

Voter registration toolkit

Getting students registered

This guide is designed to provide useful information to students' unions on voter registration, as well as how to get students registered and engaged for the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election.

What's it all about?

The 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election is currently set to take place in May 2016. **Students must be registered to vote by Monday 18th April 2016 to vote in this election.** Registering to vote allows students to have a say in who represents them in government. Together we represent around 200,000 students in Northern Ireland – this is a significant proportion of the electorate. Students can use their vote to put pressure on MLAs to address student concerns.

The 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election saw only 51.3 per cent of 18-22 year olds voting, compared to over two thirds of people aged 65 or older.* Not all students are young people but, when such a large proportion of our membership aren't voting, we need to take action.

In this election British, Irish, qualifying EU and Commonwealth students can all vote, meaning that European and some International students have a say too.

We know that politics has a massive impact on students' lives both in and out of

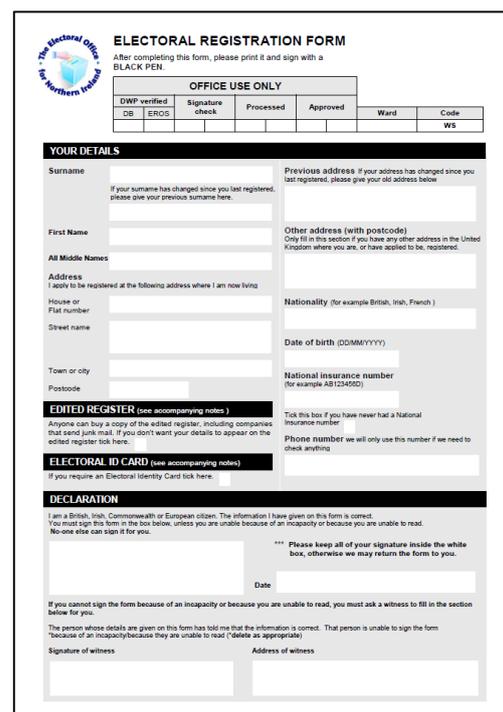
education. This is our chance to make sure that student issues are on the agenda in Stormont, as well as demonstrating that students here are a force to be reckoned with.

How does it work?

Each voter must be registered individually through filling out an electoral registration form.

Online registration for Northern Ireland is currently being developed, but will not be implemented until after the Assembly election.

It is useful to have an understanding of how the electoral system works in Northern Ireland when talking to students. Some may feel that 'politics' is too complicated, or does not



The Electoral Registration Form is a document for registering voters. It includes a header with the Northern Ireland Assembly logo and the title 'ELECTORAL REGISTRATION FORM'. Below the title, it says 'After completing this form, please print it and sign with a BLACK PEN'. There is a section for 'OFFICE USE ONLY' with columns for 'DWP verified', 'Signature check', 'Processed', 'Approved', 'Ward', and 'Code'. The main section is 'YOUR DETAILS' and contains fields for 'Surname', 'First Name', 'All Middle Names', 'Address', 'House or Flat number', 'Street name', 'Town or city', 'Postcode', 'Previous address', 'Other address (with postcode)', 'Nationally (for example British, Irish, French)', 'Date of birth (DDMMYYYY)', and 'National insurance number'. There are also sections for 'EDITED REGISTER', 'ELECTORAL ID CARD', and 'DECLARATION'. The declaration section includes a statement: 'I am a British, Irish, Commonwealth or European citizen. The information I have given on this form is correct. You must sign this form in the box below, unless you are unable because of an incapacity or because you are unable to read. No-one else can sign it for you.' There is a signature line and a date field. At the bottom, there are fields for 'Signature of witness' and 'Address of witness'.

*Report for the Electoral Reform Society, Northern Ireland 2011 Assembly Election and AV Referendum, Professor John Garry (QUB) – 2011 Northern Ireland Election Study

apply to them – it is useful to dispel these myths.

The Northern Ireland Assembly

The Assembly legislates in many key areas, including; education, employment and skills, health and social services, policing, housing, transport, economic development, local government, culture and sport, equal opportunities, and the environment. The Assembly has a huge say on matters that affect students: from how much you may pay for your education, to the bus you might take to class.

There are 108 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs), representing each of the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland.

Single transferable vote (STV)

The single transferable vote system is used to elect members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, European parliament and Local councils. These members can run as part of a political party, or as independent candidates.

Six candidates are elected for each constituency (electoral area), meaning that there is more representation in each constituency, compared to the 'first past the post' system in the UK general election. A voter can rank as many or as few candidates as they like or just vote for one candidate.

The Registration Process

Registering to vote can be as simple as filling out a form. Electoral forms can be downloaded and printed, as well as provided through the Electoral Office NI

(EONI). To register, students must provide:

- Name
- Date of birth
- Address
- National Insurance number
- Nationality
- Signature

Evidence of all the above details may be requested (if a student is British or Irish proof of nationality is not required).

Forms must be returned to an Electoral Office, by person or by post.

Electoral identity card

As well as registering, students can apply on the form for an Electoral Identity Card. This is a free photocard that can be used as ID at the polling station, and even accepted as a valid form of identification for some domestic flights.

Forms must be returned to an Electoral Office, by person or by post, alongside a colour, pass-port sized photo, with name and date of birth written on the back, as well as photographic identification (e.g. UK, Irish, EU or Commonwealth passport/driving licence). If a student lacks ID, they ask an MP, MEP, MLA or Councillor to complete a declaration and send it in with their form. The declaration can be found here:

<http://www.eoni.org.uk/Vote/Voting-systems-in-Northern-Ireland>.

Applications for the EIC may also be made in person at any area electoral office where a photograph will be taken for the card free of charge (students will need to bring ID, unless already on the register)

If somebody's electoral identity card has expired, it does not need to be renewed to vote at a polling station - identity documents produced at a polling station are no longer required to be current, as long as the photograph is still a good likeness.

Voting by post or proxy

Many students find that at election time they may have exam or coursework deadlines, making it difficult to return to their home constituency to vote. This can be easily overcome by registering for the postal vote, making voting as easy as sending a letter. To register for the postal vote, students must first be on the electoral register.

It is useful to advise students to tick the 'edited register' box, to avoid having their details published on the public register (which can be purchased by anyone, including companies that send junk mail)

The Campaign

Know your target and how to win them over

Voter registration campaigns need to be specific. With a campaign like this it can be easy to decide to target everyone. This can be unhelpful as you run the danger of your campaign becoming generic and almost impossible to measure.

It's also important that you have a way to check your progress. If you have no evidence of how many people are registering because of your campaign, it can lead to you repeating the same mistakes.

Pick specific groups and decide how you will target and inform them. For instance, many international students are unaware of their right to vote in the Assembly election.

Use all means at your disposal, targeting groups large and small. For instance, getting a student-wide email sent can be extremely effective, and when coupled with face-to-face conversations with students, this can really help to drive the message forward and get people engaged.

It's clear on social media that many students have strong opinions on the changes they would like to see socially and politically – let people know that through

registering to vote, they take the first step towards change.

Follow up with people

Once people have registered to vote, this shouldn't be the end of their journey. Make sure you collect contact details from them.

Now they are registered, they may be willing to help get others registered. You can use their contact details for your 'get out the vote' effort, emailing them where the polling station is etc.

Be creative

It may be easy to assume that everyone gets as fired up about voter registration as you do! However some people think it's boring admin and that voting is inconsequential. Adding some creativity to your campaign makes all the difference. For instance, in the past students' unions have constructed giant ballot boxes out of cardboard for students to submit their registration forms into; one even created an 'experience tunnel' with actors showing what a world would be like without democracy.

Make your campaign exciting! Get as many volunteers as possible: students, student officers, course reps, club and society members and staff can all make great volunteers.

1. Use social media! Put a banner on your union homepage, or lobby your institution to do so. Take part in co-ordinated social media activities with other unions and organisations (for instance on voter registration day). Share your events and the events of other members. Change your profile picture to let others know you have registered/voted and encourage others to do so. Through posting, blogging and tweeting, you can reach large numbers of students
2. Get as many clubs and societies as possible to join in. You could even run a registration varsity, encouraging all clubs to compete to see who can get the most students registered. A bit of healthy competition can go a long way. Whether it's kudos for winning or a prize incentive, getting clubs and societies talking about voter registration can really persuade students.
3. Do the students tend to live in a particular area? Think of where you'll find student halls: for instance the Holylands, Portstewart or Rosemount areas. Pay your students a visit, knock doors and bring information.
4. Help students find their constituency. This information can be found by using the tool on the electoral office website <http://www.eoni.org.uk/>.
5. Ask your institution. It's not just students' unions that need to be thinking about getting students registered. Put pressure on your institution to help.
6. Promote the campaign on campus by distributing leaflets, putting up posters or setting up a stand outside your halls of residence or union buildings. You can find posters here: <http://electoralcommission.org.uk/northernirelandresources>.
7. Get organised! Find students who are passionate about getting registered and set up an electoral registration society on campus.
8. Get staff on board. Talk with the staff at your institution and encourage them to spread the message.
9. Get in contact with your local trade union! They will have lots of activists who can come out on campus and their members may be able to promote the change during lectures or classes. Visit the NIC ICTU website (<http://www.ictuni.org/>) for information on trade unions in NI, as well as the NI branch of UCU (<http://www.ucu.org.uk/ni>).
10. Organise a press/stunt photo opportunity using a giant ballot box. Display it on campus or in town and invite the local press.
11. Set up an event in your students' union, or a local bar/café. This could be a battle of the bands style music night or a comedy night at your students' union with free entry for students who have registered their friends to vote.

12. Work with NUS-USI. Engage with us and our other members on social media: join our events: tell us about your plans, co-ordinate volunteers to help us get students registered.

13. Give out free stuff. It always helps.

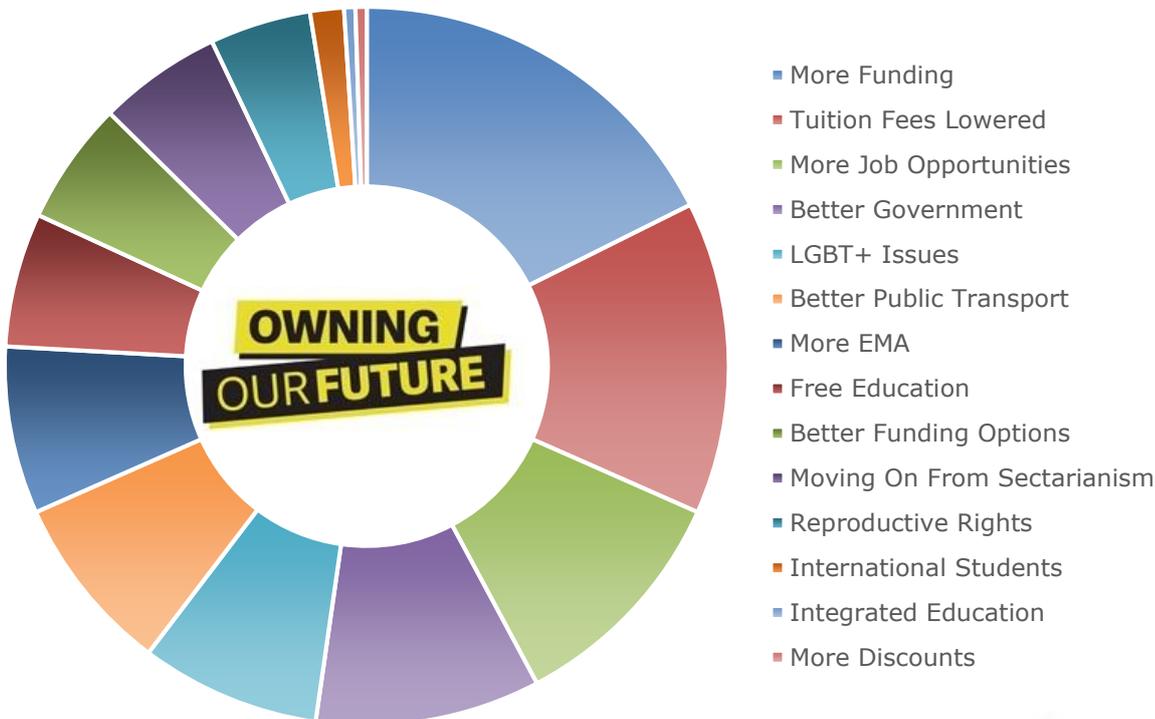
*Make sure you communicate with EU and international students. EU citizens, as well as citizens of Commonwealth countries are fully entitled to vote in the Assembly election – so for instance; if a student is from Spain they are entitled to vote based on their EU citizenship; and if a student is from Nigeria they are eligible as Commonwealth citizens. Check online for more information, and if you are unsure of a student’s eligibility, contact the Electoral Office.

Put voter registration in context

Ask students what they care about. People are passionate about issues from tackling poverty to promoting equal rights, creating fair access to education or ending sectarianism. Speak to people about what matters to them and get them fired up.

At NUS-USI we asked students in all colleges and university campuses what they thought would make Northern Ireland better for students. Most students picked one issue that was most important to them at that present time. From a sample taken we found that some of the main issues students in NI care about (amongst others) are:

Key student issues



“But I don’t like any of the political parties”

Remind people that you’re not there to convince them to vote for any party in particular. The choice is theirs to vote for a political party, an independent candidate, or to even spoil their ballot. Inaction allows politicians to assume you are complacent. Encourage people to act.

Use your vote

Registration is just one part of the journey and a good strategy is needed to get students using their vote.

Put reminders around campus of when the next elections or referendums are set to be. You might also want to host some debates on key issues in your local community to get them thinking about their vote.

The earlier you help to get students engaged with the upcoming election, the easier the ‘Get Out the Vote’ effort will be around election time.

Key dates:

- **1 February:**
 - o NUS-USI voter registration campervan of dream tour begins – Visiting SWC Omagh and SRC Armagh
- **2 February:**
 - o NUS-USI tour visit UU Coleraine and UU Magee
- **3 February:**
 - o NUS-USI tour visits SERC Downpatrick Re-freshers fair
- **4 February:**
 - o NUS-USI tour visits QUB (outside McClay library)
- **5 February:**
 - o NUS-USI tour visits BMC Titanic Quarter
 - o NUS-USI Owning Our Future student manifesto launch at BMC Titanic Quarter
 - o Voter registration day – events taking place across the UK & co-ordinated social media activity



- **15 March:**
 - o NUS-USI activist Training (Belfast) [All students welcome, for more information email us at info@nistudents.org]
- **5 April:**
 - o NUS-USI activist training (L/Derry)
- **May (exact date tbc): Northern Ireland Assembly election 2016**
 - o Postal vote applications must be returned no later than 14 working days before the date of the election

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Sources: NUS Voter Registration Toolkit, Electoral Commission Guide for Partners

