

Extension of Voting Rights for Irish Citizens Abroad in Irish Presidential Elections

1. The Government Decision (S180/20/10/1841) of 7 March 2017 approved, in principle, the holding of a referendum to amend the Constitution to extend the franchise at presidential elections to include Irish citizens resident outside the State, including citizens resident in Northern Ireland.
2. Subsequently an Options Paper (see attached) prepared by the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to inform public debate around this significant policy change to give effect to the recommendation in the Fifth Report of the Convention on the Constitution was published by the Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government on 22 March 2017.
3. The issue of extending voting rights at presidential elections to Irish citizens resident outside the State, including citizens in Northern Ireland, and the various options available were the subject of detailed discussions at a dedicated session of the Global Irish Civic Forum held on the morning of Friday, 5 May 2017. Participants at the Forum heard contributions from a panel before offering their own views on the seven options outlined in the Options Paper. The panel members were -
 - Ms. Dearbhail McDonald, Irish Independent News (Moderator)
 - Dr. Iseult Honohan, University College Dublin
 - Senator Billy Lawless, Seanad Éireann
 - Mr. Simon Coveney, T.D., Minister for Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government
 - Mr. Joe McHugh, T.D., Minister of State for the Diaspora and Overseas Development Aid
4. Dr Iseult Honohan referred to the recommendations of the Constitutional Convention, and explored the Options outlined in the Government's Options Paper published in

March – which for the purposes of the discussion were divided into three main categories: extending the right to vote in presidential elections to all citizens outside the State; extending the right to vote in presidential elections to all emigrants who have left Ireland; or extending the right to vote to all emigrants with a time limit. Senator Billy Lawless gave an impassioned speech, appealing both to the Government “Tabhair Dúinn an Vóta”, and to the diaspora to come together to support a positive vote in the referendum - mobilising the Irish community abroad in a worldwide grassroots campaign which would include positively influencing friends and family at home who would be voting in the referendum.

5. Minister Coveney emphasised both the Government’s commitment on this issue, and highlighted the importance of the consultative process and the strong desire of the Government to get the views of the global Irish to feed into their decision making process. He also noted the importance of navigating a way forward that would best contribute to ensuring a successful referendum. The commitment of Government on this issue and the important role for Irish organisations abroad were echoed in the closing remarks by then Minister of State McHugh.
6. Participants welcomed the opportunity to discuss what was seen as a very important issue, and emphasised the positive role that the Irish abroad themselves were prepared to play, and would play in achieving positive progress on this issue. While they would not participate in a referendum vote, they looked forward to participating in the debate and for a mechanism to be identified through which this could be done.
7. Speakers advocated for including more than just Irish-born citizens, referring to their own family members who though not born in Ireland retained a very strong link and a willingness to contribute to Ireland. Others advocated particularly strongly against any time limit based on time away from Ireland, referring to the elderly Irish emigrants in the UK in particular who had contributed so much to Ireland over many years, and to whom the right to vote could be particularly important. Reference was also made to the potential damage that could be done to Ireland’s relationship with its diaspora if either too narrow a grouping was selected for the extension of voting rights, or if the referendum did not succeed.

8. There appeared to be a broad understanding among those present of the importance of due consideration and preparation being given to the option to be chosen and the wording of any referendum that would go to the people, and also that the legislative and administrative processes involved in managing any change mean it will not be possible to have voting from outside the State operative for the next scheduled election in 2018.

9. In response to the question 'which citizens should have the right to vote at presidential elections?' the almost unanimous view of the Forum was that the franchise should be extended to all citizens, i.e. Option 2.2.1 in the Options Paper. There was broad agreement among those present that the extension of the franchise should not be limited to those who have left Ireland in recent years or within a certain time limit. There was also a recognition among those attending the Civic Forum that introducing a requirement to hold a valid (Irish) passport could be a reasonable criterion for eligibility.

10. Work continues at official level, more deeply now in light of the discussions at the Forum, and before a report is brought to Government with a view to identifying a preferred option to be put to the people in a referendum. It is proposed that an early meeting be organised for Minister Cannon with his counterpart in D/Housing and the colleagues in Franchise Unit there, to discuss the Options Paper and possible next steps.

Irish Abroad Unit

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