

# Voter information websites launched

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Two new websites designed to enable Irish voters interact with European Parliament election candidates and compare their personal stance on issues with those of European political parties have been launched.

The sites - CandidateWatch.ie and VoteMatch.eu - are intended to help increase voter participation in the forthcoming European election. According to a recent Eurobarometer survey, just 45 per cent of the Irish electorate said they intend to vote on June 5th.

CandidateWatch allows voters to question election candidates under a range of topics. Politicians can then respond online and their answers can be viewed by all visitors to the site. All submissions to the site are moderated to filter out any potentially abusive or insulting content.

The CandidateWatch concept originated in Germany, where it was developed by the non-profit organisation Parlamentwatch, whose co-founder and director Gregor Hackmack said it "makes politicians more accountable" because all their answers to all voter questions are archived online. "People can look back and see if the candidates have kept their promises when they are elected," he said.

Mr Hackmack said it is now used by virtually all German MEPs, who have recognised it as a valuable tool for communicating with voters. It is also available in Austria and Luxembourg.

The site carries profiles of all candidates who have so far declared for the June 5th election. Further profiles will be added once the deadline for announcing candidacy closes on May 11th.

Candidates can upgrade their profiles with a photograph, a personal statement and policy document in exchange for a €100 voluntary contribution. The money goes towards funding the operation of the website.

The board of trustees overseeing the moderation of CandidateWatch, are Sister Bernadette McMahon of the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice, Forum on Europe chairman Senator Maurice Hayes and *Irish Times* assistant editor Fintan O'Toole.

On VoteMatch.eu, users are invited to answer a series of 25 questions on EU policies. Topics include such issues as an enlarged Europe, immigration, environment and defence. Users can ascribe extra weight to their responses, which are then compared with statements furnished by all of European Parliament's main political groupings. A result screen then shows, in descending order, which party's policies best mirrors the voter's own stance.

The two websites are being hosted in Ireland by TASC, the Think-tank for Action on Social Change.

Neither site requires registration. Both are free of charge and operate on a not-for-profit basis.

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