

---

## The Single Transferable Vote in Northern Ireland

---

All elections in Northern Ireland, with the exception of UK Parliamentary general elections, use the Single Transferable Vote (STV) system of voting. STV is a form of Proportional Representation (PR) that allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. This factsheet looks at how STV works.

### Background

The Single Transferable Vote has been in existence since the nineteenth century. It was first introduced in Northern Ireland in 1973 and is used at local government, Northern Ireland Assembly and European Parliamentary elections. Within the UK, STV is used for elections within many voluntary organisations and trade unions, and will be used at local elections in Scotland from 2007. STV is also used for elections to the Australian Senate and for all elections in the Republic of Ireland, Malta and in Tasmania, where it has been in use for almost 100 years.

### Legislation

The legislation detailing the conduct of an STV count can be found in the Local Elections (Northern Ireland) Order 1985. Schedule 1 of this Order was substituted for Schedule 5 of the 1962 Electoral Law Act. Part 4 of Schedule 1 refers to the counting of votes.

### Why use STV?

Many people favour the STV method of voting because it maximises voter choice and

gives electors the ability to express preferences not only between parties but also different candidates of the same party. There are also fewer wasted votes because votes cast for candidates who have little prospect of winning can still count through a transfer to another candidate. Unlike the First Past The Post (FPTP) system, where political parties can win considerable support and yet still end up with no representation, STV gives a wider spread of representation which is beneficial to smaller parties.

### How does STV work?

On the ballot paper, the voter puts a '1' in the box next to their first preference candidate, a '2' next to their second preference, a '3' next to their third preference and so on. There is no minimum or maximum number of preferences that can be marked – the voter just carries on until they no longer wish to express a preference. However, the influence of a vote may be limited if a person chooses to vote for only a few candidates.

## An STV count

After the poll has closed, the counting process begins. The ballot papers are sorted into parcels according to the candidate for whom the first preference votes have been given. The number of first preference votes given to each candidate are recorded, along with the total number of valid and invalid papers.

## The quota

The total number of valid ballot papers are then divided by the number of candidates to be elected plus one. So if there are six seats to be filled, the total number of valid ballot papers is divided by seven. The quota (the number of votes necessary to secure the election of a candidate) is equal to the result plus one. Any fractions that may arise in calculating the quota are disregarded. An example is provided below:

**Total number of valid votes: 9,829**

**Number of candidates to be elected: 6**

**Quota equals: (9,829 divided by 7) +1 = 1,405**

When a candidate reaches the quota, they are deemed elected.

## Transfers

When the first preference votes for a candidate exceed the quota, those ballot papers for that candidate are sorted and grouped according to the next preference indicated. The ballot

papers are then transferred to the candidate for whom the next available preference was indicated. The 'transfer value' is calculated by dividing the total surplus to be transferred by the number of transferable papers.

If a voter has not indicated a further preference, the ballot papers are deemed to be non-transferable.

This process is repeated until all the surplus papers have been transferred. If there are still vacancies to be filled, the candidates with the least number of votes are excluded and any additional surpluses arising are transferred until the required number of candidates has been elected.

A candidate does not necessarily have to reach the quota in order to be elected. Indeed, if many of the ballot papers become non-transferable, it may not be possible for the required number of candidates to reach the quota. In that case the candidate or candidates with the highest number of papers would be deemed elected.

As soon as the final stage has been completed, the Deputy Returning Officer will declare the names of those who have been elected and the order in which they were returned. The Deputy Returning Officer will also give public notice of the number of first preference votes for all candidates, any transfer of votes, and the total number of votes for each candidate at each stage in the

count when those transfers took place.

## Publications

*A New Voting System: Electing the Northern Ireland Assembly* (2000) Electoral Reform Society

## Contacts

Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (administer elections in Northern Ireland):  
[www.electoralofficeni.gov.uk](http://www.electoralofficeni.gov.uk)

Electoral Reform Society (includes a model election outlining the various stages of an STV count):  
Tel: 202 7928 1622  
[www.electoral-reform.org.uk](http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk)

Northern Ireland elections (archive of Northern Ireland election results):  
[www.ark.ac.uk/elections](http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections)

Archive on the Northern Ireland conflict (contains information on elections): [www.cain.ulst.ac.uk](http://www.cain.ulst.ac.uk)

## Feedback

Please contact:  
Raymond McCaffrey  
The Electoral Commission  
Seatem House  
28-32 Great Alfred Street  
Belfast BT2 8EN  
Tel: 028 9089 4023  
Email: [rmccaffrey@electoralcommission.org.uk](mailto:rmccaffrey@electoralcommission.org.uk)  
[www.electoralcommission.org.uk](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk)