



# UL Engage Reports

2016, No. 4

## An Evaluation of the 'Limerick Be Heard' election project February 2016

D. Forde-Murray



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**UL Engage Reports**

2016, No. 4

An Evaluation of the 'Limerick Be Heard' election project\*

February 2016

D. Forde-Murray

UL Engage,  
University of Limerick,  
Limerick, Ireland  
[www.ul.ie/engage](http://www.ul.ie/engage)



# ABSTRACT



The *Limerick Be Heard* project was a community collaboration between Limerick Youth Service, Limerick Comhairle na Nóg, the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick and other local community interests. The project was designed to increase civic engagement and political participation in the context of the Spring 2016 Irish General Election through a series of informational and educational interventions designed to target different social groups, with particular attention to marginalized groups whose voices are less often heard in more mainstream electoral discussions and debates. In addition to the project's educational and informational activities, the project was responsible for the Limerick Election Study, comprising both pre and post election survey questionnaires administered to persons randomly selected from the Limerick City and County electoral register. A much shorter version of the survey was also administered to participants in the community workshops and #GE16 Flash-Debates, in order to gauge whether or not such interventions have any discernible impact on political engagement and voter intentions.



# INTRODUCTION

## INSPIRATION AND OPPORTUNITY

The 2015 Yes Equality Campaign energized voters and presented a very new model for political campaigning and active citizenship in Ireland. The tone of the campaign was deliberately open and conversational, designed to persuade and reassure voters and summed up by the campaign theme 'I'm Voting Yes, Ask Me Why?'. The result was a refreshingly different political campaign which, instead of the usual podium politics and political posturing, was intensely local and personal, staffed by 100s of gay and lesbian canvassers, supported by friends and families and floods of volunteers (Healy *et al*, 2016). It was, according to political analyst and commentator Noel Whelan 'the story of how the two pillar organizations for gay and lesbian rights, with some input from a handful of political and media specialists, built the most extensive and effective civic society campaign ever seen in Irish politics' (*Irish Times*, 25 May 2015). Aside from the passing of the marriage equality referendum with an unambiguous majority (62%), the Yes Equality campaign provided many lessons regarding the potential for a new positive style of political engagement. Just like the momentum created by the Scottish referendum (Devine, 2016), it seems that the Yes to Equality campaign was able to engage and connect with voters in ways that the traditional political parties had all but forgotten about. Many on the campaign found themselves newly politicized. It was, according to one local activist 'an example of a real grass roots movement that was facilitated by a centralized idea' and after the campaign, there was much talk about what issues 'the rainbow army' might contribute to next (Interview, Yes Equality Campaigner, 15 June 2015).

Less than twelve months later, the Irish General Election in February 2016 presented an opportunity to see how this positive political campaigning approach might work in the broader political context of a general election. The Limerick Be Heard project was an attempt to apply the lessons learned from the Yes Equality campaign and to harness this energy for a local campaign to increase the vote in Limerick. Additionally, the community partnership that constituted the Limerick Be Heard project afforded University of Limerick Politics and Practicum students the opportunity to contribute to the project as part of their academic curriculum.

As part of its contribution to this project, staff and students from the Department of Politics and Public Administration carried out a series of election related activities, including:

- Running the Which Candidate Voter Advice Application
- Maintaining the ElectionHub Ireland interactive website
- Facilitating seminars, workshops and a series of GE16*flashdebates* with local community groups
- Administering the Limerick Election Study - a randomized survey of issues and opinions in Limerick City and County.

Plus, an evaluation of the impact of these combined activities, which constitutes this report.

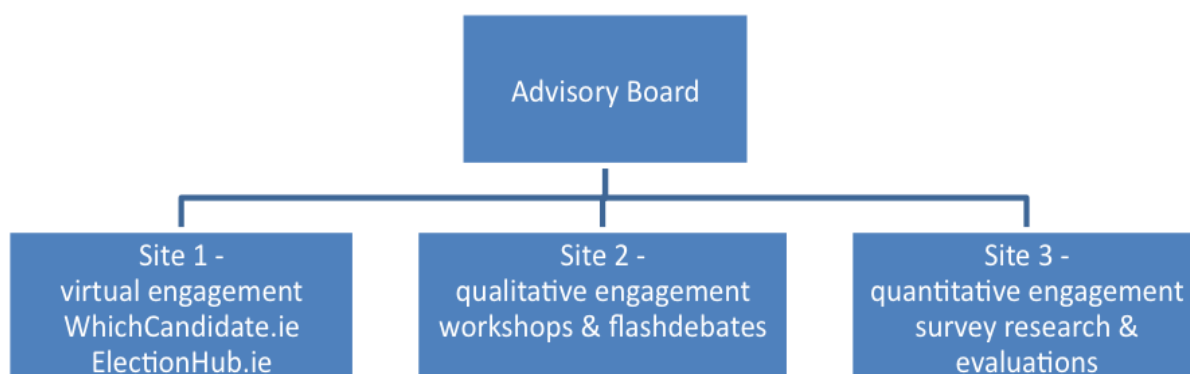
This Limerick Be Heard evaluation report is divided into three main parts, relating to the impact of the project on: the Community; Teaching and Learning; and Research. Each part provides an outline of what the project did, examples of engagement and an assessment of the outcomes and impact of each.



## PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

Limerick Be Heard was organized from the bottom up in a collaborative partnership. The project was overseen by an Advisory Board constituting representatives from the range of participating interests. The Advisory Board supported the work of this project by providing feedback, advice and ideas to the project participants. Community Evaluation of the project was designed into the project from start to finish. This was carried out by a final year dissertation student in part fulfilment for the UL Practicum M-graded module BR4103/BR4104 on the BA History Politics and Social Studies (HPSS).

**Fig 1: Organization and Structure for Implementation**



1. **Advisory Board** This group represented the organizations involved, with representation of the wider community, and acted as the oversight body for the project, providing a sense check for our activities and buy-in for the project.
2. **Sites of Engagement** Three areas of activity were chosen, with separate tasks and personnel attached to their activities.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The Limerick Be Heard project aimed to establish Limerick as the place where politics can be conducted differently – in a way that is inclusive, creative, subversive, diverse, respectful and even fun. The campaign was designed to contribute positively to personal and community capacity building to develop political understanding and citizen engagement.

*“Vote turnout is an indication that people think that they matter. It is one of those ways that you can tell that people think that their community matters, that they matter and that they have a voice to articulate that. Research shows that people who have a sense that they are involved with their community often experience better returns on social capital - in education, welfare and security. So one of the ways that we hope to contribute in this project, is by facilitating those voices to be heard, giving people a belief that their vote matters and that their opinion matters. Then there is a possibility for a spill over effect where people begin to see that they have a voice and they have some influence and so they should feel more empowered.”*

**Dr Maura Adshead, Department of Politics and Public Administration, UL**

## Organizing Principles and Objectives

Organized from the bottom up in a collaborative partnership. The principles agreed were that the Limerick Be Heard initiative:

- Would not advocate for any independent or party political candidacy.
- Would be inclusive and representative of all who wish to engage with this project
- Would seek to support diverse engagement from all walks of life, ages, backgrounds etc.
- Would be tolerant and respectful of differences of opinions and views.

## The Objectives

The objectives of the initiative were varied, reflecting the variety of interests that constituted the collaboration. These were to:

- establish the architecture of engagement that enables as many people as possible to participate in an inclusive, respectful dialogue, about the things that matter to them.
- develop Limerick as an innovative example for the rest of the country of doing politics differently.
- create a model of political engagement where citizens feel confident and comfortable to have their say about what matters to them.
- provide the identified supports and resources necessary to help implement this model.
- respond to identified needs of community groups and organizations who wish to strengthen their capacity to make politics responsive and inclusive to ordinary citizens.
- provide educational experiences for students across the educational spectrum to develop civic responsibility, communication to operate as citizens of the future.
- provide research outputs associated with project activities.

# COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The Limerick Be Heard project comprised a number of public education activities focused on the General Election, including: the Which Candidate Voter Advice Application (VAA), a short online quiz matching voter values with candidates' values on a range of issues; the ElectionHub.ie website, providing information on the geographical boundaries of the 40 Dáil constituencies, the candidates running, and a summary of related news and poll materials for the constituency; plus a series of facilitated workshops which included #GE16 Flash-Debates, designed to start conversations in communities about how and why voting might impact upon the people of Limerick.

In addition, the project afforded numerous opportunities for public education via media commentary about the election and associated issues in local, national and international print media, TV and radio. The outcomes and impact of each of these activities are described below.

## WhichCandidate.ie

Whichcandidate.ie is a Voter Advice App (VAA) that matches you to the General Election candidate in your constituency who best represents your views based on responses to a questionnaire. The aim is to encourage people to consider candidate's positions on issues when deciding how they will vote. Visit: [www.whichcandidate.ie](http://www.whichcandidate.ie)

WhichCandidate.ie is not associated with any political party or election candidate. It is run by academic staff and researchers at the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick, supported by funding from the Irish Research Council.

The political survey that forms the basis of WhichCandidate.ie is focussed on a set of relevant policy issues selected by the research team in advance of the election. Election candidates are contacted to complete a questionnaire on these issues. Each participating candidate is given a public profile on the website, incorporating their answers to the questionnaire. Voters who visit the website are asked the same set of questions, and their answers are compared with the answers of the candidates.

*"For those who aren't familiar with the parties and haven't done a huge amount of research, I think it's a good way to get a sense of where they stand relative to the candidates. If they don't have a huge amount of information already, WhichCandidate offers voters an informed and easy way to make up their mind."* **Rory Costello, Director of WhichCandidate.ie**

Following completion of the questionnaire, WhichCandidate users are presented with a customised results page containing a ranking of election candidates according to the degree to which their views correspond to the user's and how closely their answers to the questionnaire match. This ranking of candidates according to the degree to which they share opinions with the user, facilitates a clear explanation of the single transferable vote system of proportional representation that is explained in the election workshops and seminars.

*"So once they've done the WhichCandidate.ie site and gone through it and have been presented with results they can see who they're matched with, who agree with and who they disagree with"*

**Rory Costello, Director of WhichCandidate.ie**

The WhichCandidate.ie voting application proved to be a popular aid for the General Election 2016 in terms of providing important, accessible knowledge to the public and gathered a great amount of positive feedback.

*"Great Information and a great help."* **Marisa Kennedy, Twitter**

*"I've chosen the order of my preference votes thanks to WhichCandidate.ie. It is a great idea and well implemented."* **Mark Tighe, Twitter**

*"Rather than the Leaders Debate, here's a policy based way to pick who to vote for in the election."*

**Naomi O'Leary, Twitter**

*"A very useful tool."* **Gerald Mitchell, Twitter**

*"Thank you WhichCandidate.ie for providing the exact service I've been expressing a need for, for years."* **Aoife, Twitter**

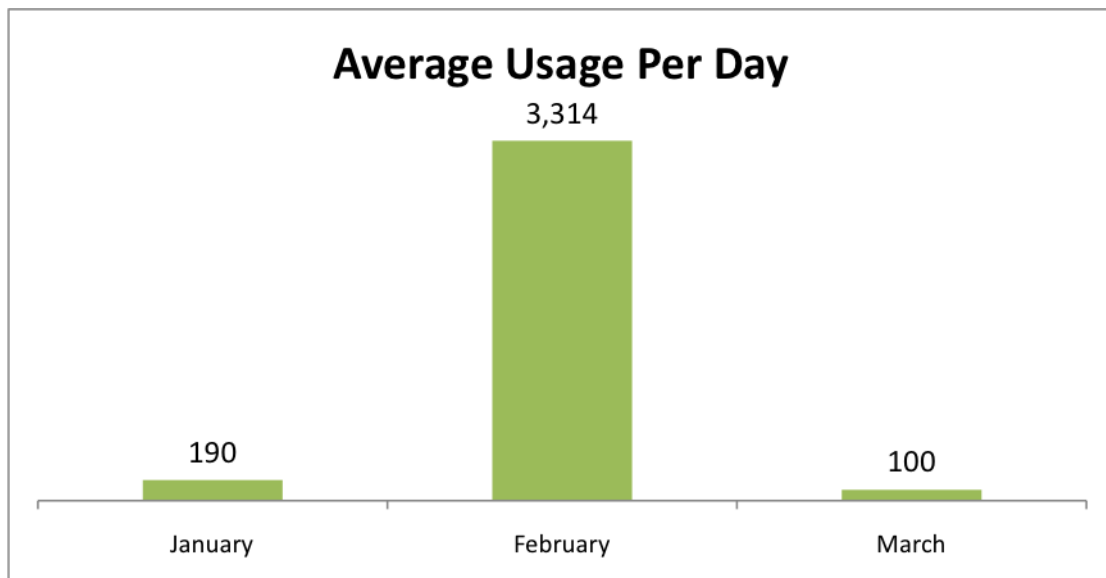
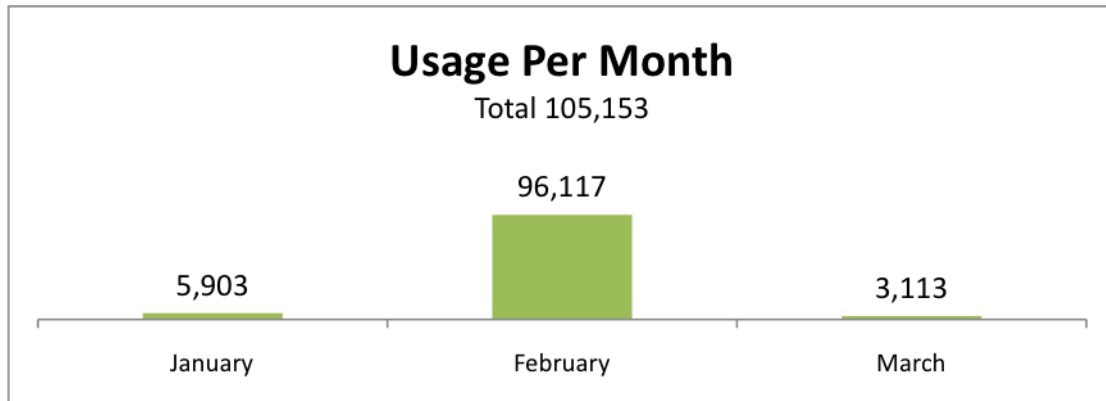
*"Nice work here. Best candidate selector with questions on point. Informed my choices."*

**Matt Twomey, Twitter**

*"Provides easy access for anyone undecided or feeling flaky."* **Emily Logan, Twitter**

*"Happy with my WhichCandidate.ie results. Puts me right where I belong."* **Adam Hurley, Twitter**

The following statistics show the usage and success of the WhichCandidate.ie website:



### The Election Hub

In June 2012, the Constituency Commission proposed changes to the constituency map of Ireland, reducing the total number of TDs from 166 to 158 and the total number of constituencies from 43 to 40. The Electoral (Amendment) (Dáil Constituencies) Act 2013 provided for the implementation of the changes. The ElectionHub.ie website provides detailed information on the new geographical boundaries, plus information on the candidates standing for election and other constituency news. The curatorship of the web was passed over to the Department of Politics and Public Administration when it became too big to manage for the independent group of volunteers who had established it. This site can be accessed at [www.electionhubireland.com/](http://www.electionhubireland.com/)

*“It’s a simple website, the design came originally from Carol Coleman RTE: you can click on each constituency, it gives you the map of the constituency, it will show you constituency changes, plus a list of candidates - which we confirmed that those candidates were actually running and added in any new ones. We put in the WhichCandidate.ie link so that you can immediately go and check where they stand on issues, and we also put in candidates’, webpages, Facebook pages etc. so you can access more information.”* **Diarmuid Scully, Department of Politics and Public Administration**

The website is set up so users can view their constituencies and find out the following information:

- Outline of constituency map including boundary changes since 2012.
- Colour-coded icons indicating parties currently holding seats.
- Short geographical profile of constituency.
- List of potential candidates for the general election with those declared, or selected and updated as these positions change
- Election Hub’s prediction based on latest published opinion polls and local knowledge gleaned from local party activists, candidates and journalists.
- Short analysis on each constituency.
- Twitter, Facebook or website links for sitting TDs and candidates.
- Links to political parties and other election sites that provide results of previous elections.
- The site focuses only on the upcoming general election. For previous election results we provide links to other sites.

*“We added in the predictions from the Irish Times, the Irish Independent, NewsTalk. We also gave the bookies odds and connections to various local media. We also added a summary analysis of what we think is going to happen. So the student has gone out, read through all the predictions, talked to local and national journalists, got their take on it and come back with a prediction.”*

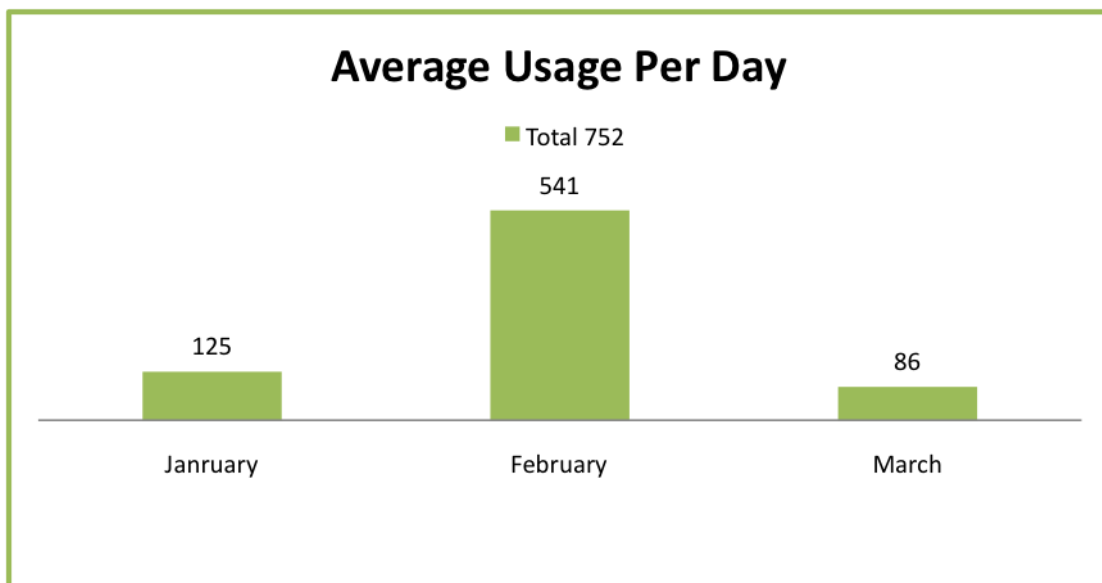
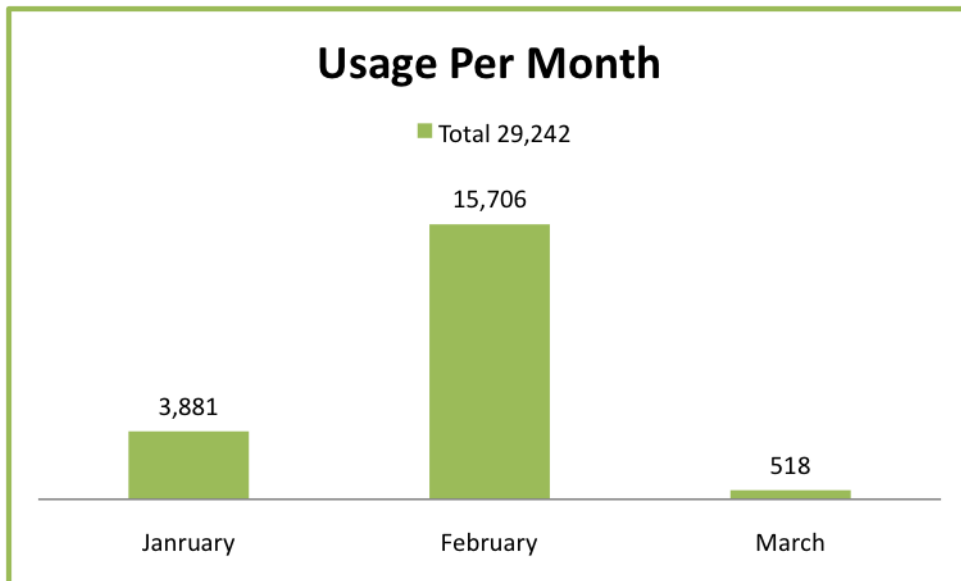
**Diarmuid Scully, Department of Politics and Public Administration**

There are no personal or political views expressed on this site. Any statements/predictions are based on an unbiased and informed assessment of available election surveys and opinion polls.

The following statistics show the usage and success of the Election Hub’s Twitter page:

	Followers	Mentions	Profile visits	Tweet	Tweets
<b>Numbers</b>	623	108	<b>1,661</b>	<b>56,400</b>	<b>256</b>
<b>Growth in</b>	<b>^55</b>	<b>^641.4%</b>	<b>^130.4%</b>	<b>^1,634.4%</b>	<b>^1.180.0%</b>

The following statistics show the usage and success of the Election Hub website:



*"We went live 10 days ago and have received 20,800 unique hits since, so it's having an impact and particularly when you look at the people who are even following us on twitter: it's political journalists, correspondents, TDs, candidates. So the site is having an impact in a target rich environment - at about 400 people - but they are quite key and the number of impressions through twitter is up around the 80,000 mark now. So we're quite pleased in the way that's gone."*

**Diarmuid Scully, Department of Politics and Public Administration**

## #GE16 Flash-Debates and workshops

The #GE16 Flash-Debates were designed to be a fun, interactive workshop that can be delivered in 40 minutes for groups of 6 or more. Beginning with a quick (and fun) politics quiz to explore 100 years of ideas and idealism in Irish society, the intention was to ensure the participants felt at ease and in a 'safe and non-judgemental space' to talk about about politics. Much of the initial discussion centred around teasing out what might be considered 'political' and participants were encouraged to see how the ordinary daily struggles they contend with are just as much political issues as are the 'high politics' of foreign relations and national budgets. Following a short discussion, participants were invited to engage in a brief 'mission and vision' exercise by answering for themselves the following questions:

What are the most important things in your life?

What are the things that upset you the most?

What would you like to change?

If the government listened to you, what would you tell them to do?

The intention of this part of the workshop was for participants to begin to develop connections between their personal interests and agenda and those offered by election candidates and political parties. This part of the session was encouraged with group work and activities focused around topics chosen from the Which Candidate politics quiz, enabling participants to see connections between their own interests and those standing for election.

The centre piece of the workshop is a mock election, enabling participants to fill out ballot papers and trace the electoral process – from the identification of the constituency quota, through the vote transfers, to the assigning of seats – facilitated by the information participants gained using the Which Candidate VAA.

The ballot papers used in the mock election were made up using relevant local candidate information and designed to look as close as possible to a real ballot paper

The aim was to demonstrate in an informal and friendly way, how the Irish electoral system works and the significance of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) transfer system.

Throughout the count various aspects of the Irish STV Proportional Representation system were illustrated, in relation to vote transfers, strategies to support favoured candidates and the potential of transfer votes to send clear 'electoral messages' and preferences.

Common errors such as spoiled votes were explained and illustrated by the count.

*"So they are asked to fill out a ballot paper, rank ordering the candidates, from the results of whichcandidate.ie and then they are shown how the electoral system works and how the votes are counted, which is a fairly complicated process in Ireland with the single transferable vote. The practical demonstration of it I think will certainly open people's eyes to how it all works."*

**Rory Costello, Director of WhichCandidate.ie**



Shifts in quota were explained as the count proceeded and the influence of lower order preferences was demonstrated in the count.

The final part of the workshop looked at a range of election results and assessed the capacity that communities and individuals have to influence the outcome.

The workshops were non-party and non-candidate affiliated and did not espouse any political agenda. The overall aim of the #GE16 Flash-Debate is to provide information on Irish politics with specific references to the General Election 2016 and the Irish electoral system to stimulate discussion and facilitate citizens' engagement with the political system.

In all, 13 community #GE16 Flash-Debates were held in various locations with a variety of local voter groups including new Irish citizens, community groups, youth groups, women's groups and students and staff from the University of Limerick. The feedback from these sessions was overwhelmingly positive.

*"The debate was very informative and the interaction of students was an excellent idea"*  
**Staff Member, University of Limerick**

*"The format was very useful in understanding how the transfer of votes actually works"*  
**Staff Member, University of Limerick**

*"Loved the idea of doing the election on a small scale to illustrate how Proportional Representation works, I also thought it was a great idea to start it off by asking people what it was that really mattered to them, as opposed to asking them something more strictly politics-based."*  
**Staff Member, University of Limerick**

*"It was very helpful (especially for someone who had very little knowledge). It was very interesting as we got to learn about the views of particular candidates rather than just the overall views of parties. I really learned a lot by going."* **Staff Member, University of Limerick**

*"I found the debate extremely helpful and I gained a lot of knowledge in terms of the voting system which I would not have been aware of. So many thanks to all involved."*  
**Staff Member, University of Limerick**

*The flash debate was excellent. It was really informative and thought provoking in highlighting areas when I know I tend not think of in terms of strategically thinking. [-] The methodology used and the inclusive and participative nature of the workshop was very good. It would have been a bonus to be able to ask more questions at the end. Thank you so much for this, it was really worthwhile going and I am sorry I missed the start.* **Staff Member, University of Limerick**

Community workshops and #GE16 Flash-Debates were also held with local youth and community groups.

*"I thought today was great fun and interesting, I learned that every vote counts even if it's not your first choice."* **Craig Duhig, Limerick Youth Service**

*"Today was a good day and I enjoyed it and the people were very nice."*  
Megan Connolly, Limerick Youth Service

*"It was great and I learned more stuff about voting and it made me change my mind about voting."*  
**Lisa Naughton, Limerick Youth Service**

*"I learned that every vote matters to every party"* **Aaron Hayes, Limerick Youth Service**

*"I found it was very interesting, they were lovely people, and would love if they came again."*  
**Kelsey O'Callaghan, Limerick Youth Service**

*"It was good I liked it."* **Saule Kliucinskaite, Limerick Youth Service**

*"I learned that every vote matters to every party."* **Donal McNamara, Limerick Youth Service**

Similar workshops were also carried out with local immigrant groups, where a local Garda attended to sign off on electoral registration forms. 123 new citizen voters in Limerick were registered.

*"Sincere thanks for coming to us on Sunday. Happy to report the trend for registration has continued and we've had a huge participation rate over last few days, just in time for deadline this evening. I'm sure the workshop and information contributed to that so thanks again. Feedback was really positive among our service-users and staff alike. The crowd on Sunday were such a mixed group that it can be hard to pitch the right level. I appreciated the fact that you didn't 'dumb' down the tone of the presentation, which people often do with our target audience and can be considered to be a little patronising. Some of the content may have been a little lost on people who didn't have high levels of English but again the mixed crowd meant that language could not have been easily addressed. The STV and mock election was fantastic and people really benefitted from it, myself included. Overall extremely informative and facilitated really well. The group you brought along with you were all very nice and respectful, understanding towards our clients and we really appreciate that."* **Aideen Roche, DORAS Luimni**

*“The people who need the encouragement to participate are those who are least likely to get that kind of encouragement. So something like Limerick Lets Be Heard is fantastic in that it will target people directly irrespective of their let’s say social class or where they live and will encourage them to vote and explain to them what it’s all about. “*

**Dr Rory Costello, WhichCandidate.ie, Department of Politics and Public Administration, UL**

**Table 1: Limerick Be Heard #GE16 Flash-Debates, workshops and seminars**

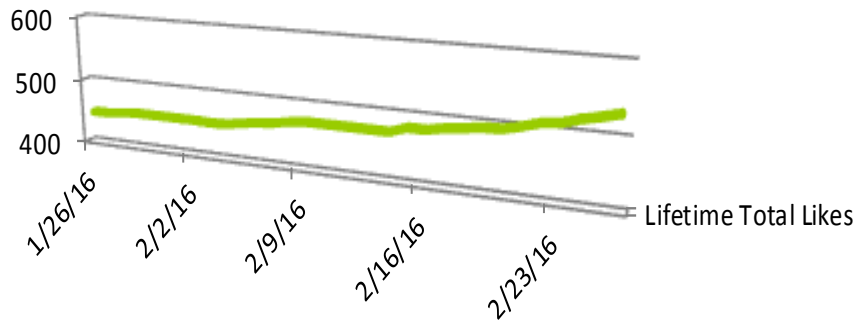
Date	Workshop	Participants	Venue
14/Nov/15	#GE16 Flash-Debate	Yoruba	Community Cork
04/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate	PO4013	University of Limerick
07/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate	Doras Luimni	Limerick City
11/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate (2 groups)	Limerick Youth Service	Limerick Youth Service
17/Feb/16	Election Talk	ROSA	Peri Hotel
18/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate (2 groups)	Comhairle na nOg/ Limerick Youth Service	The Burren Outdoor Adventure Centre
16/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate	Paul Partnership	Limerick City
22/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate	UL Students	University of Limerick
23/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate	Castleconnell Womens Group	Castleconnell
24/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate	UL Staff	University of Limerick
25/Feb/16	#GE16 Flash-Debate	Lava Javas Youth Cafe	Limerick City

### Departmental Profile

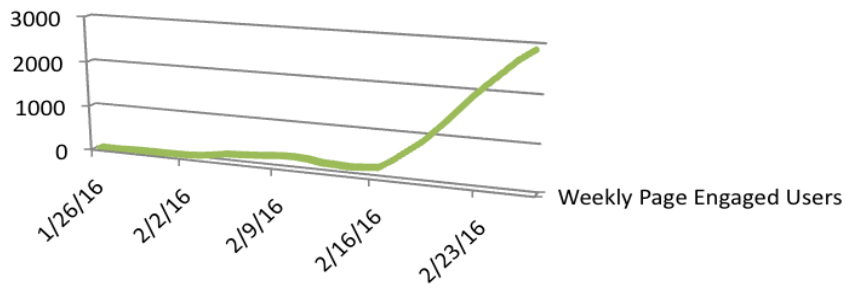
The Department of Politics and Public Administration in the University of Limerick was heavily involved in the creation and the promotion of all resources used in the Limerick Be Heard project including the ElectionHub.ie, WhichCandidate.ie and the #GE16 Flash-Debates which had a significant impact on the exposure of the department its self.

The Following statistics show the increase in usage of the Department of Politics and Public Administration UL Facebook page:

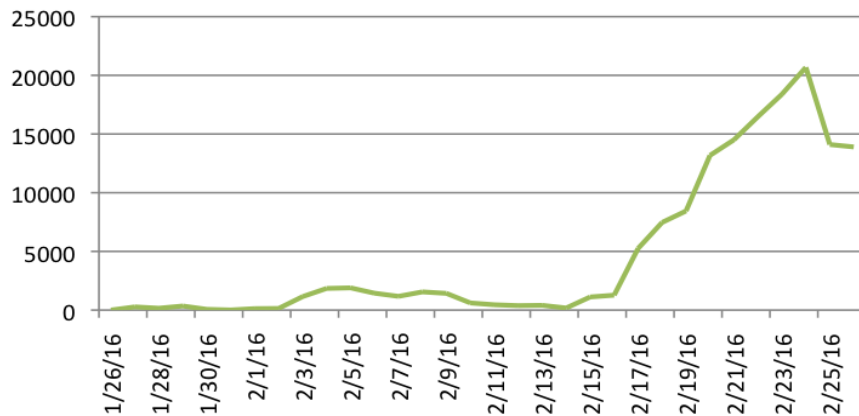
### Lifetime DPPA FB Page Total Likes



### Weekly DPPA FB Page Engaged Users



### Daily Total Reach of PPA FB Page



## Local & National Media

Additionally, the project created local and national media opportunities for Department of Politics and Public Administration staff.

DATE	GIG	PARTICIPANT	TOPIC
20/Nov/15	Limerick Live 95FM	Maura Adshead, PPA, John Real, LYS, David Boyce, Comhairle na nOg	Meet your candidates, LYS sponsored event
04/Feb/16	Limerick Live 95FM	Maura Adshead, PPA	The General Election 2016,
23/Feb/16	Limerick Live 95FM	Maura Adshead, PPA	The General Election 2016
23/Feb/16	BBC Radio 4, The	Maura Adshead, PPA	Limerick Be Heard #GE16 Flash Debate
05/01/16	RTE Drivetime	Rory Costello, PPA	Election pledges
22/01/16	RTE Drivetime	Rory Costello, PPA	WhichCandidate
07/02/16	Limerick 95FM	Maura Adshead, PPA	Limerick Be Heard and general election
4/Jan/16	RTE radio (Drivetime)	Rory Costello	Election manifestos
9/Jan/16	Irish Times	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
21/Jan/16	RTE television	Rory Costello	General election 2016 (Limerick
22/Jan/16	RTE radio (Drivetime)	Rory Costello	Election manifestos
27/Jan/16	SouthEast Radio	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
5/Feb/16	Irish Times	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
8/Feb/16	Irish Times	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
9/Feb/16	Limerick Live95FM	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
11/Feb/16	Limerick Leader	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
11/Feb/16	Connacht Tribune	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
12/Feb/16	Donegal Democrat	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
16/Feb/16	Clare FM	Rory Costello	Election debate
18/Feb/16	Radio Kerry	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
22/Feb/16	Evening Echo	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
24/Feb/16	Irish Times	Rory Costello	Election pledges
25/Feb/16	BBC World Service	Rory Costello	General Election
25/Feb/16	SouthEast Radio	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
25/Feb/16	Limerick Leader	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
25/Feb/16	Irish Times	Rory Costello	WhichCandidate.ie
27/Feb/16	RTE Radio	Rory Costello	General Election count
28/Feb/16	RTE Week in Politics	Maura Adshead	General Election
06/Mar/16	RTE Week in Politics	Maura Adshead	General Election

## LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

The Limerick Be Heard project provided a number of teaching and learning opportunities for students in the University of Limerick and also for those taking courses with Limerick Youth Service. In the University of Limerick, the project provided a problem-based learning (PBL) opportunity for students taking modules in: Irish Politics (PO4013) Journalism & New Media (LM039) UL Practicum students (BR4104) and two Final Year Project students.

### Irish Politics (PO4013)

Teaching politics and public policy to students in a way that is engaging, interesting, informative, and capable of building a range of competencies among students presents an on-going challenge (McInerney and Adshead, 2013). To achieve a higher level of student competency as ‘critical political thinkers’, Gorham (2005: 346) suggests that political thinking is most likely to occur ‘where the classroom experience itself is integrated into service-learning as a public space’. This approach to teaching politics reflects Stoker’s (2006) exhortation that we should stop talking about politics and instead create more opportunities to practice it. This is the rationale underpinning the second year module in Irish Politics (PO4013). This course is designed to build on and develop the knowledge gained in earlier politics modules by examining the political culture and behavior Ireland in more depth through some form of engaged or experiential learning.

The course takes a Problem Based Learning (PBL) approach, which in Spring 2016 used the General Election and Limerick Be Heard election activities as a key learning opportunity. Students were offered a choice from a selection of practical tasks and exercises associated with the project. These included, for example: curating the ElectionHub.ie website and carrying out associated research; administering pre and/or post election survey questionnaires as part of the Limerick Election Study; co-facilitating #GE16 Flash-Debates and/or other election workshops.

*“For the last number of years we have done it as a PBL module, in other words we give them a practical problem to solve, so we’re always looking for something that they could sink their teeth into and the election seemed to be the obvious one.”* **Diarmuid Scully, PO4013 Lecturer**

PBL involves ‘a problem, question or project as the focus of the environment accompanied by different interpretative/intellectual support systems’ (Jonassen 1999).

*“The intention is that they write a reflective essay... and incorporate what they’re learning from the lectures (the theory), to what they’re seeing in practice.”* **Diarmuid Scully, PO4013 Lecturer**

Problem based learning objectives in political science have diverse dimensions in terms of student learning, some of which include: developing an interest in politics (Bennett, 1997; Mann, 1999); learning how to participate and deliberate in the political world (Gutmann, 1987); learning how to listen politically (Bickford, 1996) and judge the political world as intelligent performers (Steinberger, 1993) and thoughtful spectators (Arendt, 1982; Kant, 2000). Student testimonials suggest that the Limerick Be Heard project facilitated this kind of learning.

### Developing an interest in politics

*"I like this module, it is interesting so far and before this module I didn't have much knowledge or interest in politics and it has certainly spiked my interest in Irish politics, especially the upcoming election."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I find it quite interesting."* **PO4013 Student**

*"Very interesting, especially with the General Election coming up."* **PO4013 Student**

*"The module is different in its approach, it's more interactive, making it easier to pay attention to what is being taught, it's a lot more hands on than others."* **PO4013 Student**

*"It's interesting and has gotten me more interested in politics and voting. "* **PO4013 Student**

*"The module is surprisingly enjoyable. I had little interest in politics prior to this but I am far more interested now."* **PO4013 Student**

### Learning how to participate and deliberate in the political world

*"I am enjoying this module. It's nice to focus on the Irish political system that will directly affect us, to try and understand it and I really enjoy the practical side."* **PO4013 Student**

*"It's helping to develop my political stance."* **PO4013 Student**

*"My favourite aspect of the module is learning things we will actually use in life."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I have developed citizen skills in terms of knowledge on voting."* **PO4013 Student**

*"So far I like this module, it seems to be more hands on than any of the other modules and it's a bit more suited to real life."* **PO4013 Student**

### Learning how to listen politically

*"I have developed more social skills through the survey work in Castletroy as I had to engage with strangers and ask them questions."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I am gaining a further understanding of the political system."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I like that I'm learning more about how to pick a candidate."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I am learning that everybody's opinion is different and you have to accept that."* **PO4013 Student**

### Learning to judge the political world as intelligent performers and thoughtful spectators

*"I have gained a more in depth knowledge of the General Election and how the electoral system works which I think is very important for all citizens."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I have learned the importance of individual votes in the election."* **PO4013 Student**

*"As an American, my favourite aspect of the module is understanding Irish politics and comparing it to American politics."* **PO4013 Student**

The learning environment provided by the Limerick Be Heard project and associated activities, enabled Politics teaching staff to supplement familiar university class room based teaching with an off-campus 'living curriculum'. This enabled students to experience politics as praxis, using the project to explore the ways and means by which politicians and citizens engage with each other and the manner in which the priorities of citizens are translated into policy through the medium of elections.

*"So the basis of Limerick Be Heard is responding to requests directly from the community, from various groups to explain the electoral system, explain how it works and to engage people in terms of debate and discussion and a fun way around the issues and I think it's going very well and a number of my students are working on that."* **Diarmuid Scully, PO4013 Lecturer**



Essentially the module used three main resources of the Limerick Be Heard project: the Election Hub; the #GE16 Flash Debates; and the Limerick Election Study. Students were offered a choice regarding which of the project's activities they elected to support.

### **ElectionHub.ie**

For this activity, students were assigned a constituency and requested to 'go explore', by talking to local journalists and people on the ground, coming back with an assessment of what was happening. Students were then encouraged to compare their own assessments with those offered by the major broadsheets and news organizations such as the *Irish Times*, *Irish Independent*, *Newstalk* and RTE. Each constituency area was covered in the site, with students providing summaries of the news and opinion polls, combined with local information and commentary. Each constituency site also included a space for analysis, commentary, and for those students who were willing – a prediction of the likely election outcome in that area.

*"I really enjoy working on the electionhubireland.com website and researching the upcoming election."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I am working on the website. I have enjoyed organising the different information on candidates and their parties."* **PO4013 Student**

*"My favourite aspect of the module is being involved in the election hub."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I like the involvement of practical work like the election hub website"* **PO4013 Student**

*"like the election hub as a group project"* **PO4013 Student**

### **#GE16 Flash Debates**

The #GE16 Flash Debates provided another opportunity for students to develop practical skills in presentation and facilitation.

*"The Flash Debates are a direct intervention with various communities, helping to give people knowledge and information that will help them come to their own decisions."*  
**Diarmuid Scully, PO4013 Lecturer**

*"Interesting, fun, learning information that is useful in everyday life."* **PO4013 Student**

*"The flash debates were engaging and worthwhile, giving a sense of how things are actually done in the political system."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I enjoy the flash debate, it was different from the lectures."* **PO4013 Student**

*"The flash debate make the learning much more fun."* **PO4013 Student**

*"They make the module more interesting and keep me intrigued, I feel I'm learning a lot through the flash debates."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I think they are a much better way of learning. I loved the mock election, seeing for myself how the Irish electoral system works."* **PO4013 Student**

*"Makes learning about government easier."* **PO4013 Student**

*"I am working on the website. I have enjoyed organising the different information on candidates and their parties."* **PO4013 Student**

### **Limerick Election Study**

The Limerick Election Survey comprised 200 pre-election and 200 post-election survey questionnaires administered by teams of students (accompanied by staff), to persons randomly selected from the Limerick City and County electoral register. Students were encouraged to use this experience as a means of developing their political understanding, relating all of this practical information to more theoretical political concepts like voter cleavages, party alignment and re-alignment etc.

*"So for instance on the election survey you'll be looking at things like, if you're going into different areas are you getting different levels of response...? Which demographic groups use the internet more? Where are newspapers bought? Which socio economic groups and what age groups are more satisfied or dissatisfied with the government's performance?"* **Diarmuid Scully, PO4013 Lecturer**

*"I have developed more social skills through the survey work in Castletroy as I had to engage with strangers and ask them questions."* **PO4013 Student**

*"My favourite aspect of the module is the election surveys"* **PO4013 Student**

*"I like getting out and about, finding out people's reactions about the upcoming election."* **PO4013 Student**

*"My favourite part of the module is the election survey"* **PO4013 Student**

### Journalism and New Media (LM039)

In autumn 2015, MA Journalism students taking the Broadcast Journalism module were offered a selection of UL Practicum projects, including 'Limerick Be Heard', to use as material for preparation of a podcast for radio. This enabled students of this module to gain practical experience, but also provided an opportunity to introduce them to the 'political media'. Their podcast also provided a useful output for the Limerick Be Heard Project which has helped promote the project. The podcast can be accessed at: [www.ul.ie/engage/resources-to-listen/24](http://www.ul.ie/engage/resources-to-listen/24)

*"I'm pleased with the final podcasts [-] and would be very interested in doing it again next. I am definitely in favour of integrating a project like this into that module every year. In fact, I'd be interested in expanding it to the second years also, if we had enough projects for them to work on."*

**Dr. Fergal Quinn, Lecturer in Journalism, School of Culture and Communication, UL**

In spring 2016, students from the BA Journalism taking the module in Irish politics, were given the opportunity to curate the ElectionHubIreland.com website providing various information on candidates standing in the General Election 2016 and predictions of the results of the election after considerable liaising with various forms of media, journalists and political analysts.

*"It has actually been very useful because about half the class are journalism students and particularly Journalism & New Media, so it really ticked all the boxes."*

**Diarmuid Scully, PO4013 Lecturer**

*"I enjoy the election hub section because it's really beneficial to my course."* **BA Journalism Student**

### Final Year Project Student (BR4103/BR40104)

As the Limerick Be Heard project required an evaluation report to be conducted, this provided the opportunity for a final year BA History, Politics, Sociology and Social Studies student to create a Final Year Project (FYP) on the evaluation of Limerick Lets Be Heard. As the FYP was part practicum, part write up, the student was involved with the project from its initial planning stages in Autumn 2015 to the final delivery in Spring 2016 and subsequent analysis.

*I chose to base my FYP on Limerick Be Heard as it would allow me to use and acquire not only academic skills but also employability skills. Being an Arts, Humanities and Social Science student, I do not have a vocational field that I can immediately enter upon graduation and often further study is encouraged. Being part of the Limerick Be Heard project allowed me to gain experience in 'doing politics'. The initial stages of the project included many meetings with various collaborators from around Limerick and the University which exposed the difficulties of starting an initiative as such but also the benefits of including different parts of the community to produce a more comprehensive project.* **Dubheasa Forde, Final Year Project student**

*“As a politics student, I already had a deep interest in the subject however being able to partake in the organisation of such a project and be a helper and participant at events held by Limerick Be Heard, allowed me to practice my interests in politics which inevitably added significantly to my fascination with this topic and expanded my knowledge greatly.*

*The written requirement of my FYP was an evaluation report of the Limerick Be Heard project. This required a considerable amount of liaising with collaborators, participants, fellow students, organiser and university staff. This included interviews, surveys, gathering of information and statistics which challenged and greatly improved my interview, transcribing, data collection and data analysis skills. The actual writing of the report itself involved all Microsoft Office applications, which provided me with new skill sets.*

*My overall experience with Limerick Be Heard has been overwhelmingly positive. I feel I have gained a poignant insight into community development, I have learned many valuable skills and furthered my passion for politics and civic engagement.”*

**Dubheasa Forde, Final Year Project student**

### **UL Practicum Students (BR4014)**

The UL Practicum provides curriculum based accredited learning that deploys academic expertise in response to identified community needs, in the context of applied community projects, designed and implemented by collaborative teams comprising of UL staff, community partners and students.

The UL Practicum is conceived of as mechanism by which staff and students across all of the university (ie in cross-disciplinary teams and projects) may: engage with practical problems; build the core values of the institution; communicate the relevance of university research; and transform learning. Details of the UL Practicum can be accessed at: [www.ul.ie/engage/node/53](http://www.ul.ie/engage/node/53)

In Autumn 2015, one Junior Year Abroad (JYA) completed a UL Practicum and was involved in the set up and administration of the LBH project.

*“ In essence, I think that what has been accomplished by this eclectic group of academics and youth group social workers is both incredibly important, and really commendable. While there were times that I questioned whether or not we’d manage to succeed or move past the confines of a board room discussion, there has been a noticeable and measurable success that I was happy to be a part of crafting in some small way.”*

**Donovan Hyland, JYA student, UL Practicum Autumn 2015**

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In Spring 2016, the Limerick Be Heard project formed the basis for a UL Practicum for 11 Junior Year Abroad students from the US. Four students were seconded from the US Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP) in the University of Minnesota. The remaining seven took the module as an optional elective.

*“Just interacting with the different groups, with surveys and flash debates, was really helpful with developing my awareness of diverse people and multiple realities.”*

**UL Practicum student, May 2016**

*“I believe this Practicum can improve my explanatory skills. I need to break information down into even simpler terms and understand that my perspectives are not the only one.”*

**UL Practicum student, May 2016**

*“I believe the Practicum can improve my communication skills and build my confidence in public speaking.”*

**UL Practicum student, May 2016**

*“I believe this Practicum offers a great opportunity for teamwork and collaboration. As a part of it, my skills in this respect have grown tremendously.”*

**UL Practicum student, May 2016**

# LIMERICK BE HEARD RESEARCH

At a practical level, the Limerick Be Heard project was designed to increase civic engagement and political participation in the context of the spring 2016 Irish General Election. Research indicates that higher voter turn-out correlates with other positive social capital indicators, which are important indicators for health and well-being. This project was interested in contributing to positive political engagement and education, with a view to combatting citizens' feelings of isolation and exclusion from the political process, and from politics more generally as a form of active civic engagement.

In terms of research, the Limerick Be Heard project afforded a number of opportunities to develop research on political parties, election analysis and voting behaviour in Ireland for staff, and graduate students in the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick, as well as for international exchange students from the University of Minnesota's Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP).

Staff and graduate students located in the department's *Democratic Performance Research Cluster* ([www.ul.ie/ppa/democratic-performance/](http://www.ul.ie/ppa/democratic-performance/)) have used the project to develop research synergies and publishing opportunities.

## The Limerick Election Study

The Limerick Election Study comprised 200 survey questionnaires administered to persons randomly selected from the Limerick City and County electoral register prior to the election and 200 survey questionnaires administered to persons randomly selected from the Limerick City and County electoral register after the election. A much shorter version of the survey was administered to participants in the community workshops and #GE16 Flash-Debates in order to gauge whether or not these interventions have any discernible impact on political engagement and voter intentions.

*"The election Survey is the first local survey that has been done. The idea is to focus on Limerick City, do a pre-election survey of the city, asking a series of 19 questions, essentially identifying what people's key issues are, what they think of the governments performance, who they thought would form the next government and to generally get a feel for how people engage with the process, also providing information on where they get their news from, how much they trust the news sources and there will be a post-election survey to follow up."* Diarmuid Scully, PO4013 Lecturer

The Limerick Election Study data is currently being analysed so a complete research study can be carried out with the pre-election and post-election data.

## University of Minnesota Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP)

Students from the University of Minnesota Undergraduate Research Opportunities Programme (UROP) were recruited to assist in the collection, coding and analysis of the survey data. They have also facilitated and participated in #GE16 Flash-Debates.

Their research requirements incorporate academic content of the Limerick Be Heard project and a space for reflective learning about the process of UL Practicum. The students were required to undertake an initial literature review to identify what they think might be key issues regarding citizen participation, engagement and voter turnout? They were then tasked with examining the extent to which their behavioural hypotheses were reflected or exemplified in their empirical work. Some UROP students elected to chose their own research proposals with relevant academic staff.

### University of Limerick Staff Research

**Rory Costello**, BA (UCC) MA (UCC) PhD (TCD), is a lecturer in the Department of Politics and Public Administration. He previously worked on a number of other 'voting advice' tools, such as the EUVOX project for the 2014 European Parliament elections and is the director of WhichCandidate.ie. His research is concerned with political representation and the extent to which voter concerns are represented by election candidates and public representatives.

*"So I'm looking for any kind of major points of disagreement between let's say the political class (the candidates, the parties) and voters. I am interested to know whether there are certain issues where the positions and views of voters aren't being represented by the candidates that are standing for election? I can look at that because we are asking candidates and we are asking voters the same sets of questions, so we can see where they agree and where they disagree. So the more people who take our survey, the better it is for my research. The collaboration is particularly good because a lot of people find their way to whichcandidate.ie through our media partners, through word of mouth and social media etc The #flashdebates are important because we do not want only the opinions of those who are fairly politically engaged already: it's important for the research that we get a lot of people using the website who let's say aren't political junkies. So the workshops certainly will get a more diverse range of people and that's very good for my research and I am looking forward to seeing the results"*

**Dr Rory Costello, WhichCandidate.ie Department of Politics and Public Administration, UL**

**Maura Adshead**, BA, MA (Limerick), PhD (Liverpool), is Senior Lecturer in Politics and Public Administration at the Department of Politics and Public Administration, University of Limerick. Maura is a specialist in Irish politics and policy and is interested in the political repercussions of the Irish fiscal crisis and the impacts of the Great Recession on political movements and the Irish party system. Her involvement in the Limerick Be Heard project facilitates co-publication opportunities with two of her PhD students and has led to a new international collaboration with IFWEA, the University of Rutgers and UMass Boston. Together with IFWEA partners in selected other countries, they are putting together and international study of education and capacity building which advances democracy through improving the political participation of vulnerable communities and groups. Limerick Youth Service have agreed to continue the partnership at local level and a joint proposal for funding was submitted to the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission in July 2016.

“We envisage that the data that we have collected during this project will be used for two Journal articles, which will be co-written by members of the team. These are:

Adshead, McBride and Scully ‘The politics of engagement: voter education and Community Based Learning in #GE16 Ireland

Adshead, McBride and Scully ‘Understanding voting intentions and outcomes in the 2016 Irish General Election: insights from the Limerick Election Study’

In addition, the Flashdebates workshop templates are now being used as the basis for an international study of the impact of electoral education on voter turnout and political participation.”

**Maura Adshead, Limerick Be Heard, Department of Politics and Public Administration, UL**

### **University of Limerick PhD Students**

**James McBride**, BA in Economics and Politics (1990), MA in Comparative Politics (1995), Higher Diploma in Statistics (2006). His research interests include Irish voting behaviour, the Irish party system, electoral systems, and public opinion and attitudes to the EU. James’ research is co-supervised by Rory Costello and Maura Adshead. James was heavily involved in the Limerick Be Heard project particularly the with the election survey and the electionhubireland.ie

*“My PhD is on the persistence and success of Independent candidates in Irish politics, especially in the last 20 years or so. I’m engaged with the Limerick Be Heard project at two points, both of which are relevant to my PhD. The Limerick Election Study, with its pre and post-election surveys will hopefully help me to develop a case study examining the level of voter engagement with, and attitude towards, politics in Limerick. If Independents do well in Limerick in this election, the post-election survey in particular will help me identify who voted for them and why. The candidate and voter data that Rory Costello is collecting as part of the Which Candidate initiative will help me form a picture of how closely voters match the candidates they vote for, and help point towards whether voters engage with the ballot paper on logical or emotional terms.”*

**James McBride, Department of Politics and Public Administration, UL**

**Diarmuid Scully**, BSc (Kemmy Business School), MA (UL). Diarmuid’s research is focused on political dynasties in Ireland and in a comparative international context. He central interest is in the causes of such dynasties and the support, or otherwise, given to them via the electoral system. He hypothesises that the greater the degree of voter choice in inter-party competitions, the higher the rate of (political) family dynasty formation.



*“The argument is essentially that where you have two or more candidates running for the same party, competing directly with one another for votes, that they have to make a personal appeal because they can’t appeal on the basis of ideology, so they have to build a personal political machine separate from the party that they can have control over for fear that the running mate will otherwise get the benefit from it. So that in itself when that TD leaves their post, the likelihood is that the machine remains and that somebody else takes it over and continues it, and this will normally be a close relative, it’ll either be a right hand man, right hand woman or son or daughter of the person that held it before hand and that theory seems to apply across the democratic world, that these machines do exist, that these machines are inheritable but that they are more prominent in countries that use open electoral systems that allow interparty competition. Ireland has the most open electoral system of all in that we are the only one that allows for interparty competition and that you can transfer votes across party lines, which means that the need to appeal on a personal basis is even greater because with open list PR. Where Limerick Be Heard comes into it is basically going through the electoral system again, interacting, seeing how people vote, seeing what the basis of the vote is, Is it candidate bases? Is it party based? And where this appeal is made? Certainly the implication would be that where the more candidates a party runs the higher the likelihood is, it will have political dynasties. It also ties into the Limerick Be Heard programme as we both are concerned with the question of why do we vote the way we vote?”* **Diarmuid Scully**

### **Associated Research Outputs**

Adshead, M. (March 7, 2016) ‘Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael need to get with the message from Irish voters’, *the Journal.ie* # Voices, available at:

<http://www.thejournal.ie/readme/fine-gael-fianna-fail-ge16-2647245-Mar2016/>

Adshead, M. ‘Irish responses to austerity’, paper presented to the 22<sup>nd</sup> International Conference of Europeanists on ‘Contradictions: Envisioning European Futures’, panel on ‘The political responses and the fall out of Austerity II’, Sciences Po, Paris, France, 8-10 July 2015

Adshead, M. ‘Who’s Left in the wake of Irish Austerity?’, under review, June 2016

Costello, Rory. ‘A candidate-centred voting advice application for Irish elections’. Paper presented at the Irish Political Studies Annual Conference, Galway, October 2014.

Costello, Rory; Paul O’Neill and Robert Thomson (forthcoming). ‘The fulfilment of election pledges by the outgoing government’. In Michael Gallagher and Michael Marsh (eds), *How Ireland Voted 2016*. Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan.

Costello, Rory and Achillefs Papageorgiou. ‘Issue salience and policy representation: evidence from the 2016 Irish general election’. Paper to be presented at the Political Studies Association of Ireland Annual Conference, Belfast, 9-10 October 2016.

Thomson, Robert, and **Rory Costello** (2016). "Governing together in good and bad economic times: the fulfilment of election pledges in Ireland." *Irish Political Studies*, 31 (2):182-203 DOI: 10.1080/07907184.2016.1149066

And recent newspaper coverage <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/politics/coalition-parties-filled-44-of-election-promises-study-1.2545776>

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