
Election Turnout in Ireland: measurement, trends and policy implications

28 January 2016

Introduction

Voter turnout is the percentage of people that turn up and vote in a given election.

Turnout is an indicator of engagement or disengagement from conventional politics and is seen as one indicator of the health of representative democracy. It is argued that if increasing numbers abstain in elections, the outcome of the election may be distorted.¹ This is especially the case if those who abstain are more representative of one group in society. Many analysts have noted as a cause for concern the declining number of people voting in elections in advanced democracies over the past two decades.²

This *Note* discusses issues with the measurement of turnout, using data from the CSO on the voting-age population, before presenting an overview of the trends in turnout at Irish General Elections, local elections and referendums, including available data on the variation in turnout across different groups (age and socio-economic background). It then gives voter turnout at European elections, comparing Ireland with other European countries.

The *Note* concludes by presenting survey data designed to explain non-voting and briefly considers policies designed to address low levels of turnout and participation in conventional politics.

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1. Measuring turnout

Turnout can be measured in two ways:

- (i) by expressing those who vote as a percentage of all voters on the electoral register (REG);
- (ii) by expressing those who vote as a percentage of the estimated voting-age population as calculated from the census (VAP).

In Ireland turnout is generally measured and reported in reference to the electoral register (REG). It is the method used by the Department of the Environment to calculate and report official turnout rates shortly after an election. This is also the approach in many countries and cross-country studies.³

Problems with calculating turnout at a % of Register (REG)

When calculating turnout in this way, the accuracy of the turnout indicator depends to a considerable extent on the accuracy of the electoral register.

Where the electoral register is incomplete and therefore under-estimates the actual size of the voter-adult population, the official turnout figure (REG) will be higher than real turnout; where the electoral register over represents the voter-adult population, official turnout (REG) will be lower than real turnout.

In Ireland the national electoral register (i.e. the 31 local authority registers combined) for General Elections is inflated (e.g. includes deceased people and/or duplicate entries) and over-represents the estimated population of voters in the State.⁴ As a result, the official turnout rate in general elections under-estimates real turnout at a national level. Table 1 shows the number of electors on the register, the estimated voting-age population for general elections and the extent to which the register over or under-represents the estimated real electorate. In 2011 the number on the register was 104% the estimated voting-age population.

Table 1: Number of electors on Register and estimated voting-age population⁵

Election Year	Number of Electors on Register	Estimated Voting-age population (Number)	Register as % of Real Electorate
1981	2,275,450	2,144,862	106%
1982	2,335,153	2,177,924	107%
1987	2,445,515	2,286,993	107%
1992	2,557,063	2,390,054	107%
1997	2,741,262	2,562,285	107%
2002	3,002,173	2,739,999	109%
2007	3,110,914	2,912,197	107%
2011	3,209,244	3,074,898	104%

However, while the register over-represents the voting-age population in Ireland at a national level, in some constituencies (primarily inner-city and suburban constituencies undergoing rapid population growth and change) the opposite is the case in that registers underestimate the adult population.⁶ In these constituencies, official turnout figures will be higher than real turnout.

Further, because registration rates in one area, or in one country, may be higher or lower than in another, comparing turnout between countries or, indeed, between constituencies where the register is compiled locally as it is in Ireland, is not always valid. When comparing between constituencies or countries, comparing trends in turnout over time is more useful.

Addressing measurement issues

One way of partly addressing these problems is to use an alternative or an additional measure of turnout. The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) uses VAP – the estimated voting-age population – as an additional indicator of political participation/turnout. It points out that although VAP, which is based on the most recent population census figure available, is not an exact figure, it is a reflection of the demographic trend and estimated population growth of a country. VAP is a more useful measure, the more regularly a census is undertaken; Ireland's five-year cycle is helpful in this respect. Measuring turnout as a proportion of REG and VAP can ensure greater understanding of levels and trends, better informing policy makers tasked with improving turnout. In the Sections of this *Note* that follow, both measures of turnout are used in so far as is possible.

Calculating the voting-age population

In calculating the estimated voting-age population for Ireland, the type of election matters; different sections of the population are entitled to vote depending on the election (Table 2).

Table 2: Calculating the estimated Voting-Age Population (VAP)

Election	Entitled to vote	To calculate estimated Voting-Age Population
General election (and Presidential)	Citizens 18 and over British citizens resident	Population aged 18 and over minus non-Irish citizens but including British citizens.
Referendum	Irish citizens aged 18 and over	Population aged 18 and over minus all non-Irish citizens (i.e. excluding British citizens resident in Ireland).
Local elections	All residents (of 12 months) aged 18 or over	Population aged 18 and over
European elections	Irish citizens and all residents who are citizens of EU Member States	Population aged 18 and over minus non-EU citizens

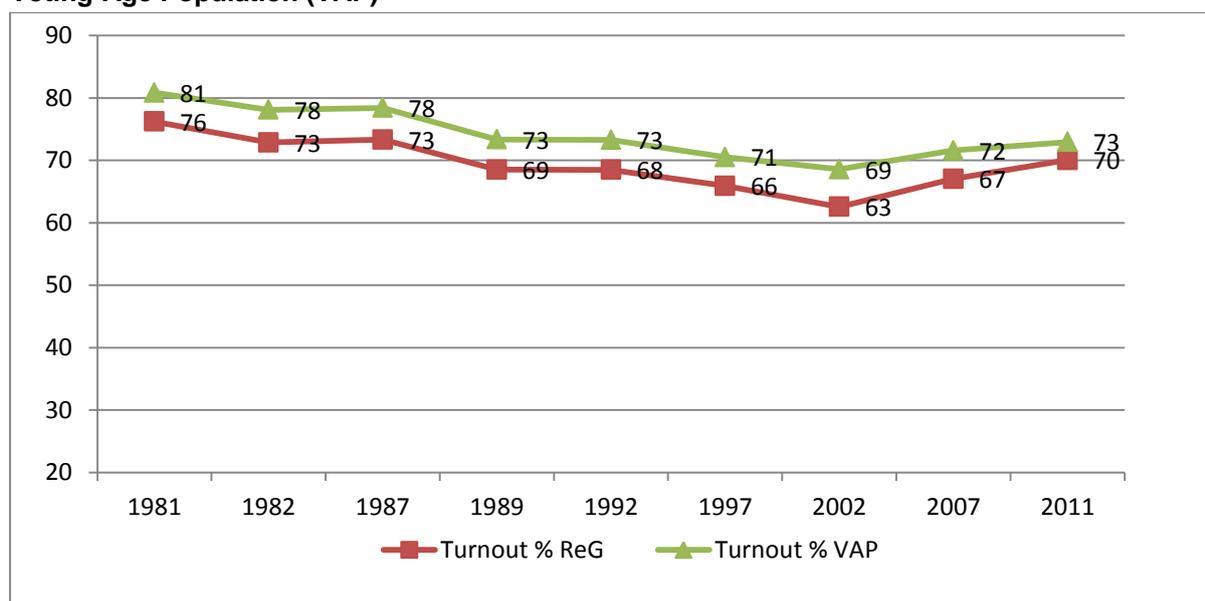
IDEA (data [available here](#)) uses data from the US Census Bureau (which itself uses CSO data) to estimate the voting-age population in Ireland. Its figure includes all people aged 18 and over ordinarily resident in Ireland. When measuring turnout in parliamentary elections,

the figure is not adjusted to reflect the population eligible to vote in general elections i.e. Irish citizens or citizens of the UK living in Ireland who are 18 or over. As a result, the turnout level reported by IDEA is lower than it should be. The method of estimating VAP used by the IDEA was more useful when few non-Irish citizens lived in Ireland.⁷

2. Turnout at general elections

Figure 1 shows the turnout at general elections as a proportion of the voting-age population (VAP) and as a proportion of the electoral register (REG) from 1981-2011.

Figure 1: Turnout General Elections 1981-2011 (as proportion of the Register and of the Voting-Age Population (VAP))⁸



From the data we can draw a number of conclusions about turnout in Irish general elections

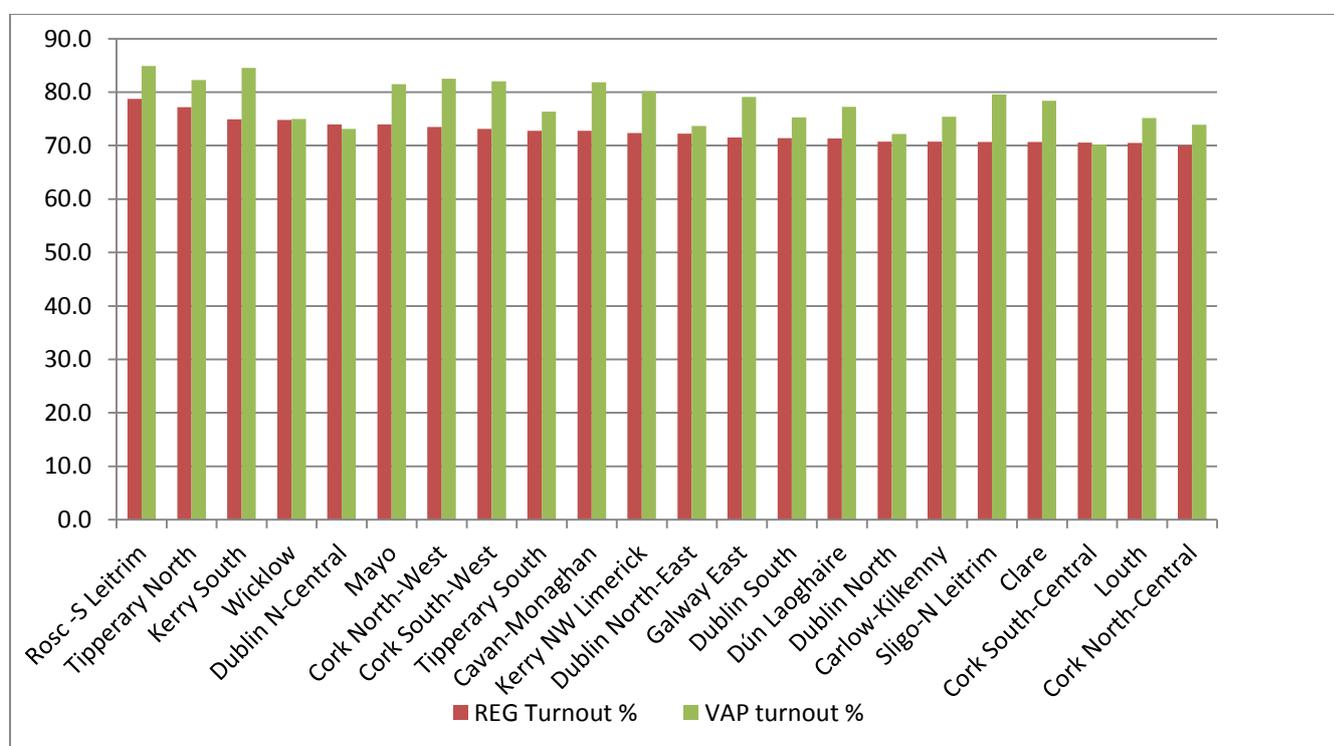
- Firstly, real turnout in Irish general elections is higher than official figures on turnout report. In the context of problems with the register, this higher measure (VAP) is a better estimate of actual turnout with turnout in the 2011 General Election 73% of the estimated voting-age population.
- Secondly, whether expressed as a proportion of REG or the estimated VAP, the trend in turnout is broadly similar: turnout in general elections underwent a gradual decline from 1981 until the 2002 General Election which recorded the lowest ever official (REG) and (VAP) turnout figures. The trend since 2002 has been upwards although turnout has not returned to the levels of the 1980s.
- Thirdly, the exceptionally low turnout (REG) in 2002 may be in part be explained by the extent to which the register was inflated in 2002; this inflation was at its highest in 2002.

2.1 Constituency level data on turnout (general elections)

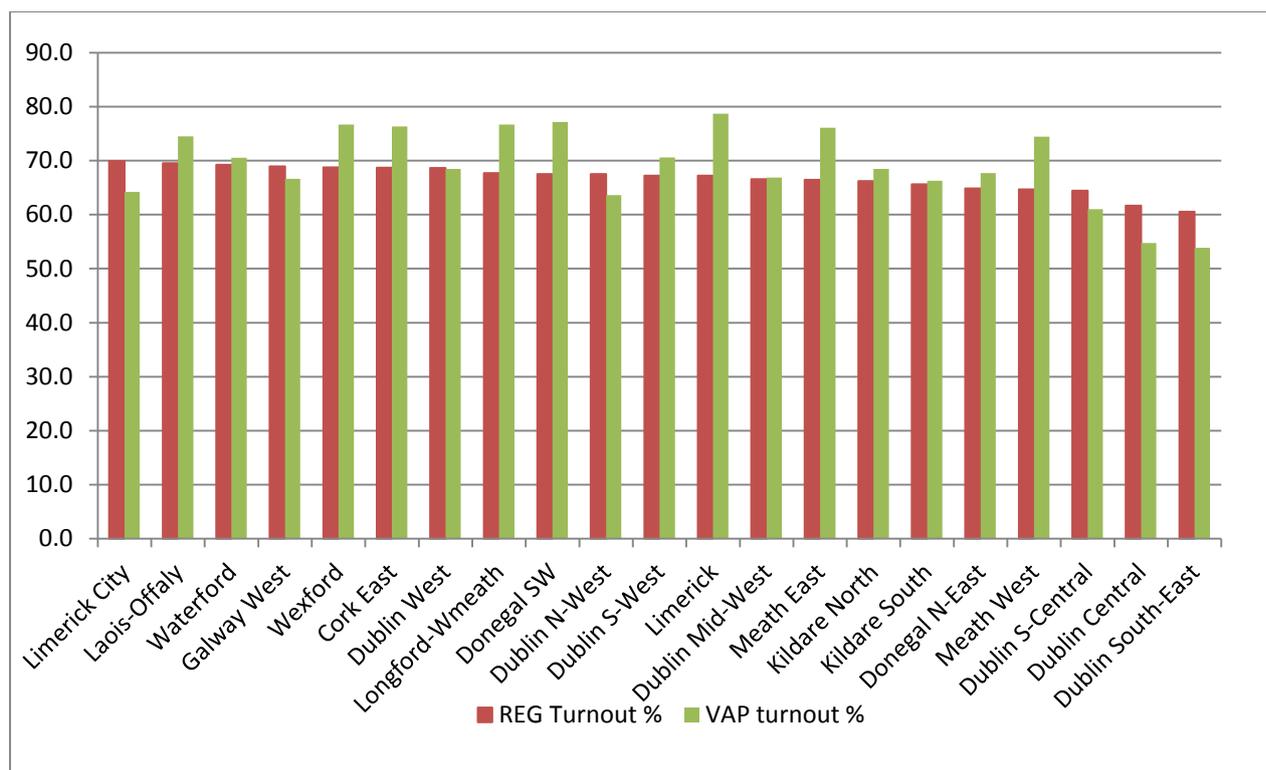
Data on turnout as a % of registered electors and of the voting-age population for each of the 43 constituencies in the 2011 General Election is presented in Appendices 1 and 2 in Table and map formats. A number of observations can be made from the data:

Firstly, in the majority of constituencies, turnout is higher when expressed as a proportion of the voting-age population; this is arguably the more accurate measure of turnout. For example, in four of the five constituencies with the highest official turnout rates (REG) turnout is even higher when calculated as a proportion of the VAP (figure 3): Roscommon-Leitrim, Tipperary North and Kerry South.

Figure.3: Turnout as %of REG and % of Voting-age Population (presented in order of highest-to lowest by REG) (See Appendix 1 for full Table)⁹



Secondly, however, in some constituencies - those shaded in blue (Appendix 1) - the opposite is the case: turnout is lower when expressed as a proportion of the VAP. Further while the first map (Appendix 2) shows that in no constituency was turnout (REG) below 60%, when expressed as a proportion of the VAP (map 2), turnout dropped well below 60% in two Dublin constituencies: 54.8% in Dublin Central and 53.8% in Dublin South East (figure 4). This is because, unlike the trend nationally, the electoral register for these constituencies was lower than the estimated voting-age population.

Fig.4: Turnout by REG and VAP in constituencies with lowest official (REG) turnout (2011)

Thirdly, as a proportion of the register, the highest turnouts in 2011 were in predominantly rural constituencies and the lowest tended to be in urban areas. This trend is similar, and perhaps slightly more pronounced, when turnout is calculated as a proportion of the more accurate VAP measure (Table 3):

- Low turnout tends to be in predominantly urban constituencies regardless of which measure of turnout is used. This trend is slightly more pronounced when turnout is measured as a proportion of VAP. Four of the five constituencies with the lowest turnout are predominantly urban when measured as a proportion of the VAP.
- Three constituencies (Roscommon-South Leitrim, Tipperary North and Kerry South), all predominantly rural, record the highest turnout regardless of the measure used. However, when the VAP is used, two predominantly rural Cork constituencies are among the highest five meaning that all five are predominantly rural. On the other hand, Wicklow and the urban constituency of Dublin North Central, two of the top five when measured as proportion of the register, no longer feature in the five highest when measured as a proportion of VAP.

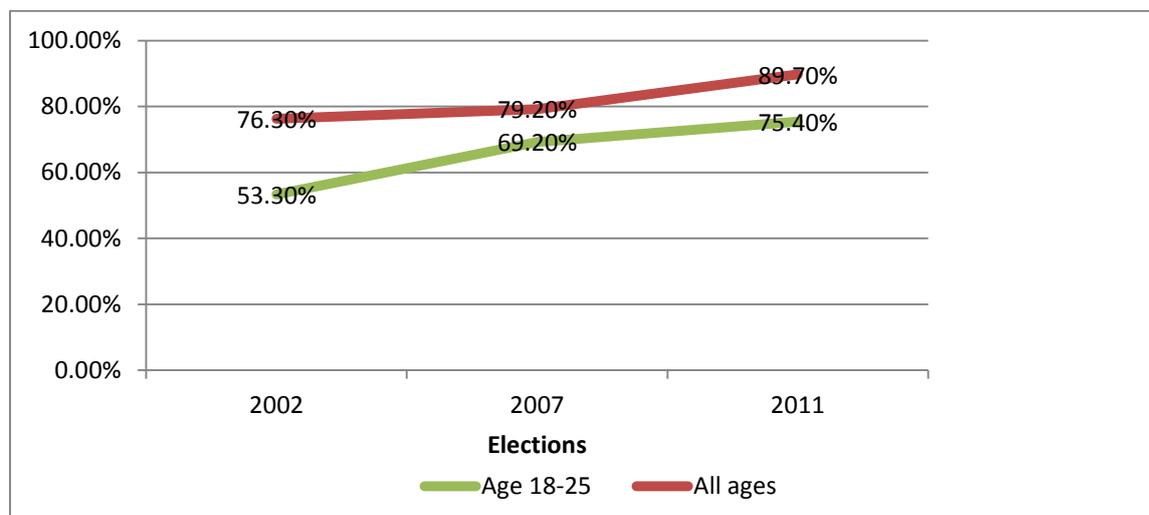
Table 3: Constituencies with highest turnout as % of REG and % of VAP (2011)

	% of Register		% of Estimated VAP	
	Constituency	%	Constituency	%
Highest turnout	Roscommon-South Leitrim	78.75%	Roscommon South-Leitrim	84.9%
	Tipperary North	77.16%	Kerry South	84.5%
	Kerry South	74.93%	Cork North West	82.5%
	Wicklow	74.8%	Tipperary North	82.3%
	Dublin North Central	73.1%	Cork South West	82%
Lowest turnout	Donegal North-East	64.86%	Kildare South	66.3%
	Meath West (64.66%)	64.66%	Dublin North West	63.6%
	Dublin South-Central (64.46%)	64.46%	Dublin South Central	61%
	Dublin Central (61.64%);	61.64%	Dublin Central	54.8%
	Dublin South-East (60.54%).	60.54%	Dublin South East	53.8%

2.2 Data on turnout by age (general election)

While official turnout figures cannot report on the age of those who vote, survey data and in particular the data gathered by the Irish National Electoral Study (INES) can be used to estimate voter turnout amongst different age groups. It should be noted, however, that in surveys voting is often over-reported (either because people don't like to admit that they did not vote or because those who are willing to answer the survey are more likely to be people who are interested in voting).¹⁰ The data is therefore most useful for showing trends.

Figure 5 presents survey data from the INES.¹¹ It suggests that there is a constant pattern of lower turnout amongst people in the youngest age category in general elections but that the trend in turnout amongst younger voters since 2002 mirrors the national trend in that it is upwards. This survey data is only available for 2002-2011 general elections. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the turnout of young people was higher than usual for the 2015 marriage equality referendum. This is briefly discussed below.

Figure 5: Self-reported turnout of 18-25 age group (Irish National Electoral Study)

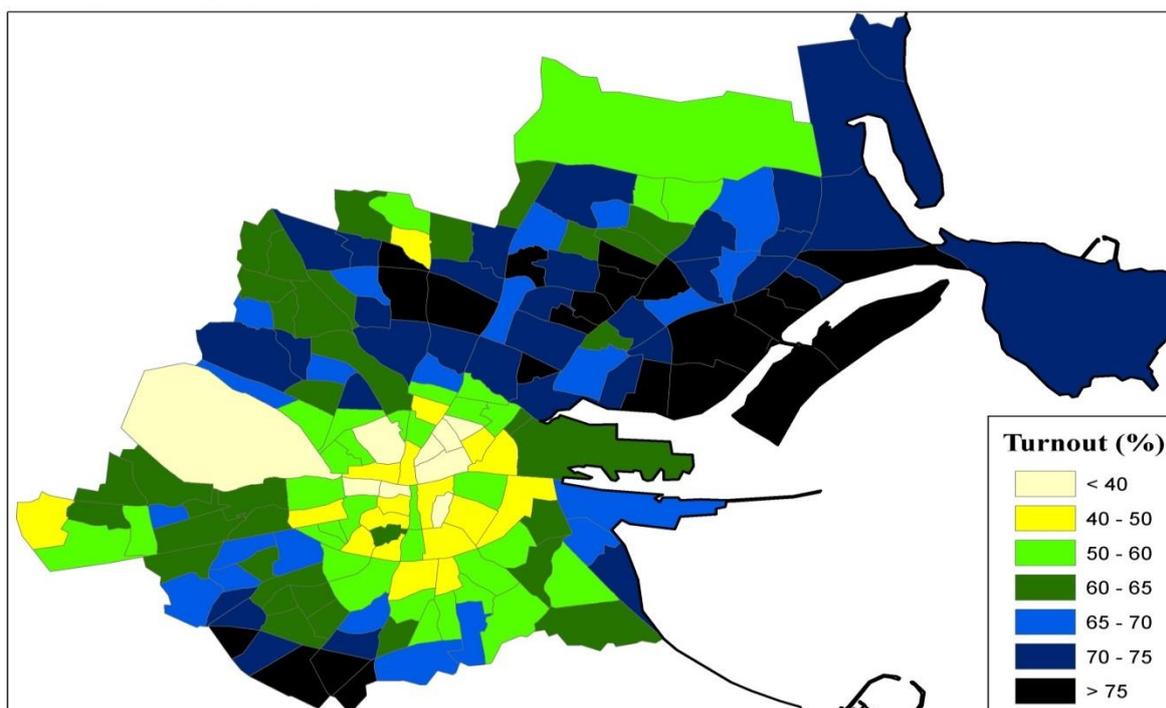
Turnout amongst the 18-25 age groups is lower than average in most European countries. Cross-national data from the European Social Survey, analysed by political scientist James Sloam, found that average *reported* turnout since 2000 in 30 Europe countries among the 18-25 age category was 59% compared with 82% reported turnout amongst the population as a whole.¹² The Survey also found that there is a strong socio-economic dynamic to this pattern: young people with low levels of educational achievement who are eligible to vote do so in 'alarmingly small numbers' (average of 25% since across the 15 European States).

2.3 Data on turnout by socio-economic background (general election)

It is possible to estimate turnout by social background using data on turnout at local electoral area level for which social deprivation data are available. Using this data published by the CSO, Kavanagh et al found that higher turnout has tended to be associated with middle class areas and lower turnouts with working class areas for general elections up to 2002.¹³

For the 2011 election, Kavanagh examined the relationship between turnout (REG) and deprivation levels in Dublin constituencies and found a broadly similar trend (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Voter turnout in Dublin City constituencies by electoral division (2011 General Election) Kavanagh (2012)



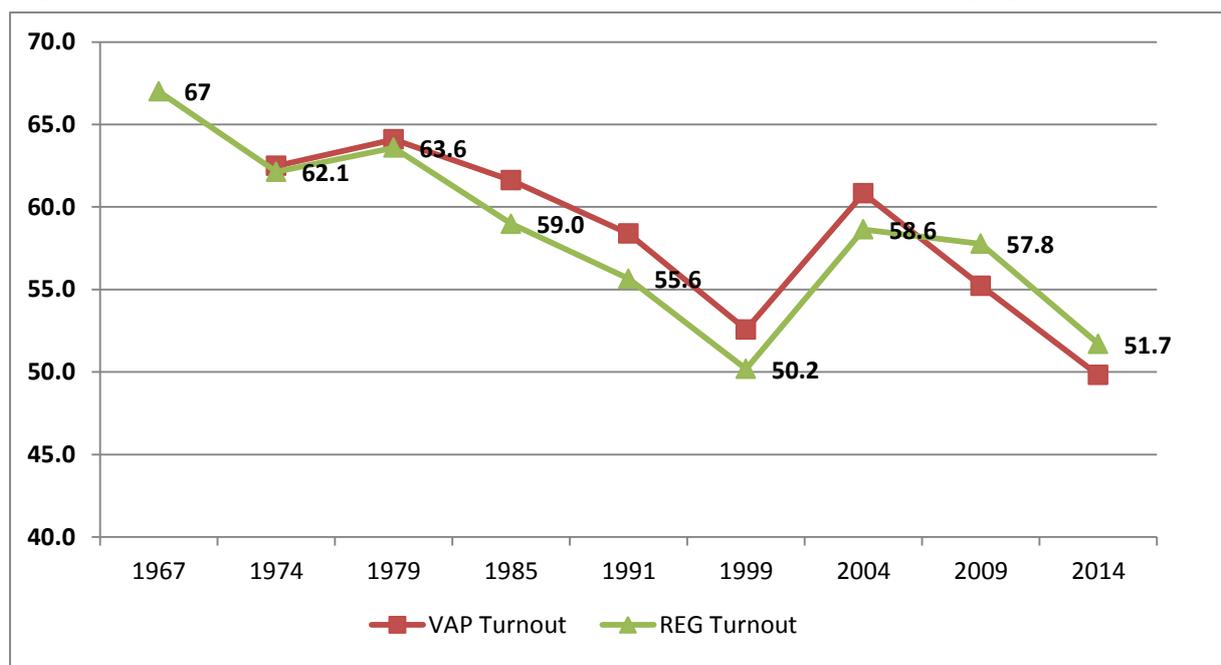
Kavanagh found that the very high turnout levels were associated with mainly middle class and mainly settled areas (that is experiencing relatively little population in migration compared with other parts of the city). He also found that turnout was, relatively speaking, higher in older working class communities which tend to be settled. A key deterrent of

turnout, perhaps equally important to the socio-economic background of an area, appears to be the extent to which an area is 'settled' or experiences regular population change.

3. Turnout at local elections 1967-2014

Figure 6¹⁴ below shows local turnout as a proportion of the electoral register and of the voting-age population. A number of observations can be made from the data.

Figure 6: Local elections 1974-2014: Turnout as % of Register and by Voting-age Population



- A downward trend in turnout at local elections is clear regardless of which measure is used. Over the period from 1967 to 1999 turnout fell from 67 per cent to 50 per cent (REG). This trend was reversed in 2004, when an official turnout of 59% was recorded, a level almost maintained in 2009 (58 % turnout).¹⁵ However, in 2014, turnout dropped back to 51.6%, the second lowest official turnout level in Irish local elections.
- Voters in 2011 made up just 50% (49.8%) of the estimated voting-age population, the lowest ever turnout as a proportion of the estimated VAP in local elections.
- The difference between the level of turnout when measured as a proportion of the register or of the estimated voting-age population (VAP) is less significant at local level as the number of people eligible to vote is larger and the two figures are more aligned. This may mean that the (REG) turnout figure is more accurate for local elections than it is for general elections. However, concerns about the accuracy of the electoral register discussed in Sections 1 apply also to registers for local elections.

Turnout (local elections) in rural or urban areas

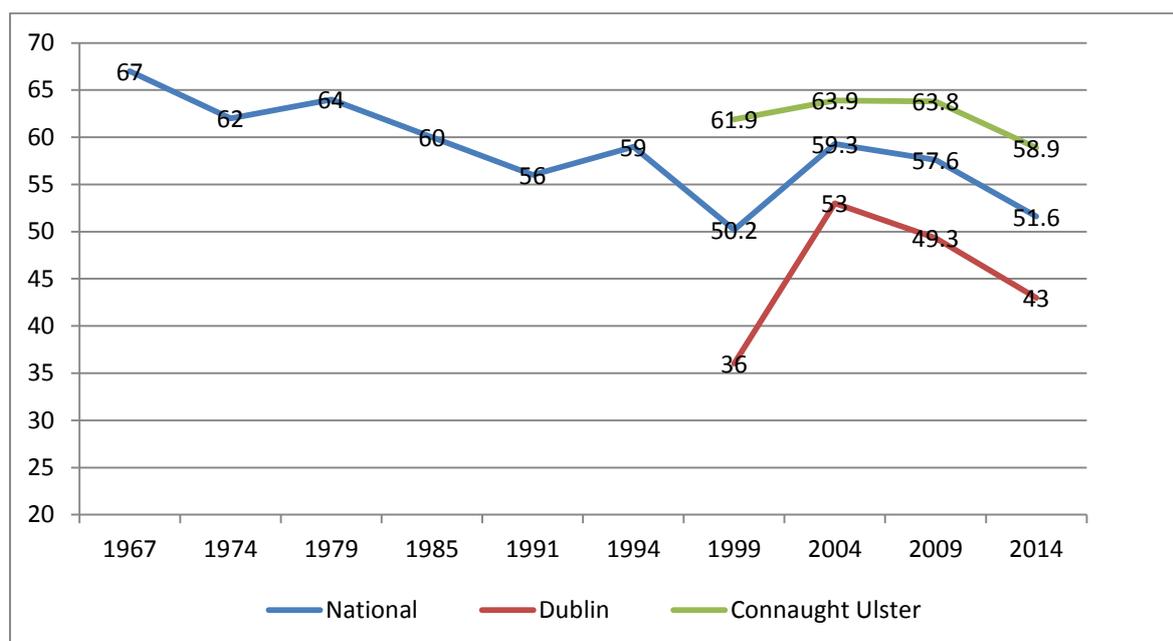
Geographer and political analyst Adrian Kavanagh¹⁶ has found that while turnout in local elections has tended to be higher in rural areas, the 2014 local elections saw a narrowing of this urban-rural difference.

Rural areas continued to have the highest level of turnout (in terms of percentage) but rural areas experienced the biggest drops (measured by percentage points) in turnout with the Border, West and Midland areas experiencing the greatest decline.

Further, while the lowest levels of turnout (REG) continued to be in Dublin and its surrounding local authority areas (43%), he found that turnout in Dublin did not drop as low as the level recorded there in the 1999 local elections.

Figure 7 below, adapted from Kavanagh, compares official turnout in the rurally-dominated constituencies of Ulster and Connaught and the pre-dominantly urban constituencies of Dublin from 1999 - 2014.

Figure 7: Local election turnout (urban and rural) 1999-2014



The percentage point change in turnout from 2009 to 2014 in each local authority area is mapped by Kavanagh (2014) and is available in map format [here](#).

4. Turnout at referendums, 1937-2015

Table 7 below gives official turnout (REG) in all referendums from 1937 to 2015 (35 referendums, 28 occasions).

Table 7 Turnout and results in referendums 1937-2011

Year	Subject	Turnout	Result
1937	Draft Constitution	75.8%	Yes
1959	PR	58.4%	No
1968	Redrawing of constituencies	65.8%	No
1968	Constituencies	65.8%	No
1972	Accession to the EC	70.9%	Yes
1972	Reducing voting age to 18	50.7%	Yes
1972	Recognition of specified religions	50.7%	Yes
1979	Adoption	28.6%	Yes
1979	University representation in Seanad	28.6%	Yes
1983	Right to life of unborn	53.7%	Yes
1984	Extension of voting rights at Dáil elections	47.5%	Yes
1986	Dissolution of marriage	60.8%	No
1987	Single European Act	44.1%	Yes
1992	Maastricht Treaty	57.3%	Yes
1992	Right to life of unborn	68.2%	No
1992	Right to travel	68.2%	Yes
1992	Right to information	68.1%	Yes
1995	Dissolution of marriage	62.1%	Yes
1996	Bail	29.2%	Yes
1997	Cabinet confidentiality	47.2%	Yes
1998	Amsterdam Treaty	56.2%	Yes
1998	British-Irish Agreement	56.2%	Yes
1999	Local government	51.1%	Yes
2001	Death penalty	34.8%	Yes
2001	International Criminal Court	34.8%	Yes
2001	Treaty of Nice	34.8%	No
2002	Protection of life in pregnancy	42.8%	No
2002	Treaty of Nice	49.5%	Yes
2004	Citizenship	59.9%	Yes
2008	Lisbon Treaty	53.1%	No
2009	Lisbon Treaty	59.0%	Yes
2011	Judges' remuneration	55.9%	Yes
2011	Oireachtas inquiries	55.9%	No
2012	Stability EMU	50.60%	Yes
2012	Children	33.50%	Yes
2013	Seanad abolition	39.2%	No
2013	Court of Appeal	39.2%	Yes
2015	Marriage equality	60.5%	Yes
2015	Age of eligibility to be President	60.5%	No

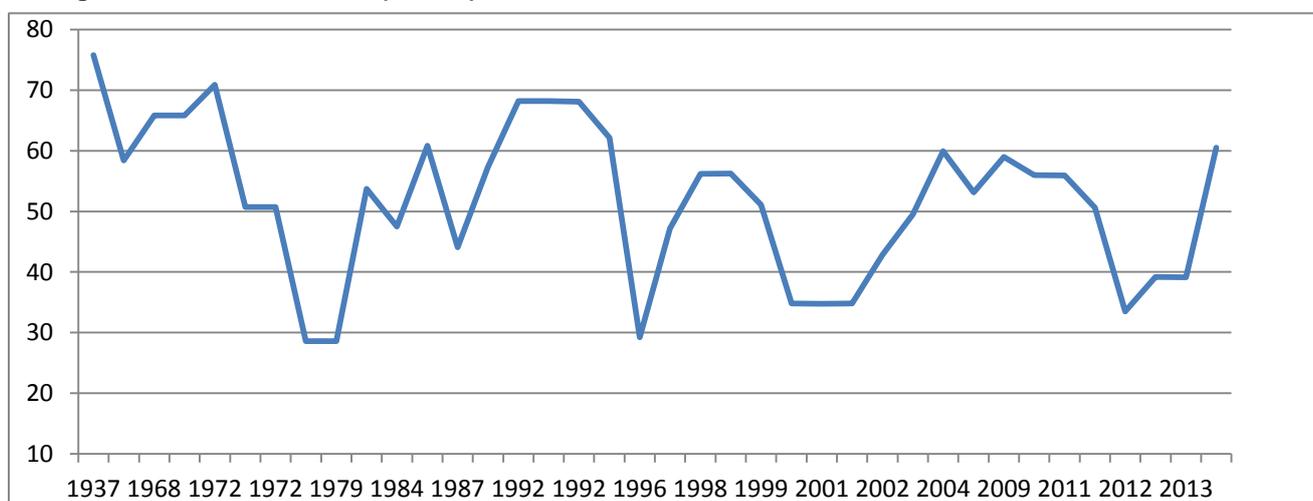
Source: DECLG. ¹⁸

When interpreting this data, a few measurement issues should be noted. As per Table 1 of this *Note*, the eligible voting population for Referendums is smaller in size than that for General Elections as it excludes British citizens resident in Ireland. Yet turnout (REG) is reported as a proportion of the number of voters on the electoral register for general elections. Actual turnout is therefore always some percentage points higher than reported turnout. Because of this limitation, data on official turnout at referendums is best used to examine trends in referendum turnout rather than comparing referendum turnout with turnout in general or any other elections.

Bearing this in mind, a number of observations can be drawn about turnout at referendums:

- Perhaps most obvious from the data in Table 7 (displayed in graphic form in Figure 8) is the volatility in the level of turnout at referendums which has ranged from 28.6% in the 1979 referendum on adoption rights and Seanad university representation to 75.8% in the 1937 referendum on the Constitution.
- Research into the reasons for abstaining in referendums, considered in more detail in Section 6, suggests that the perceived saliency and profile of the issue affects this decision with referendums on moral issues and some European issues frequently having higher turnouts.

Figure 8: Official Turnout (%REG) in referendum contests 1937-2015



- For example, the higher turnout levels (REG) from 1992-1995 are for the referendums on the right to the life of the unborn, the right to travel and information (1992) and the divorce referendum (1995).
- More recently, the official turnout level for the marriage equality referendum at 60.5% was significantly higher than turnout in any referendum since 1995; twenty percentage points higher than the preceding referendums (2013) and, unlike the

inquiries and judges' remuneration referendums for which 56% of the registered electorate turned out (2011), it did not coincide with any other elections.

To what extent does reporting turnout as a proportion of VAP change this picture?

As with general elections, when measured as a percentage of the estimated voting-age population turnout is higher in referendums.

Taking the referendum on Oireachtas Inquiries (2011) as an example, official turnout (the proportion of those on the register who voted) was 56%. As per the above, this register included British citizens who were ineligible to vote in the referendum. This means that the register was inflated and turnout was, in fact, higher. How much higher?

Taking the estimated voting-age population for Dáil elections¹⁹ calculated for Section 2 above, and removing British citizens from it, the estimated voting-age population in 2011 was 2,973,777. Measured as a proportion of the estimated voter-age population, turnout in the Inquiries referendum was in fact 60%.²⁰

Below (Table 8) we express turnout at referendums since 2011 as a proportion of the estimated voting-age population for referendums (Irish citizens aged 18 and over). CSO population estimates were used for years subsequent to 2011 (census year).²¹

Table 8: Turnout at recent referendums as % of REG and of the Voting-Age Population

Referendum	Total Poll	Estimated Vap	Turnout % VAP	Turnout % (REG)
Oir Inquiries (2011)	1,785,208.0	2,973.8	60.0	55.9
EU Stability (2012)	1,591,385.0	3,038.3	52.4	50.6
Children (2012)	1,066,239.0	3,038.3	35.1	33.5
Seanad (2013)	1,240,729.0	3,031.9	40.9	39.2
Court of Appeal (2013)	1,240,135.0	3,031.9	40.9	39.2
Marriage Equality (2015)	1,949,725.0	3,032.4	64.3	60.5

In what type of constituency does turnout tend to be higher?

Studies of turnout (REG) in referendum at a constituency level have shown that the highest turnout levels tend to be in the more middle class urban constituencies, with the highest levels usually being recorded in the constituencies of Dun Laoghaire, Dublin North-Central.²²

5. Turnout European Parliament Elections

Figure 9 below shows a downward trend in Irish turnout (REG) for European Parliament elections. This is in line with the average trend in Europe where turnout has been declining since the first elections were held in 1979.²³ However, in spite of the declining trend, Irish turnout has been higher than the European average in six out of the eight EP elections.²⁴

Figure 9. Turnout (REG) Ireland and EU average in the European elections 1979-2014

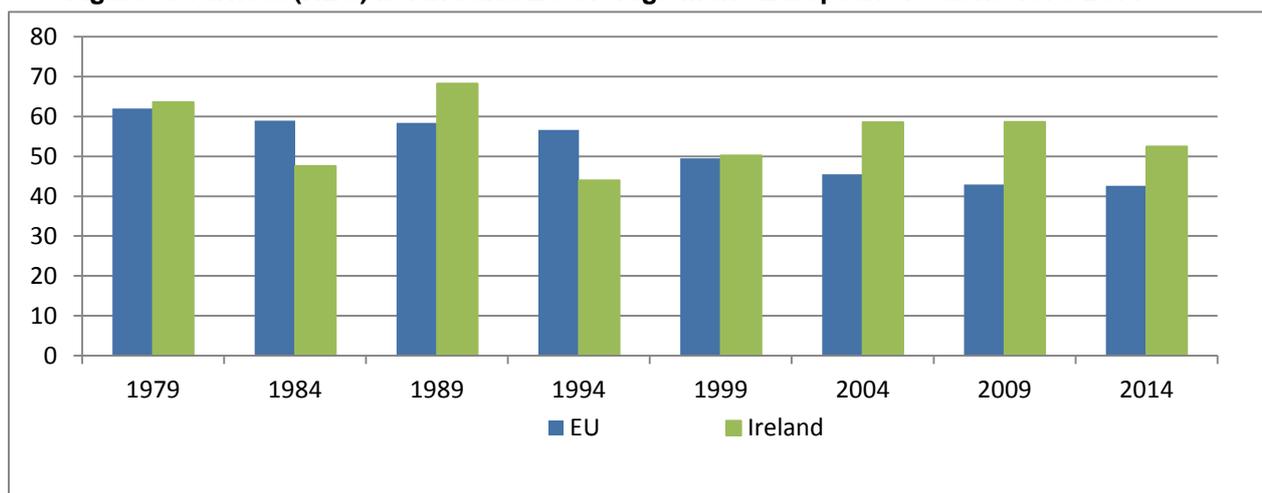


Table 9 below shows that turnout for European Parliament elections varies substantially across Europe. Turnout as a proportion of the register exceeded 70% in Belgium and Luxembourg (which have systems of mandatory voting) and in Malta. Ireland, along with Greece, Italy, Denmark and Sweden was in the next highest group where the participation rate was over 50%. The participation rate in all other EU countries was lower than 50%.²⁵

However, as per Section 1, comparing turnout levels between different countries is complicated by measurement issues primarily concerning the extent to which registers are accurate. As such, the data is best used to analyse trends over time or alongside data on turnout as a proportion of the estimated voting-age population or along with turnout as a proportion of the VAP.

When calculated as a proportion of the VAP, does this picture change?

Table 9 below gives turnout as a proportion of the estimated VAP for 2014 election using data from the IDEA.²⁶ The data shows some variation depending on which measure is used but the same group of countries have the highest levels of turnout: Turnout in Belgium remains very high at 86% and the states with turnout exceeding fifty percent (VAP) are Luxembourg, Denmark, Greece, Italy and Malta. When expressed as a percentage of VAP, turnout in Ireland and Sweden drop below 50%. In Luxembourg turnout is substantially lower when expressed as a proportion of the estimated VAP (55%).

Table 9: VAP and REG European Parliament Elections 2014²⁷

Country	Voter Turnout (%)	VAP Turnout (%)	Voting age population
Austria	45.39 (2014)	42.48 (2014)	6848988 (2014)
Belgium	89.64 (2014)	86.82 (2014)	8206928 (2014)
Bulgaria	36.10 (2014)	41.07 (2014)	5751084 (2014)
Cyprus	43.97 (2014)	31.49 (2014)	847441 (2014)
Czech Republic	18.20 (2014)	17.57 (2014)	8696514 (2014)
Denmark	56.32 (2014)	54.21 (2014)	4302187 (2014)
Estonia	36.52 (2014)	32.55 (2014)	1013212 (2014)
Finland	40.98 (2014)	41.66 (2014)	4149114 (2014)
France	42.43 (2014)	38.82 (2014)	50872787 (2014)
Germany	48.14 (2014)	44.57 (2014)	66952598 (2014)
Greece	59.97 (2014)	67.53 (2014)	8798915 (2014)
Hungary	28.97 (2014)	28.96 (2014)	8043818 (2014)
Ireland	52.44 (2014)	47.45 (2014)	3586748 (2014)
Italy	57.22 (2014)	57.32 (2014)	50577526 (2014)
Latvia	30.04 (2014)	43.20 (2009)	1767172 (2014)
Lithuania	47.37 (2014)	43.19 (2014)	2807195 (2014)
Luxembourg	85.55 (2014)	55.76 (2014)	405676 (2014)
Malta	74.80 (2014)	77.84 (2014)	330921 (2014)
Netherlands	37.32 (2014)	36.35 (2014)	13156909 (2014)
Poland	23.82 (2014)	23.62 (2014)	30899955 (2014)
Portugal	33.67 (2014)	37.56 (2014)	8744169 (2014)
Romania	32.44 (2014)	33.50 (2014)	17645517 (2014)
Slovakia	13.05 (2014)	13.14 (2014)	4381043 (2014)
Slovenia	24.55 (2014)	25.64 (2014)	1638247 (2014)
Spain	43.81 (2014)	41.21 (2014)	38823070 (2014)
Sweden	51.07 (2014)	49.37 (2014)	7614029 (2014)
United Kingdom	35.40 (2014)	33.20 (2014)	49557644 (2014)

6. Factors affecting voter turnout and policy implications

Factors affecting voter turnout are generally categorised as ‘circumstantial’ or ‘intentional’.²⁸

Circumstantial factors include being unable to vote due to illness/absence on polling day, not being on the electoral register or difficulties in locating/getting to a polling station. Policies designed to reduce ‘circumstantial abstention’ include administrative measures often referred to as ‘voter facilitation methods’ such as an extension of polling hours, more access to advance voting or postal voting options, and making the registration process as straightforward as possible.

There is some evidence in academic studies to support the argument that voter-facilitating rules do have a limited positive effect on turnout.²⁹ However, Blais concludes that country-specific factors are important when designing these policies. A recent cross-country study by Quinlan³⁰ found that when the voter registration process is handled by a single, independent body, turnout tends to be higher. However, he also includes that facilitating voters is not a cure for the problem of growing abstention.

Intentional causes of non-voting include voter apathy or anger or a sense that there is inadequate choice on the political spectrum for voters. A voter might abstain because s/he does not wish to engage in public affairs through conventional electoral politics. Some may see conventional electoral politics as irrelevant. The decision not to vote might be an expression of dissatisfaction with the government or the political system, and, as noted above, might be an indicator of political engagement or disengagement.

The issue of intentional non-voting, a true indicator of disengagement from conventional politics, requires different policy responses. Policy responses must essentially aim to convince such citizens that there is a point to engaging with the electoral process. Examples of such policies include educational outreach programmes targeted at sections of the population who are less likely to vote. Evidence about the effectiveness of such policies is mixed and context specific and is outside of the scope of this *Note*.

Are those who abstain in Ireland primarily circumstantial or intentional?

Empirical data used to explain low turnout is survey-based data as exit polls only interview voters and not non-voters. For general elections in Ireland, the best which examines the reasons behind turnout is from the Irish National Election Study (2002 and 2007). According to this data:³¹

- Circumstantial abstainers outnumbered intentional or voluntary abstainers by 2 to 1 for the general population;
- Of circumstantial abstainers, almost 50% gave absence from home as their reason for not voting with a quarter of this group citing being away on holidays. Almost 25%

gave lack of time arising from work (busy, did not get home in time from work) or from family commitments (new baby had arrived, had no baby sitter) as their reason. Other reasons cited were illness or infirmity (13%), unable to find their polling card (7%) or bad weather and difficulty in getting to the polling station (5%);

- When broken down by age, there were more voluntary abstainers amongst younger non-voters (under 35) than amongst the general population. While circumstantial abstainers outnumber voluntary abstainers by 2 to 1 amongst the general population circumstantial abstainers outnumbered voluntary abstainers by only 1.6 to 1 amongst those between 25-34 and by only 1.3 to 1 amongst those between 18-24. The ratio was 3 to 1 in favour of circumstantial voters amongst non-voters over 35;
- In terms of employment status, turnout is lowest amongst students and the unemployed. Non-voters who are unemployed were far more likely than students to be voluntary abstainers with two thirds of this group compared with one-third of the student group citing intentional rather than circumstantial reasons.

In **referendums**, post-poll surveys undertaken by the Referendum Commission suggests that non-voters are circumstantial or voluntary (lack of interest) in equal numbers. A substantial category of non-voters also cite 'lack of/insufficient understanding' which, while slightly different to 'lack of interest,' also fits into the intentional rather than the circumstantial category. The Commission has found a direct relationship between the level of understanding of the referendum proposal, and the propensity to vote.

- For example, survey data gathered after the Inquiries Referendum, in which 56% of the electorate voted, found that over 50% of non-voters explained their abstention as either 'circumstantial' or lack of/no interest' while 18% of respondents who did not vote said that they did not fully understand the issue.³²
- In surveys following the 2012 Children Referendum, 26% of non-voters gave circumstantial reasons while 19% gave 'no interest in it and not bothered to vote' as the main reason for abstaining. A significant number - 34% of respondents - said they did not vote either because they did not understand the referendum or did not know enough about it.³³ 76% of respondents who voted said they understood the proposal well while only 24% of non-voters reported understanding it well.
- A similarly high percentage of non-voters cited 'a lack of understanding' as a reason for abstaining in the Fiscal Treaty referendum (31%) The proportion 'not understanding' was lower for the 2011 referendums on Oireachtas Inquiries (9%) and Judges' Pay (7%).
- In the referendum on the abolition of the Seanad, 29% gave circumstantial reasons for not voting (busy/unable to get to the polling station) while other non-voters gave

more intentional reasons. 29% had 'no interest/not too pushed/bothered' with 13% citing 'lack of understanding' and 12% insufficient knowledge. (12%).^{34,}

Survey research published by the European Parliament following the 2014 European elections ³⁵ found that circumstantial non-voters were more numerous than intentional non-voters in Ireland:

- In Ireland, and six other Member States, **circumstantial** (personal and technical) reasons for not voting dominate: Denmark (58%), **Ireland** (54%), Belgium (51%), France (48%), Netherlands (47%), Estonia (47%), Luxembourg (45%) and the United Kingdom (39%). This included too busy or no time or at work/on holiday or away from home/sick or health problem at the time/involved in a family or leisure activity/registration or voting card problems.
- On the other hand, political or what are above termed 'intentional' reasons were cited by 42% of Irish respondents (lack of trust or dissatisfaction with politics in general/not interested in politics as such/vote has no consequences or vote does not change anything/ rarely or never vote).

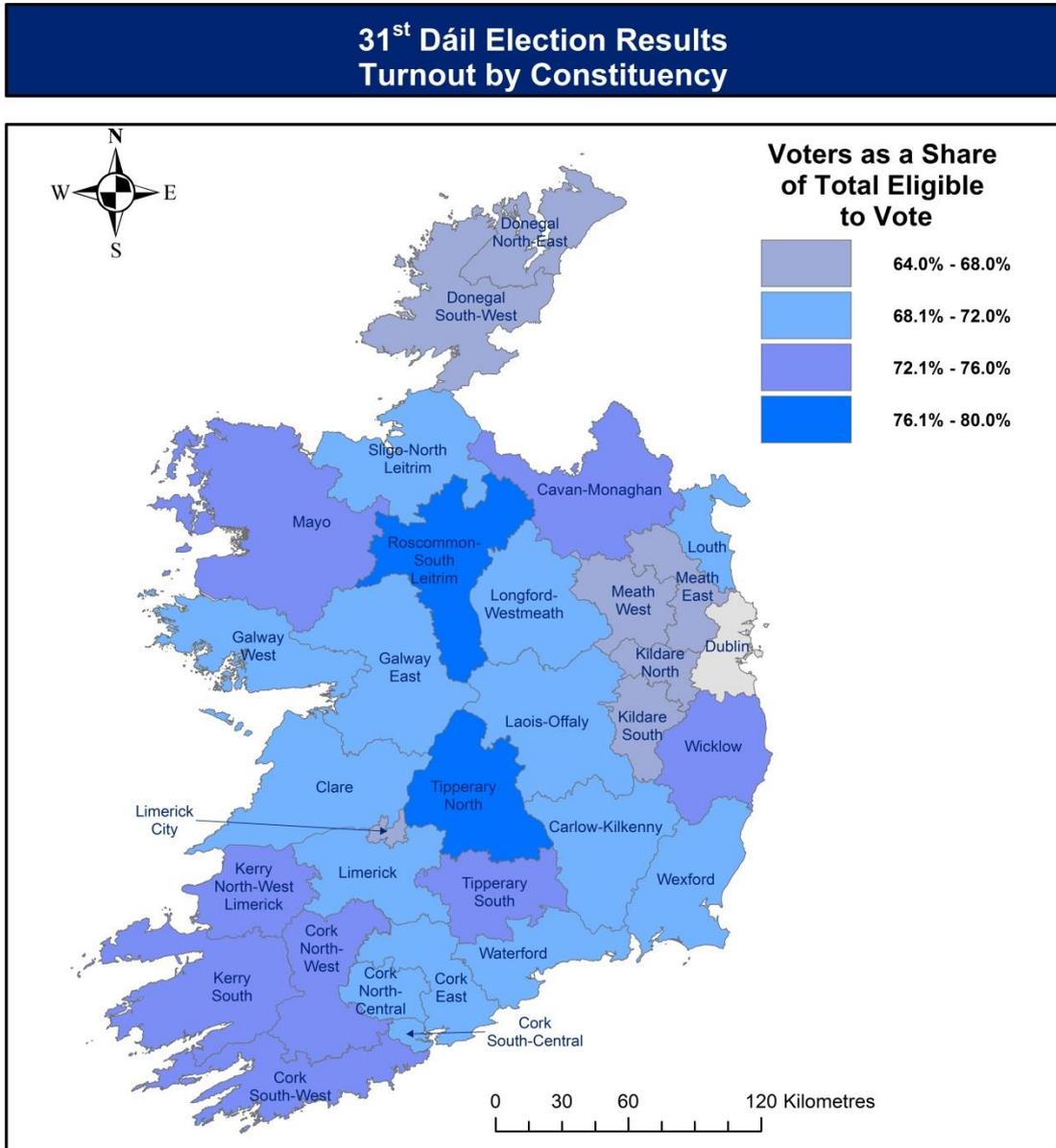
Table 10: Reasons* for Irish and EU28 abstention from voting in 2014 EP elections

	Did not vote	Reasons* of a political nature in the broad sense*	Personal and technical reasons*	Reasons* directly related to the European Union	Lack of information on the EE2014*
EU 28	57.39%	50%	37%	25%	4%
Ireland	47.56%	42%	54%	14%	3%

Appendix 1: 2011 election, turnout as % of REG and VAP

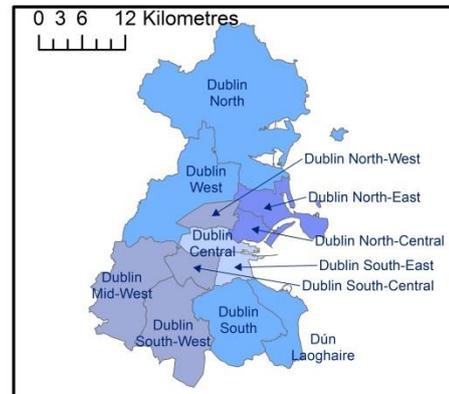
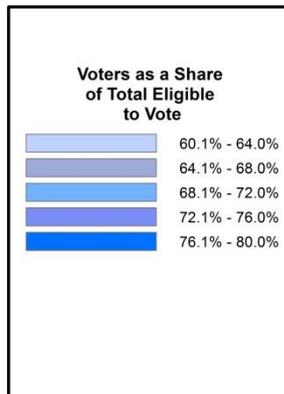
Constituency	Total population	Electoral Register	Voting age population (VAP)	% of VAP on Register	Votes Cast	REG Turnout %	VAP turnout %
Carlow-Kilkenny	145533	105449	98896	106.6	74,564	70.7	75.4
Cavan-Monaghan	133369	99,178	88130	112.5	72,142	72.7	81.9
Clare	111177	82,745	74641	110.9	58,495	70.7	78.4
Cork East	113954	83,651	75273	111.1	57,459	68.7	76.3
Cork North-Central	104846	75,302	71347	105.5	52,709	70.0	73.9
Cork North-West	81521	62,967	55997	112.4	46,194	73.5	82.5
Cork South-Central	134992	91,619	92149	99.4	64,664	70.6	70.2
Cork South-West	82815	62,967	56138	112.2	46,048	73.1	82.0
Donegal N-East	82779	59,084	56619	104.4	38,324	64.9	67.7
Donegal SW	78148	64,568	56518	114.2	43,595	67.5	77.1
Dublin Central	113028	56,892	64042	88.8	35,069	61.6	54.8
Dublin Mid-West	110464	64,880	64588	100.5	43,193	66.6	66.9
Dublin North	114143	70,413	69026	102.0	49,799	70.7	72.1
Dublin N-Central	74366	52,992	53580	98.9	39,187	74.0	73.1
Dublin North-East	81022	58,542	57396	102.0	42,287	72.2	73.7
Dublin N-West	78692	49,269	52281	94.2	33,262	67.5	63.6
Dublin South	141333	102,387	97139	105.4	73,105	71.4	75.3
Dublin S-Central	126777	80,268	84827	94.6	51,744	64.5	61.0
Dublin South-East	103163	58,217	65455	88.9	35,246	60.5	53.8
Dublin S-West	105614	70,613	67239	105.0	47,475	67.2	70.6
Dublin West	117126	62,348	62495	99.8	42,799	68.7	68.5
Dún Laoghaire	104875	80,115	73995	108.3	57,157	71.3	77.2
Galway East	110075	83,651	75661	110.6	59,836	71.5	79.1
Galway West	140466	88,840	91968	96.6	61,268	69.0	66.6
Kerry NW Limerick	80650	63,614	57429	110.8	46,027	72.4	80.1
Kerry South	77756	59,629	52851	112.8	44,679	74.9	84.5
Kildare North	119680	77,959	75388	103.4	51,610	66.2	68.5
Kildare South	90275	58,867	58263	101.0	38,623	65.6	66.3
Laois-Offaly	152824	108,142	100958	107.1	75,213	69.6	74.5
Limerick City	102121	64,909	67924	95.6	43,617	69.9	64.2
Limerick	81535	65,083	57857	112.5	45,512	67.2	78.7
Longford-Wmeath	116592	85,918	75856	113.3	58,186	67.7	76.7
Louth	143168	99,530	93396	106.6	70,190	70.5	75.2
Mayo	130552	101,160	91772	110.2	74,795	73.9	81.5
Meath East	86531	64,873	56622	114.6	43,098	66.4	76.1
Meath West	85482	62,776	54552	115.1	40,591	64.7	74.4
Rosc -S Leitrim	80794	60,998	56596	107.8	48,035	78.8	84.9
Sligo-N Leitrim	80152	63,432	56351	112.6	44,837	70.7	79.6
Tipperary North	84938	63,235	59307	106.6	48,789	77.2	82.3
Tipperary South	79770	57,420	54724	104.9	41,793	72.8	76.4
Waterford	112091	78,435	76995	101.9	54,298	69.2	70.5
Wexford	145273	111,063	99551	111.6	76,351	68.8	76.7
Wicklow	140807	95,341	95100	100.3	71,311	74.8	75.0

Appendix 2:
Map 1: Turnout (REG) as proportion of the Electoral Register

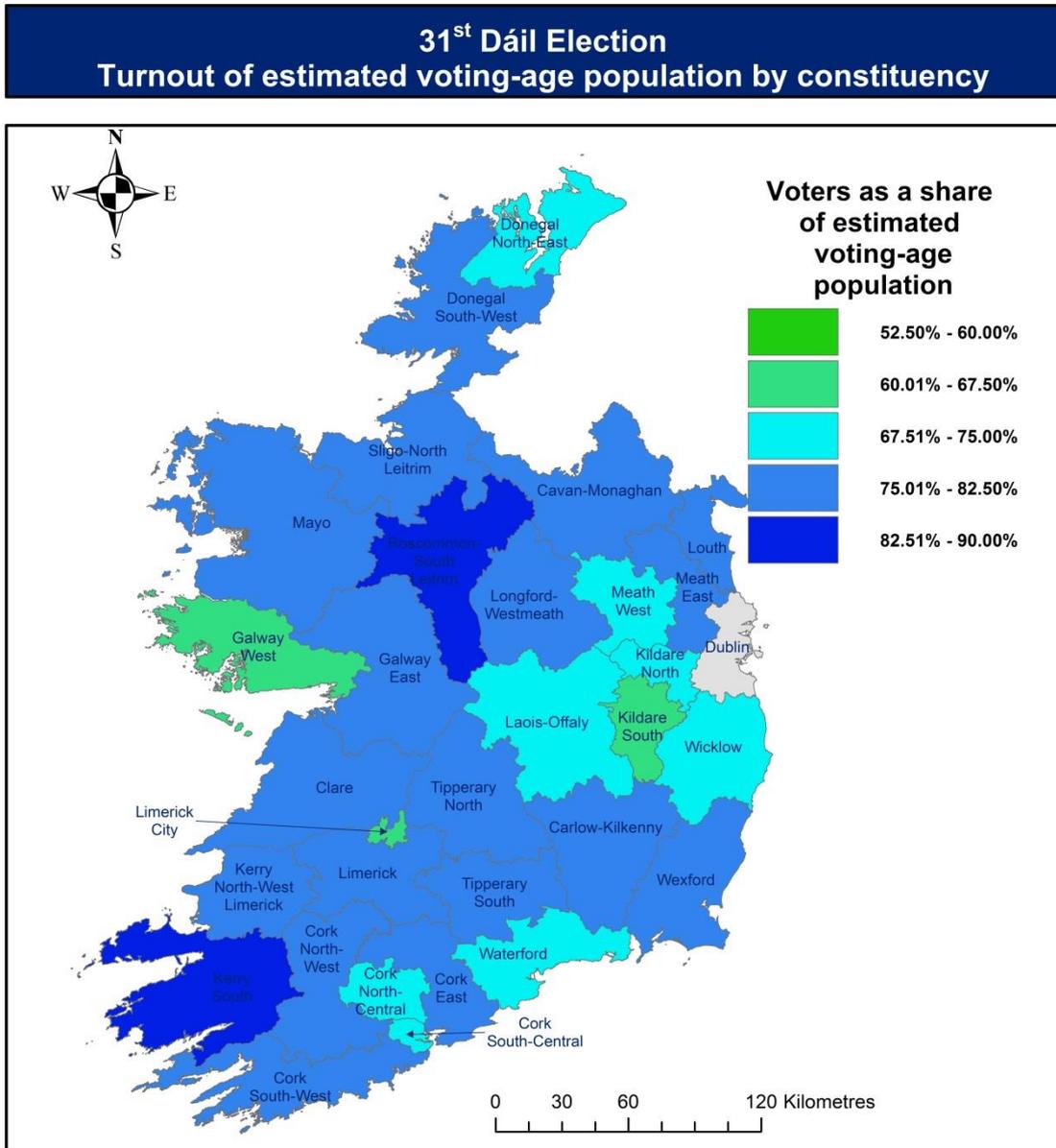


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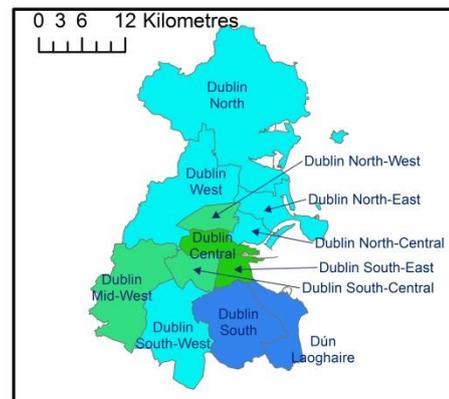
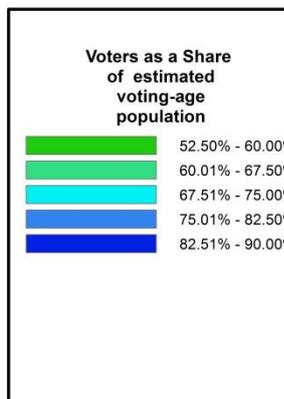


Map 2: Turnout 2011 (VAP) as proportion of the estimated voting-age population



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Endnotes

¹ Farrell D., 'Compulsory voting would help halt decline in turnout' Irish Times, 22 July 2014

² For example Wattenberg, 2002, Dalton, 2006, Blais, 2010) all fully referenced in Quinlan Stephen (2015) 'Facilitating the electorate: a multilevel analysis of election timing, registration procedures and turnout' *Irish Political Studies* vol. 30, 4 pp. 482-509.

³ O'Malley Eoin (2014) [Voter turnout make many of our comparisons invalid](#) The Irish Politics Forum.

⁴ O'Malley, Eoin (2001) Apathy or error? Questioning the Irish register of electors. *Irish Political Studies*, 16:1, 215-224.

⁵ The voting-age population for general elections is calculated using CSO census data to establish the total adult population aged 18 and over and subtracting all non-Irish citizens in this age category but including British citizens as they are entitled to vote in general elections. See [Library and Research \(2015\) Electoral Commission: Overview of Policy Rationale](#) prepared for the Joint Committee on Environment, Culture and the Gaeltacht. Pp. 6-14 discusses the inaccuracies of the register in detail. Briefing is an appendix (page 158) to the Joint Committee on Environment, Heritage and Local Government (2016) [Report on the Proposed Electoral Commission](#). Data on voting-age population up to 2001 is from O'Malley (2001) cited above. Data for 2002 and 2007 was calculated by political analyst, Odran Flynn, who wrote widely on this subject in the run up to the 2007 general election and who used CSO census data with estimates for deaths and net immigration. Data for 2011 was calculated by Library and Research using the same method as O'Malley and Flynn. Data on the numbers on the electoral register is from the Dáil Electoral Handbook and Department of the Environment, General Election Results.

⁶ Kavanagh Adrian, [submission to Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Constitution \(2010\)](#) inquiry on the electoral system.

⁷ L&RS discussed this with IDEA staff who confirmed that this figure is all adults aged 18 and over and stressed the need to use one source as the main focus is to compare trends across countries. They also noted that a further purpose of their data gathering is to measure inclusivity and that using this figure shows the proportion of adults living in Ireland who are not eligible to vote. However, our interest is in measuring turnout i.e. the proportion of those eligible to vote who do vote.

⁸ Data in Figure 1 for VAP is from Table 1.

⁹ In order to calculate turnout as a proportion of the VAP, L&RS used constituency-level data from the 2011 census supplied by CSO to estimate the voting-age population (VAP) for each of the 43 constituencies in the 2011 Election. Data on official turnout and numbers on the register is from Department of the Environment, Election Results, 2011.

¹⁰ Irish National Electoral Study (INES), supplied to L&RS by Prof. Michael Marsh (Trinity College Dublin) in 2011.

¹¹ Irish National Electoral Study (INES), supplied to L&RS by Prof. Michael Marsh (Trinity College Dublin) in 2011.

¹² Sloam, James. 'Voice and Equality: Young People's Politics in the European Union' *West European Politics*, Volume 36, Issue 4, 2013.

¹³ Kavanagh, Adrian, R. Sinnott, S. Fotheringham, M. Charlton (2006). A geographically weighted regression analysis of General Election turnout in the Republic of Ireland. Paper presented to the Political Studies Association of Ireland Conference, University College Cork, 20 October 2006 <http://www.psai.ie/conferences/papers2006/kavanagha1.pdf>

¹⁴ Figures for electoral register and turnout for all local elections were provided to L&RS by the Department of Environment where they were not available online. The estimated voting-age population was calculated from the Census and CSO estimates of population for the years in which local elections took place (all adults over 18 years of age).

¹⁵ Department of Environment and Local Government (2000) quoted in Callanan, Mark and Justin F. Keogan. *Local Government in Ireland: Inside Out*. Dublin, Institute of Public Administration, 2003; Kavanagh, Adrian. [Turnout or Turned Off? A Geographical Review of Voter Turnout patterns at the 2014 Local Elections, 3 June 2014](#). Accessed at <http://adriankavanaghelections.org/>

¹⁶ Kavanagh, Adrian. [Turnout or Turned Off? A Geographical Review of Voter Turnout patterns at the 2014 Local Elections, 3 June 2014](#). Accessed at <http://adriankavanaghelections.org/>

¹⁷ Department of Environment and Local Government (2000); Kavanagh (June 2014) cited above.

¹⁸ [Department of the Environment \(2015\) Referendum Results 1937-2015](#)

¹⁹ The 2011 census estimated that there were 3,439,565 people aged 18 and over living in Ireland and of this 465,788 are non-Irish citizens and, thus not entitled to vote in Referendums to the Constitution. ¹⁹

²⁰ Figure for total number of votes cast in 2011 Inquiries referendum (1,785,208) is from Department of the Environment, Referendum Results 1937-2015.

²¹ [CSO Population and Migration Estimates](#) are reported by age group and by nationality but the level of imputation involved does not allow CSO to publish the population estimates by age and nationality. The estimated population aged 18 and over was calculated for each year along with the proportion of the total population that was Irish in each year. These were used to calculate the estimated population aged 18 and over in the years 2010 to 2015 who were eligible to vote in referendums.

²² Kavanagh, Adrian. [Voting patterns and turnout levels in Referendum elections in the Republic of Ireland, 1937-2013, September 2013](#). Dublin North Central is part of the new Dublin Bay North constituency for the 2016 general election and Dublin South's boundaries have been amended and has been renamed Dublin-Rathdown

²³ [European Parliament. Profile of voters and abstainers in the European elections 2014](#) (April 2015), European Elections Desk Research. European Parliament Directorate-General for Communication Public Opinion Monitoring Unit/TNS Opinion, Brussels, April 2015.

²⁴ European Parliament (2015) cited above.

²⁵ European Parliament (2015) cited above.

²⁶ The estimated VAP used by IDEA for Ireland better represents the electorate entitled to vote in European elections than it does the electorate at General elections. However, the VAP still includes non-EU citizens resident in Ireland (who do not have the vote) (see Section 2 above).

²⁷ [IDEA data on turnout at European Parliament elections 2014](#) (accessed 18 January 2016)

²⁸ Marsh, Sinnott, Garry and Kennedy (2008) *The Irish Voter the nature of electoral competition in the Republic of Ireland* Manchester, Manchester University Press.

²⁹ Blais Andre. (2006) 'What affects voter turnout?' *Annual Review of Political Science* Vol.9. 111-125.

³⁰ Quinlin Stephen (2015) 'Facilitating the electorate: a multilevel analysis of election timing, registration procedures and turnout' *Irish Political Studies* Vol. 30 (4) 482-509.

³¹ The data from the Irish National Electoral Study in the following published format if not otherwise referenced. Marsh, Sinnott, Garry and Kennedy (2008) *The Irish Voter the nature of electoral competition in the Republic of Ireland* Manchester, Manchester University Press. Pp. 192-216. This survey was the first full-scale election study conducted in Ireland. It was conducted by political scientists from Trinity College and UCD and surveys returned by 2,663 voters were examined. L&RS searched the database of the INES 2007 and 2011 studies. We were unable to extract data with identical questions in the 2007 and 2011 re-runs of the survey. The information presented in this paper is information from the first wave of the project (2002-2007). However, we do not expect that the reasons for not turning out would change substantially. Of interest, however, is whether, for example, low turnout amongst young people between the ages of 18-24 is an age or a cohort effect (i.e. will this group of people always have a high turnout or will turnout amongst them increase as they age).

³² Referendum Commission Report on the 29th Amendment to the Constitution (Judge's Remuneration) Bill and 30th Amendment of the Constitution (Inquiries) Bill. p.13.

³³ [Referendum Commission Report on the Referendum on the 31st Amendment of the Constitution \(Children\) Bill 2012](#)

³⁴ Martin Shane and MacCarthaigh Muiris 'Bicameralism in the Republic of Ireland: The Seanad Abolition Referendum.' / [Irish Political Studies](#), Vol. 30, No. 1, 2015, p. 121-131

³⁵ [European Parliament. Profile of voters and abstainers in the European elections 2014](#) (April 2015), European Elections Desk Research. European Parliament Directorate-General for Communication Public Opinion Monitoring Unit/TNS Opinion, Brussels, April 2015. See [here](#) for a summary of the research, the aim of which is to identify the various profiles of abstainers and voters, and to understand the reasons underlying their decision to vote or abstain, and to analyse their attitudes and opinions regarding the EU.