

3.9 Participation

CORE POLICY OBJECTIVE: PARTICIPATION

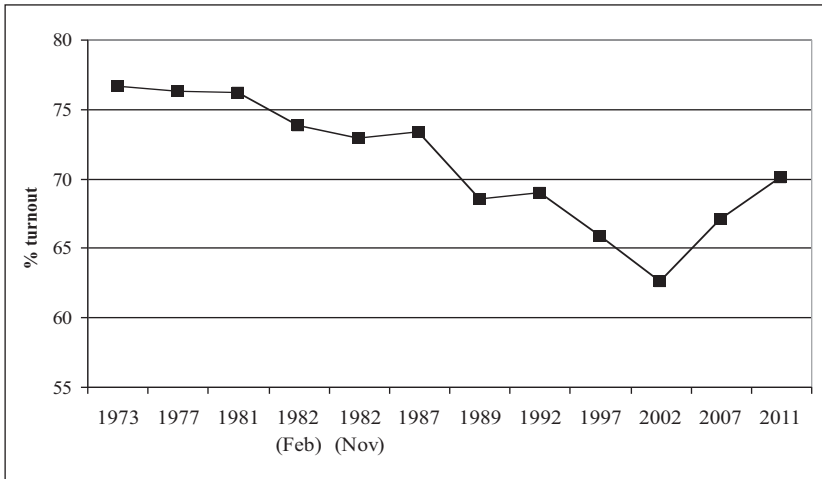
To ensure that all people have a genuine voice in shaping the decisions that affect them and to ensure that all people can contribute to the development of society

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. The context of the 2011 general election dissipated some of the voter apathy that had been widespread over previous years. Indeed the election also reminded voters of the importance of governance and decision making in democratic societies. As chart 3.9.1 shows voter turnout has been falling over time reaching a low point of 62.6 per cent in 2002. The 2011 turnout, at 70.1 per cent, was an improvement on previous elections and brought Ireland's turnout above the European average for the first time since the 1980s; the EU-27 average turnout is 69.7 per cent (CSO, 2010:44).⁷⁵

The most recent in-depth analysis of voter participation was done in 2003 by the CSO. In a quarterly national household survey module on voter participation and abstention issued in April 2003 the CSO provided an insight into how people regarded the electoral process. It examined participation in the May 2002 general election and found high levels of non-participation among young people.⁷⁶ 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.

⁷⁵The 2006 review of the accuracy of the electoral register may suggest that the official figures for 2002 and 2007 are somewhat understated.

⁷⁶ A similar study was not carried out following the 2007 General Election.

Chart 3.9.1: Percentage turnout in Irish General Elections, 1973-2011.

Source: CSO (2010:44) and Department of Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2011).

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 have been 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. Many of the developments of recent years will simply have added to the disillusionment of many people. 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 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. To enable real participation to occur a process of deliberative democracy is required. Deliberative democratic structures enable discussion and debate to take place without any imposition of power differentials. Issues and positions are argued and discussed on the basis of the available evidence rather than on the basis of assertions by those who are powerful and unwilling to consider the evidence. Deliberative democracy produces evidence-based policy.

Deliberative 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 was made over the past decade. At local government level the development of Community Forums, Strategic Policy Committees and County/City Development Boards were moves in the right direction. So also were some of the developments in social dialogue at national level, most importantly the creation of the Community and Voluntary Pillar and the Environmental Pillar. However, these initiatives failed to develop real deliberative processes. In practice power differentials were used to undermine the validity of evidence-based policy proposals. While evidence-based proposals can be undermined in this way the issue of real participation has quite some distance to go before the rhetoric of participation is matched by reality.

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. Arising from the work of this Task Force, consideration should 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.

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 but are never really discussed. There are many issues that 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.

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.

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.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ 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 different arenas. 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. This situation seems to be persisting despite the total failure of market mechanisms in recent years during which these very mechanisms combined to produce Ireland’s range of current crises – and the linked EU-level crises that are not currently being recognised by most decision-makers.

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. Recent experience has shown clearly that in terms of many policy goals, markets 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

The issue of governance is of major importance for Government and for society at large. Within this wider reality it is an especially crucial issue for the Community and Voluntary sector. There is a substantial role for civil society in addressing both the causes and the consequences of the multi-faceted crises Ireland currently faces (economic, banking, fiscal, social and reputational).

The Community and Voluntary sector is playing a major role in responding to both the causes and the consequences of these crises. Support for this work is crucial and it should not be left to the charity (welcome but very limited) of philanthropists. Funding is required by the sector and has been provided over many years by Government. In recent years much of that funding has been reduced with obvious consequences for those depending on the Community and Voluntary sector. It is crucial that the new Government appropriately resource this sector into the future and that it remains committed to the principle of providing multi-annual statutory funding.

Social dialogue is a critically important component of any effective decision-making in a modern democracy. The Community and Voluntary Pillar provides a mechanism for social dialogue that should be engaged with by the new Government. All aspects of governance must be characterised by transparency and accountability. Social dialogue contributes to both transparency and accountability. We believe governance along these lines can and should be developed in Ireland.

Key Priorities 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.**
 - **Significantly increase the funding to C&V sector organisations providing services, facilitating participation at national and local level and addressing both the causes and the consequences of Ireland's current series of crises.**
 - **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.**
 - **Strengthen the mechanisms of engagement between the state and the C&V sector.**
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