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# USI Political Engagement Strategy 2023-2026

## Campaigns Strategy Committee

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# Introduction

The Union of Students in Ireland (USI) is the representative body of 374,000 students across the island of Ireland and is an entirely student-led organisation. We are comprised of further and higher education member students’ unions across the island, both North and South, and seek to protect and enhance education, the rights of students, and the ability of all to access third-level education.

This strategy paper seeks to inform the political engagement campaigns of USI, with specific focus on youth voter registration and political education for young people. The Campaigns Strategy Committee of USI have the responsibility of yearlong campaigns, with a primary focus on the annual USI higher education funding campaign. However, this year, the committee noticed a gap in USI’s campaigns strategy as a result of the lack of political engagement strategy that led to a disconnect between USI’s higher education campaigns and the wider political landscape.

This strategy paper will not only inform structures that should be examined in USI’s general political engagement on a Coiste Gnó level, but also the political engagement campaigns that the organisation should prioritise rolling out over the next three years – with particular focus on voter registration in the lead up to the 2024 Local and European Elections.

# Background

## Forthcoming Elections

### January 2024 – Assembly Elections (NI)

An election must take place to elect the 90 members of the Northern Ireland Assembly (MLAs) if the parties previously elected fail to form an Executive, which they have yet to do. The most recent Northern Ireland Assembly election took place on the 5th of May 2022, however, the DUP declined to agree on the appointment of a Speaker to the Assembly, thus preventing the formation of an Executive.

A previous deadline for the formation of an executive was noted to be the 27th of October 2022, however this deadline was extended by the Westminster Parliament and a new deadline of the 18th January 2024 has been proposed. This deadline will be cemented by the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Bill 2022-2023 which is due to complete its passage through the House of Commons in February 2023. If this bill does not pass, an election must be called by the end of the first week of March 2023.

Northern Ireland is divided into 18 parliamentary constituencies, each of which return one Member of Parliament (MP) to the House of Commons at Westminster and 5 MLAs to Stormont.

### May 2024 – Local Elections (ROI)

Local elections take place every five years and are when councillors are elected to represent the electorate on the local authorities. There are thirty-one local authorities in Ireland, and these are split into County Councils, City Councils and City and County Councils. Each local authority has representatives elected from local electoral areas, of which there are 166 total.

You do not have to be an Irish citizen to vote in the local elections, however you must be ordinarily resident in the State on 1st of September, to register on the Register of Electors for the following year.

To vote in a local election, you must:

* Be over 18 years of age,
* Live in the local electoral area,
* Be listed on the Register of Electors, or the Supplement to the Register.

All elections taking place in Ireland operate a system of proportional representation, with a single transferable vote.

### May 2024 - European Elections (ROI)

European Elections take place every five years, where representatives are elected to the European Parliament. While voting practices vary between different EU systems, as MEPs (Members of European Parliament) are elected according to national electoral systems. In Ireland, MEPs are elected using the PR-STV system – proportional representation with a single transferable vote. Ireland is divided into three constituencies for European elections: Dublin, South and Midlands-North-West.

To be eligible to vote in European elections in Ireland, you must:

* Be a citizen of the European Union,
* Be 18 years of age,
* Be listed in the Register of Electors.

If you are an EU citizen and you were not registered to vote in previous European elections in Ireland, you must apply for registration and complete a statutory declaration form (EP1) which is available from City and County Councils. The forms are sent to your home Member State to prevent double voting. If you are an Irish citizen living in another Member State, you are entitled to vote in that country. This means that international students’ from an EU Member State, and Irish students who are attending a year abroad in another EU Member State are eligible to vote in the European Elections.

### February 2025 – Dáil Elections (ROI)

A Dáil election (otherwise known as a General Election) is due to take place in February of 2025. The Dáil is the lower house of the Oireachtas and seats 160 Teachta Dála (TDs) across 39 constituencies. This election determines the formation of the government and which political parties are in power – thus, determining which party will hold the responsibility for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation, and Science.

You can vote in a general election if you are:

* An Irish or British citizen,
* Aged 18 or over on the day of the election,
* Registered to vote.

### February 2025 - Seanad Elections

The Seanad is the upper house of the Dáil, and while the makeup of the Seanad does not impact on the formation of the government, they play a crucial role in the passing of Irish legislature. Senators are not officially divided into political parties. There are a total of 60 Senators – 11 of whom are directly nominated by the Taoiseach and the remaining 49 are elected in the Seanad Elections.

43 Senators are elected by panels of candidates representing specific vocational interests. The panels are as follows:

* Cultural and educational panel,
* Agricultural panel,
* Labour panel,
* Industrial and commercial panel,
* Administrative panel.

The remaining 6 elected Senators are elected by graduates from colleges within the National University of Ireland (NUI) and Trinity College Dublin. The NUI consists of University College Dublin, University College Cork, University of Galway and Maynooth University.

# Constituencies

## Stormont Constituencies Representing USI Member Organisations

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **USI Member Organisation** | **Constituency** |
| BMC Students’ Union | Belfast West |
| SMUCB Students’ Union |
| QUB Students’ Union | Belfast South |
| Stranmillis Students’ Union |
| UU Students’ Union *(Belfast Campus)* | Belfast North |
| NRC Students’ Union *(Newtownabbey Campus)* |
| UU Students’ Union *(Coleraine Campus)* | East Londonderry |
| NWRC Students’ Union *(Limavady Campus)* |
| NWRC Students’ Union *(Greystone Campus)* |
| NRC Students’ Union *(Coleraine Campus)* |
| UU Students’ Union *(Magee Campus)* | Foyle |
| NWRC Students’ Union *(Strand Road Campus)* |
| NWRC Students’ Union *(Springtown Campus)* |
| CAFRE Students’ Union | South Antrim |
| NRC Students’ Union *(Ballymena Campus)* | North Antrim |
| NRC Students’ Union *(Ballymoney Campus)* |
| NRC Students’ Union *(Larne Campus)* | East Antrim |
| NRC Students’ Union *(Magherafelt Campus)* | Mid Ulster |
| SWC Students’ Union *(Cookstown Campus)* |
| NWRC Students’ Union *(Strabane Campus)* | West Tyrone |
| SWC Students’ Union *(Omagh Campus)* |
| SRC Students’ Union *(Armagh Campus)* | Newry and Armagh |
| SRC Students’ Union *(Newry Campus)* |
| SRC Students’ Union *(Banbridge Campus)* | Upper Bann |
| SRC Students’ Union *(Lurgan Campus)* |
| SRC Students’ Union *(Portadown Campus)* |
| SWC Students’ Union *(Erne Campus)* | Fermanagh and South Tyrone |
| SWC Students’ Union *(Dungannon Campus)* |
| SERC Students’ Union *(Bangor Campus)* | North Down |
| SERC Students’ Union *(Holywood Campus)* |
| SERC Students’ Union *(Downpatrick Campus)* | South Down |
| SERC Students’ Union *(Newcastle Campus)* |
| SERC Students’ Union *(Ballynahinch Campus)* | Strangford |
| SERC Students’ Union *(Lisburn Campus)* | Lagan Valley |

Note: All constituencies have a five possible seats to elect MLAs

## Local Authorities Representing USI Member Organisations

### Dublin Region

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **USI Member Organisation** | **Local Authority** | **Local Electoral Areas** | **Seats** |
| DCU Students’ Union | Dublin City Council | Artane - Whitehall | 6 |
| Ballyfermot - Drimnagh | 5 |
| NCAD Students’ Union | Ballymun - Finglas | 6 |
| Cabra - Glasnevin | 7 |
| NCI Students’ Union | Clontarf | 6 |
| Donaghmede | 5 |
| TCD Students’ Union | Kimmage - Rathmines | 6 |
| North Inner City | 7 |
| TU Dublin Students’ Union  *(City Campus)* | Pembroke | 5 |
| South East Inner City | 5 |
| South West Inner City | 5 |
| IADT Students’ Union | Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Counil | Blackrock | 6 |
| Dundrum | 7 |
| Dún Laoghaire | 7 |
| Glencullen - Sandyford | 7 |
| Killiney - Shankill | 6 |
| Stillorgan | 6 |
| TU Dublin Students’ Union  *(Blanchardstown Campus)* | Fingal County Council | Balbriggan | 5 |
| Blanchardstown - Mulhuddart | 5 |
| Castleknock | 6 |
| Howth - Malahide | 7 |
| Ongar | 5 |
| Rush - Lusk | 5 |
| Swords | 7 |
| TU Dublin Students’ Union  *(Tallaght Campus)* | South Dublin County Council | Clondalkin | 7 |
| Firhouse - Bohernabreena | 5 |
| Lucan | 5 |
| Palmerstown - Fonthill | 5 |
| Rathfarnham - Templeougue | 7 |
| Tallaght Central | 6 |
| Tallaght South | 5 |

### BMW Region

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **USI Member Organisation** | **Local Authority** | **Local Electoral Areas** | **Seats** |
| DKIT Students’ Union | Louth County Council | Ardee | 6 |
| Drogheda Rural | 4 |
| Drogheda Urban | 6 |
| Dundalk - Carlingford | 6 |
| Dundalk South | 7 |
| Maynooth Students’ Union | Kildare County Council | Athy | 5 |
| Celbridge | 4 |
| Leixlip | 3 |
| Clane | 5 |
| Maynooth | 5 |
| Kildare | 5 |
| Newbridge | 6 |
| ATU Galway – Mayo Students’ Union  *(Galway Campus)* | Galway City Council | Galway City West | 6 |
| Comhaltas na Mac Léinn Ollscoil na Gallimhe | Galway City Central | 6 |
| Calway City East | 6 |
| ATU Galway – Mayo Students’ Union  *(Mayo Campus)* | Mayo County Council | Ballina | 6 |
| Castlebar | 7 |
| Claremorris | 6 |
| Swinford | 4 |
| Westport | 4 |
| Belmullet | 3 |
| ATU Sligo Students’ Union | Sligo County Council | Sligo - Strandhill | 6 |
| Ballymote - Tobercurry | 7 |
| STACS Students’ Union | Sligo - Drumcliff | 7 |
| ATU Donegal Students’ Union | Donegal County Council | Donegal | 6 |
| Glenties | 6 |
| Buncrana | 5 |
| Carndonagh | 4 |
| Letterkenny | 7 |
| Milford | 3 |
| Lifford - Stranorlar | 6 |
| TUS Students’ Union  *(Athlone Campus)* | Westmeath County Council | Athlone | 5 |
| Moate | 4 |
| Mullingar | 6 |
| Kinnegad | 5 |

### Southern Region

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **USI Member Organisation** | **Local Authority** | **Local Electoral Areas** | **Seats** |
| MTU Cork Students’ Union | Cork City Council | Cork City North-East | 6 |
| Cork City North-West | 6 |
| Cork City South-Central | 6 |
| UCC Students’ Union | Cork City South-East | 6 |
| Cork City South-West | 7 |
| SETU Students’ Union  *(Carlow Campus)* | Carlow County Council | Carlow | 7 |
| Muinebeag | 5 |
| Carlow College Students’ Union | Tullow | 6 |
| SETU Students’ Union  *(Waterford Campus)* | Waterford City and County Council | Tramore – Waterford City West |  |
| Waterford City East |  |
| Waterford City South |  |
| Portlaw-Kilmacthomas |  |
| Dungarvan |  |
| Lismore |  |
| SETU Students’ Union  *(Wexford Campus)* | Wexford County Council | Enniscorthy | 6 |
| Gorey | 6 |
| Kilmuckridge | 4 |
| New Ross | 6 |
| Rosslare | 5 |
| Wexford | 7 |
| TUS Students’ Union  *(Limerick Campus)* | Limerick City and County Council | Limerick City East | 7 |
| Limerick City North | 7 |
| Limerick City West | 7 |
| Adare - Rathkeale | 6 |
| Cappamore - Kilmallock | 7 |
| Newcastle West | 6 |
| MTU Kerry Students’ Union | Kerry County Council | An Daingean | 3 |
| Castleisland | 4 |
| Kenmare | 6 |
| Killarney | 7 |
| Listowel | 6 |
| Tralee | 7 |

## European Election Constituencies Representing USI Member Organisations

### Dublin Region

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **USI Member Organisation** | **European Constituency** | **Seats** |
| DCU Students’ Union | Dublin | 4 |
| IADT Students’ Union |
| NCAD Students’ Union |
| NCI Students’ Union |
| TCD Students’ Union |
| TU Dublin Students’ Union |

### BMW Region

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **USI Member Organisation** | **European Constituency** | **Seats** |
| ATU Donegal Students’ Union | Midlands-North-West | 4 |
| ATU Galway–Mayo Students’ Union |
| ATU Sligo Students’ Union |
| Comhaltas na Mac Léinn Ollscoil na Gallimhe |
| DKIT Students’ Union |
| Maynooth Students’ Union |
| TUS Students’ Union  *(Athlone Campus)* |

### Southern Region

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **USI Member Organisation** | **European Constituency** | **Seats** |
| Carlow College Students’ Union | South | 5 |
| MTU Cork Students’ Union |
| MTU Kerry Students’ Union |
| SETU Students’ Union |
| TUS Students’ Union  *(Limerick Campus)* |
| UCC Students’ Union |

# Voter Registration

Given the high amount of upcoming elections in the timeframe that this strategy paper seeks to cover, youth voter registration is a key priority for USI and our member organisations. Voter registration campaigns need to be prioritised in the USI calendar of events, and adequate training must be given to empower local students’ union officers to run voter registration drives. In 2015, previous voter registration drives run by USI saw 10,000 students’ registered on a single day in 2015.

## Voter Registration Campaign

The Vice President for Equality and Citizenship and the Vice President for Campaigns have the joint responsibility for the roll-out of USI’s voter registration campaigns and drives. Outlined below are the actions mandated to the USI Coiste Gnó with the aim of increasing the youth voter turnout in all upcoming elections.

* The Vice President for Equality and Citizenship to develop a training programme to be implemented in the timetable of Students’ Union Training (SUT) and/or SUT+ to teach students’ union officers from USI’s member organisations how to run successful voter registration drives.
* The Vice President for Campaigns to work with the Vice President for Equality and Citizenship to develop campaign materials to be distributed to USI’s member organisations to assist with the promotion of voter registration drives.
* The Regional Vice Presidents to assist with the roll out of voter registration drives on MO campuses.
* The Regional Vice Presidents to report back to the Vice President for Equality and Citizenship with the total number of students registered to vote during locally run voter registration drives. The Vice President for Equality and Citizenship should report these figures to Comhairle Náisiúnta and the USI Campaigns Strategy Committee to track the success of the campaign.
* The USI Vice President for Equality and Citizenship to develop an intervarsity challenge with the aim of promoting voter registration across all USI’s member organisations by highlighting the proportional percentage of students registered to vote throughout all USI and locally run voter registration drives.
* Voter registration drives run by both USI and our Member Organisations should have the goal of registering 20,000 students to vote each year.

## Voter Reform

USI believes that significant reform is needed to fully empower the youth vote. The Irish system of voter registration has seen some modernisation over recent years that has assisted in ensuring that the process of registering to vote is not an arduous task. However, the majority of this modernisation only affects students living in the Dublin region.

**USI’s Positions**

* Online voter registration, as seen on voter.ie should be accessible to all areas and not limited to those living in Dublin.
* A “rolling”, or continuous register, rather than the current system of limited periodic registration windows, as recommended in the report [“The Future of the Electoral Register in Ireland and Related Matters”](https://opac.oireachtas.ie/Data/Library3/Library2/DL044618.pdf) would be the best way to roll out a national system for online voter registration.
* Automatic voter registration is ultimately the best way to promote a high youth voter turnout as it removes the most complicated aspect of voting – which is being added to the register.
* Registered Irish voters who are overseas should be able to have their vote facilitated at Irish embassies. This would allow students who are studying abroad to engage politically, which should be encouraged.
* USI believes that a national policy to extend voting rights to those aged 16 and upwards. Enfranchising this demographic is crucial to ensure that our democratic system is truly representative and encourage active citizenship in young people.
* The current system for the election of the Seanad is archaic and classist. USI supports the extension of voting rights for Seanad elections to all citizens registered to vote. Limiting the electorate to only those who are graduates of the small pool of NUI universities disenfranchises a huge proportion of USI’s members, and in order to be a functional aspect of our legislative system, Seanad election reform must happen. This includes the removal of the 11 Seanad seats nominated by An Taoiseach‚ as well as the introduction of the secret ballot for all Seanad voting.

# Political Education

There is a need for specific political education aimed at students in order to empower young people to engage with active citizenship and civics. While campaigns on issues directly impacting young people are received incredibly well across USI’s member organisations, very rarely are these issues tied to political systems that has allowed them to exist for so long. It is the responsibility of USI to ensure that students are politically aware, and thus politically engaged. This is of particular importance in the lead up to elections.

## Student Political Education Campaign

A yearlong campaign should be rolled out, with oversight from the USI Campaigns Strategy Committee with the aim of politically educating students. Outlined below are the actions mandated to the Coiste Gnó with the aim of ensuring the success of the campaign.

* The USI Coiste Gnó to work to develop the site votes.usi.ie as a hub for political information with a student focus. The site should outline the voting history of politicians on pieces of legislation affecting students, critically examine the manifestos of political parties in the lead up to elections and provide information to students on the political systems in Ireland. The site will also serve as an informational resource on all of USI’s political work – including submissions to the government and lobbying documents.
* The Vice President for Campaigns to develop an informational booklet for member organisations to place in Freshers’ Packs/Orientation Packs with information on the political systems in Ireland.
* The USI President to ensure that political education workshops are run during SUT and/or SUT+ to provide incoming sabbatical officers with knowledge of the political landscape ahead of starting their terms in office. A separate training session should be run specifically for students’ union officers in the NUS-USI region.

## USI’s Political Engagement

As a lobbying organisation, USI engages in a tremendous amount of work with political parties, governmental departments and committees and other NGOs. However, for incoming officers to the Coiste Gnó, there is a lack of institutional knowledge on the work previously done by USI in the political landscape, as well as a significant amount of political administration that currently falls as the responsibility of the USI President. There is an expectation that the Coiste Gnó will enter into their roles with a significant level of knowledge of Ireland and Northern Ireland’s political systems and this is often not the case. As a result, the Campaigns Strategy Committee feel that there is a need for a full-time or part-time staff person with the responsibility for political engagement to ensure that the union’s lobbying work is accurately catalogued, to ensure that the Coiste Gnó are given contextual briefs ahead of lobbying actions, and to ensure that there is a continuation of USI’s political engagement work following the term changeover of the Coiste Gnó.

This staff person would:

* Work with the Vice President for Campaigns to develop and populate the votes.usi.ie site.
* Have the administrative responsibility for cataloguing USI’s submissions to governmental departments and open submission calls on legislation.
* Assist the USI Coiste Gnó in the formatting and writing of submissions.
* Have an in-depth knowledge of the USI Policy File to ensure that all submissions are in line with USI Policy.
* Catalogue and track all lobbying actions undertaken by USI, and submit all lobbying returns on behalf of the organisation.
* Create a monthly lobbying report outlining all of USI’s political engagements to be presented by the President at Comhairle Náisiúnta.
* Ensure that the USI President and Vice President for Campaigns are updated on developments in legislation affecting students.
* Work with the Vice President for Campaigns to assist in the development of materials for USI’s political education campaign, and ensure that the materials developed are factual and accurate.

This position paper mandates the USI President to establish the feasibility of developing a staff role with the responsibility for political engagement and education. The matter should be brought to the attention of the USI Governance Committee for review, and the results should be reported to Comhairle Náisiúnta.

In the event that the USI Governance Committee determines that it is not feasible to develop the outlined staff position, the above responsibilities should be delegated amongst the USI Coiste Gnó by the USI President. The delegation of responsibilities should be reported to Comhairle Náisiúnta.