy* (8.5 per cent); *illness/disability* (6 per cent); *no polling card* (3.8 per cent); and *lack of transport* (1.3 per cent). Across the age groups young people were more likely to be *not registered* and *not interested* (CSO, 2003:5). Finally the survey also found that it is those people who participate least in other areas of society (employment, voluntary groups, organisations) that do not participate in elections.

The implications of these findings suggest that many people, especially young people, have little confidence in the political process. They are disillusioned because the political process fails to involve them in any real way, while also failing to address many of their core concerns. Transparency and accountability are demanded but rarely delivered. A new approach is clearly needed to address this issue.

An agreed forum and structure for argument on issues on which people disagree is a need that is becoming more obvious as political and mass communication systems develop. Most people are not involved in the processes that produce plans and decisions which affect their lives. They know that they are being presented with a *fait accompli*. More critically, they realise that they and their families will be forced to live with the consequences of the decisions taken. A lack of structures and systems to involve people in the decision-making process results in the exclusion and alienation of large sections of society. It causes and maintains inequality.

Any exclusion of people from debate on the issues that affect them is suspect. Such exclusion leaves those responsible for it open to charges concerning the arbitrary use of power. Some of the decision-making structures of our society and of our

⁷³ A similar study was not carried out following the 2007 General Election.

world allow people to be represented in the decision-making process. However, almost all of these structures fail to provide genuine participation for most people affected by their decisions. Our society and the world in which we live need decision-making structures that enable participation.

Real participation by all is essential if society is to develop and, in practice, to maintain principles guaranteeing satisfaction of basic needs, respect for others as equals, economic equality, and religious, social, sexual and ethnic equality. Modern means of communication and information make it relatively easy to involve people in dialogue and decision-making. It is a question of political will - will the groups who have the power share it with others?

Some progress has been made in recent years. At local government level the development of Community Forums, Strategic Policy Committees and County/City Development Boards are moves in this direction. So also are developments in social partnership at national level, most importantly the creation in 1996 of the fourth pillar of social partners to represent the community and voluntary sector. This was a welcome initiative and much appreciated by the groups concerned. However, much remains to be done in this area and deeper issues need to be addressed.

Task Force on Active Citizenship

The Task Force on Active Citizenship was established in 2006. It was asked to recommend measures which could become part of public policy to facilitate and encourage a greater degree of engagement by citizens in all aspects of life and the growth and development of voluntary organisations as part of a strong civic culture. Its final report, published in March 2007, provided a total of 25 broad ranging recommendations for enhancing citizen's participation in all aspects of Irish life. *Social Justice Ireland* considers this an important report and we note the *Towards 2016* commitment that, arising from the work of this Task Force, consideration will be given to the development of appropriate measures and indicators of social capital, and to future approaches in relation to citizenship education and voter participation. We believe that it is now an opportune time for the development of these much needed indicators.

A forum for dialogue on civil society issues

An issue that is contributing to disillusionment with the political process concerns the range of civil society issues that are of major concern to large numbers of people. These are issues that many people feel are not being addressed adequately;

insofar as a discussion or debate does take place, they feel that they are not allowed to participate in any real way.

Social partnership, as we have pointed out, is one process aimed at improving the participation of various sectors in Ireland. However, it is in danger of being overloaded. The various social partners in the five pillars of social partnership – employers, trades unions, farmers, environmental organisations and the community and voluntary pillar – represent large segments of Irish society. However, they do not represent, nor do they claim to represent, all of Irish society. In fact the case is made, with some legitimacy, that none of these social partners represents their own entire sector.

The development of a new forum within which a civil society debate could be conducted on an ongoing basis would be a welcome addition to the political landscape in Ireland. Such a forum could make a major contribution to improving participation by a wide range of groups in Irish society.

Establishment of such a forum would ensure that civil society issues were not being loaded onto the already extensive work of social partnership in the socio-economic area. It would also be complementary to the work of the National Economic and Social Council which already has an extensive agenda.

Social Justice Ireland proposes that government authorise and resource an initiative to identify how a civil society debate could be developed and maintained in an ongoing way in Ireland, and to examine how it might connect to the growing debate at European level around civil society issues.

There are many issues such a forum could address. One such issue that comes to mind, given recent developments in Ireland, is the issue of citizenship, its rights, responsibilities, possibilities and limitations in the twenty-first century. Another topical issue is the shape of the social model Ireland wishes to develop in the decades ahead. Do we follow a European model or an American one? Or do we want to create an alternative – and, if so, what shape would it have and how could it be delivered? The issues a civil society forum could address are many and varied. Ireland would benefit immensely from having such a forum.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ For a further discussion of this issue see Healy and Reynolds (2003:191-197).

Impact on the democratic process

Would a civil society forum and a new social contract against exclusion take from the democratic process? Democracy means “rule by the people”. This implies that people participate in shaping the decisions that affect them most closely. What we have, in practice, is a highly centralised government in which we are “represented” by professional politicians. The more powerful a political party becomes, the more distant it seems to become from the electorate. Party policies on a range of major issues are often difficult to discern. Backbenchers have little control over, or influence on, government ministers, opposition spokespersons or shadow cabinets. Even within the cabinet some ministers seem to be able to ignore their cabinet colleagues.

The democratic process has certainly benefited from the participation of various sectors in other arenas such as social partnership. It would also benefit from taking up the proposals to develop a new social contract against exclusion and a new forum for dialogue on civil society issues.

The decline in participation is exacerbated by the primacy given to the market by so many analysts, commentators, policy-makers and politicians. Many people feel that their views or comments are ignored or patronised, while the views of those who see the market as solving most if not all of society’s problems are treated with the greatest respect.

Markets have a major role to play. But it needs to be honestly acknowledged that markets produce very mixed results when left to their own devices. In terms of many policy goals, they are extremely limited. Consequently other mechanisms are required to ensure that some re-balancing, at least, is achieved. The mechanisms proposed here simply aim to be positive in improving participation in a twenty-first century society.

Supporting the Community and Voluntary Sector

An important development emerging from the *Towards 2016* national agreement saw the government acknowledge the important role of the community and voluntary sector in service provision. The agreement signalled an increase in funding for the sector. It also noted that the Government is committed to appropriately resourcing the sector into the future and that it remains committed to the principle of providing multi-annual statutory funding. These were welcome commitments. However, the thrust of policy in *Towards 2016* has been reversed.

The national agreement *Towards 2016* committed the Government to provide the following specific additional supports to the sector:

- The Community Services Programme + €30m by 2009.
- Increased funding of €5m per annum to support volunteering.
- Increased funding of €10m per annum to support the C & V Sector, including the costs arising from contributing to evidence based policy making, over and above normal activities and programmes.

However, the failure of the *NAPinclusion* to deliver new funding for the Community and Voluntary sector on the scale required raised serious questions concerning Government's commitment to honour the terms of the national agreement. An additional €200m had been sought by the C&V Pillar of social partners as part replacement for the money taken out of the sector with the reduction in the number of places on the Community Employment scheme (which followed the fall in unemployment) in previous years. A commitment to additional funding on this scale is essential to legitimate Government bona fides in this area. Instead, recent Budgets have seen a major reduction in the funding available to the C&V sector. At the very moment that economic pressures placed increasing demands on the sector, Government reduced the funding being made available.

Policy Proposals on Participation

- **Establish and resource a forum for dialogue on civil society issues. This initiative should identify how a civil society debate could be developed and maintained in an ongoing way in Ireland and should examine how it might connect to the growing debate at European level around civil society issues.**
- **Ensure that Strategic Policy Committees (SPC), County Development Boards (CDB) and Community Forums strengthen participation at local level.**
- **Resource the ongoing participation of the community and voluntary sector in both the CDB and SPC structures.**

- **Significantly increase the funding to C&V sector organisations providing services and facilitating participation at national and local level.**
- **Ensure that there is real and effective monitoring of policy implementation. Involve a wide range of perspectives in this process, thus ensuring inclusion of the experience of those currently excluded.**
- **Resource voter education programmes for young people and socially excluded people.**
- **Implement the recommendations of the Task Force on Active Citizenship.**
- **Strengthen the mechanisms of engagement between the state and the C&V sector.**