EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Elections should provide opportunities for citizens to participate in politics and hold leaders to account. When they work well, elections can deepen civic engagement, inform public debate, stimulate party competition, strengthen government responsiveness, and allow the peaceful resolution of political conflict.

The problem is that too often contests fail to achieve these objectives. There is widespread concern in many countries about low or falling turnout, public disaffection, party polarization, and the failure of elections to ensure legitimate outcomes. Electoral malpractices (*abuse of the electoral system) continue to undermine contests around the world, from overt cases of violence and intimidation to disinformation campaigns, cybersecurity threats, barriers to voting, and the underrepresentation of women and minority candidates. To assess global trends, the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity expert survey monitors elections worldwide and regionally, across all stages of the electoral cycle.

Methodology: This report describes the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity dataset (PEI-7.0). The dataset is drawn from a rolling survey of 3,861 expert assessments of electoral integrity across 337 elections in 166 countries around the world. The cumulative study covers all national presidential and parliamentary elections from July 1, 2012 to December 31, 2018. This annual release adds 53 presidential or parliamentary contests held during 2018. Perceptions of electoral integrity are measured by experts in each country one month after polls close. Experts are asked to assess the quality of national elections on eleven sub-dimensions: electoral laws; electoral procedures; district boundaries; voter registration; party registration; media coverage; campaign finance; voting process; vote count; results; and electoral authorities. These items sum to an overall Electoral Integrity Index scored from 0 to 100. Additional batteries of items are used to monitor specific problems each year. Given widespread concerns about the issue of fake news, online disinformation, & foreign meddling, the 2018 survey focused on issues of campaign media.

FIGURE 1: ELECTORAL INTEGRITY WORLDWIDE, 2012 TO 2018

Source: The Perceptions of Electoral Integrity expert survey, country-level www.electoralintegrityproject.com

(Words within brackets marked with * are simpler vocabulary to help students.) Adapted for Exam purposes. Source: https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/government-needs-to-act-on-promise-of-electoral-commission-1.4325920

**Government needs to act on promise of electoral commission**

The electoral process is only as strong as its weakest link and there are many chinks in Irish voting procedures. Since 2007, government after government has promised to establish an **electoral commission** to address vulnerabilities in how we manage elections and **referendums**. The commitment is back again in the 2020 **Programme For Government**. All the political parties favour an electoral commission but somehow it never gets to the top of the to-do list. Elections and referendums work reasonably well in Ireland and this has allowed an alarming complacency take hold.

Age and stability in a democracy provide no guarantee of immunity to global threats. Last month, in the United Kingdom, the Russia report demonstrated there was direct interference in the political system by Russian state actors (*people working on behalf of the Russian government*). This interference was ignored by successive governments, and questions about how the **Scottish Independence** and **Brexit** referendums were affected remain unanswered. Russian meddling in elections has been well documented. The Trump election in 2016 continues to be marred in controversy and investigations. The European Union was on high alert for the 2019 European Parliament elections but these passed off relatively unscathed.
(without being damaged). While external threats to democracy are at least discussed in other democracies, they are virtually ignored in Ireland.

Those who argue that Ireland is a small country of little interest to others forget that it is a crucial linchpin (*vital element of) global supply chains, perhaps most pertinently (*importantly/relevantly) at the height of the global pandemic, for pharmaceuticals and medical devices. It is also the European hub for the digital economy. Decisions taken in Ireland have global repercussions.

And there is evidence of interference. Overseas groups and individuals were able to purchase political advertising directly targeting Irish voters during the 2018 referendum on the Eighth Amendment, and no Irish institution had any power to act. With broadcast highly regulated, but the online world remaining a virtual no-man’s land, we have witnessed the slow creep of disinformation and polarisation into Irish public life, with attack ads and conspiracy finding traction under the radar. We are leaving decisions over the kind of discourse (*debate/discussion) we want for our country to private companies in California with their eyes trained on Washington, DC.

An important point that’s lost in debates about the outcome of the 2020 General Election was the troublingly low level of participation. Voter Turnout of just 62.9 per cent was recorded. Only general elections in 1922, 1923 and 2002 had lower levels of participation. In 2002 when turnout dropped to 62.6 per cent, a national campaign was initiated to improve electoral registers and staff involved in the most recent census were recruited to undertake a door-to-door campaign to address major concerns about the accuracy of the electoral registers.

The 2002 process may have temporarily alleviated the disarray (*reduced confusion) in the electoral registers but all evidence since points to the re-emergence of irregularities. A study in 2016 suggested that there could be as many as 500,000 names on the registers that should not be there. These included people who were registered at other addresses, voters who had died and many who had emigrated in the preceding years. The global Electoral Integrity Project, an independent academic study founded in 2012, has audited Irish electoral procedures over several elections and voter registration processes have consistently been scored as weak. At the 2016 general election, Ireland was ranked 137th in the world for our voter registration processes. This is an alarming finding for an old & stable democracy.

An interconnected problem is the poor voter education efforts at elections. This problem is all the more bizarre because there are quite robust voter information campaigns at referendums when each referendum commission engages in sustained campaigns highlighting the issues involved in the referendum, when the vote will take place and what the ballot will look like. But none of this information is provided at elections. The State relies entirely on media organisations which, while they do great work, cannot be a substitute for a publicly-funded national voter education campaign, explaining which election is taking place, who will be elected, what roles they play, when the election will happen, who is entitled to vote and how to vote.

Proportional representation through the single transferable vote (PR-STV) is a very unusual system and voters deserve detailed and regular information campaigns about how it works and how they should vote under this system. Most other democracies have such campaigns, helping voters understand the decisions being made and encouraging them to vote. The electoral commission has been put on the long finger for too many years. The Government must act and meet its own commitment to protect Ireland’s democracy. The programme for government commits to having an electoral commission in place by the end of next year. The work to meet that deadline starts now.

Dr Theresa Reidy is a political scientist at University College Cork. Prof David Farrell is the head of politics and international relations at University College Dublin

(For the benefit of students engaging with this article, the exam author suggest that you compile a list of all the words highlighted in bold and be able to give a brief definition of those terms for future reference)
Data-Based Questions (150 Marks) – Answer all questions

(a) According to **Document A**, identify THREE of the main areas of concern surrounding global voting integrity. Identify and explain which of these concerns you think to be most significant on a global scale. (10 Marks)

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(b) According to **Document B**, why do the authors think that Ireland is potentially vulnerable to external influence on our elections. In your answer consider both the problems experienced in **other areas of the EU** and **internal factors**. (10 Marks)

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(c) What specific issues do the authors of Document B identify relating to ‘Voter Education’ in Ireland, and what specific remedies do they suggest? (20 Marks)

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(d) Based on the explanation of their ‘**Methodology**’, do you feel that the data presented in **Document A** is reliable? Justify your answer with reference to specific ways in which the data has been **gathered and analysed**. (20 Marks)

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(e) To what extent do the visual representations in Document A (Figure 1 & Figure 2) enhance or detract from the overall understand of the data presented in the document as a whole. Comment on both figures in your response. (20 Marks)

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(f) Are the authors of Document B justified in claiming that the Irish Government needs to “address vulnerabilities in how we manage elections and referendums”. Justify your answer with reference to both document, putting the Irish situation in a broader, international context. (20 Marks)

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(g) Drawing on both documents, your wider learning and contemporary evidence, respond to the tweet below from former Green Party European and Dáil election candidate, Saoirse McHugh. In your answer consider the ‘pros’ and ‘cons’ of using activism as a means of bringing about political change. (50 Marks)

(*)This answer is usually given one full page in the answer booklet, but students are allowed to continue their answer on additional pages at the back of the answer booklet.)