

Recommendations to improve the efficiency and management of single transferable vote election counts in Northern Ireland

February 2016

Summary

In autumn 2015 we undertook a project, working closely with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, to look at how counts at elections using the single transferable vote in Northern Ireland could be made more transparent and efficient. As part of the project we ran two workshops and a mock count event to analyse the current count model and consider alternatives for improving the count process.

Following the project we are making four recommendations to the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland which we believe have the potential to improve efficiency, transparency and provide cost savings. These recommendations include the introduction of the 'mini count model' to single transferable vote elections in Northern Ireland, improving communications and undertaking a review of resourcing and current technology. We believe that some elements of these recommendations can be taken forward immediately, while others represent a longer-term goal towards which initial steps could be taken now.

This briefing paper provides background on the project and sets out our recommendations in more detail.

Introduction

The single transferable vote (STV) is used at all elections in Northern Ireland, with the exception of UK Parliamentary elections which use the first past the post system. Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly, local councils and the European Parliament use STV, under which an elector votes for candidates in order of preference, placing a '1' beside their first choice candidate, a '2' beside their second choice candidate and so on. A voter can vote for as few or as many candidates as they wish.

Each candidate needs a minimum number of votes to be elected, which is called the quota. The quota is calculated according to the number of seats and votes cast. The first preference votes for each candidate are added up and any candidate who has achieved this quota is elected.

If a candidate has more votes than are needed to meet the quota, that candidate's surplus votes are transferred to the remaining candidates. Votes that would have gone to the winner instead go to the second preference listed on those ballot papers.

If no candidates meet the quota, the candidate with the fewest first preference votes is eliminated and the second preference votes are transferred to other candidates. These processes are repeated until all the seats are filled.

Historically election counts for the Northern Ireland Assembly and local councils have taken up to two days to complete. There was some significant criticism from candidates and the media at the time taken to complete the verification and first stage of the count at the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election. This criticism was repeated at the 2014 European Parliamentary election when it took almost nine hours to complete the first stage, and the whole count was not completed until the evening of the second day.

In our statutory election reports on the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election and the 2014 European Parliamentary election we identified a number of planning and management issues that contributed to the delays that took place during the counting of votes. These included issues such as the lack of an overall management plan, poor communications and contingency planning, the quality of some staff working at the count and poor management of the count on the day.

In our 2014 report we also gave a commitment to work with the Chief Electoral Officer to look at what could be done to improve the efficiency of the manual counting of STV elections in Northern Ireland. We said that this could include looking at the Chief Electoral Officer's plans as well as the design and content of polling station stationery, the set-up of count venues and the allocation of staff. We also suggested that there may be benefit in running a mock count to assess each aspect of the process in detail to identify where improvements could be made that would improve the time taken to complete counts whilst also maintaining accuracy and confidence in the overall result.

Electronic counting

Following the 2011 and 2014 elections the Chief Electoral Officer made clear his support for the introduction of electronic counting at elections using STV in Northern Ireland. Electronic counting is already used at elections to local councils in Scotland and the Mayor of London and London Assembly elections.

The Northern Ireland Office has confirmed to the Chief Electoral Officer that it is not their intention at this time to make any provisions to introduce electronic counting in Northern Ireland.

In our report on the 2014 European Parliamentary election we said that there would need to be significant work to consider the costs and benefits of introducing an electronic count, including the implementation and running of electronic counting compared to that of manual counting. This would include undertaking an appropriate cost benefit analysis of the manual counting.

What we did

In October 2015 we ran two workshops in Belfast. The workshops were facilitated by colleagues from the Electoral Management Board for Scotland¹ (EMB). The first workshop was attended by the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, senior staff from the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland (EONI), including those who act as Deputy Returning Officer at elections, and representatives from the Electoral Commission. Four key areas were identified as needing further consideration to improve STV counts in Northern Ireland. These were:

- The process used to count votes
- Communications
- Resources (particularly staffing)
- Use of technology

Following the first workshop it was agreed to focus the second workshop on further examining the count process with a view to considering what changes could be made to improve the efficiency of a manual STV count. Areas identified for improvement were the verification of used ballot papers, the primary sort of candidates' first preference votes and the process of transferring surplus votes.

On 2 November 2015 we ran a mock count in Seven Towers Leisure Centre, Ballymena and recruited over 50 experienced count staff. There were 20,000 ballot papers with voters' preferences marked against 18 candidates on each. The preferences were marked so as to represent a real set of ballot papers as closely as possible, and to enable the count to be carried through to a conclusion in a realistic way. An experienced Deputy Returning Officer and Count Manager ran the count to ensure that it replicated a real count as closely as possible. The mock count was observed by representatives from the Commission, the EONI, the EMB and the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA).

During the mock count a number of different methodologies were trialled and timed during the verification of used ballot papers. These included counting ballot papers with tables of two, three and four count staff. Different directions were given to count staff on how to count ballot papers (such as in bundles of 10, 25 or 50). A trial also took place to conduct the primary sort whilst the verification of ballot papers was ongoing (at previous elections the primary sort did not commence until the verification had been completed).

As the day progressed we also conducted a small mini-count trial with the ballot papers from two ballot boxes. A mini-count simply means breaking down the verification and count into 'areas' smaller than the whole constituency (in the case of

¹ The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) was created by the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011, which gave the Board "the general function of co-ordinating the administration of Local Government elections in Scotland". The EMB's prime focus is ensuring that the interests of the voter are kept at the centre of all elections planning and administration.

a Northern Ireland Assembly or UK Parliamentary election). The results from those 'areas' are then aggregated to achieve an overall result.

The mock count was then followed up with a wash-up meeting in the Commission's Belfast office.

Our recommendations

Having considered the outcomes of the two workshops and the mock count as well as the feedback from those who attended the event, we have set out four recommendations for the Chief Electoral Officer that we believe have the potential to make considerable improvements to the counts at STV elections in Northern Ireland. We believe that elements of these recommendations can be taken forward immediately, but recognise that they will not be completed in time for the upcoming Northern Ireland Assembly election in 2016. Opportunities to implement or trial new initiatives should be considered for the May 2016 poll. Developing a new strategic approach for the next STV elections in 2019 should be achievable.

Recommendation one: Introduce the mini-count model to STV elections in Northern Ireland

Normally at an STV count, ballot boxes are delivered from each polling station to the count venue. Each ballot box is checked in and EONI staff complete the verification of unused ballot papers overnight. On the first morning of the count the verification of used ballot papers is carried out. This process is usually completed by teams of two or three staff working on the maximum number of tables that can be accommodated at the count venue. Once the contents of each ballot box have been verified they are then moved to a central location for mixing in preparation for the primary sort whereby first preference votes are sorted, and made ready for counting. However this process does not begin until all the ballot papers have been verified although provision does exist in law for the sort to begin before verification is complete. Following the primary sort a candidate's first preference votes are counted and brought together to a central rack or table. This then allows for a candidate's ballot papers to be distributed at later stages of the counts, be it for the redistribution of surplus votes or the next preference on an excluded candidate's papers.

While this process is well established and familiar to electoral administrators, candidates and agents, we believe that it does have a number of shortcomings. In our view this is one of the significant reasons for the long time taken to complete a manual count as ballot papers are regularly moved around the count venue and then returned to the central candidates' tables (with proper checks and balances put in place). This leads to the perception that count staff, at times throughout the count, are 'sitting doing nothing' when in actual fact they can do nothing until the ballot papers have been moved. Furthermore at times the process can lack transparency as ballot papers are moving between tables and racks, making it difficult to locate errors if they arise. In addition there is also an increased risk of discrepancies in the total number of ballot papers counted as the count progresses through each stage.

We believe the mini-count model trialled at the mock count has the potential to make significant improvements to the efficiency and transparency of election counts in

Northern Ireland. This process has been used at other elections across the UK and is widely accepted as being particularly effective in achieving an accurate, timely result with clear audit trails.

How would a mini count work at a STV election in Northern Ireland?

At a Northern Ireland Assembly election the ballot boxes from each constituency would be broken down into smaller 'areas' and then assigned to a table team at the count venue. A count supervisor would be responsible for managing up to two or three table teams. The count supervisor's role is to oversee the work of the teams and to act as the line of communication to the central calculator.

Each ballot box would be opened and verified. Verified ballot papers would be held near the team which opened that box. Count supervisors would then provide verification figures to a central calculator's table who would collate the figures to get the complete verification and turnout figures for the constituency.

Following the completion of the verification including agreement from the central calculator, the ballot papers at the table would be mixed and the primary sort would commence, followed by the count of each candidate's first preference votes. Count supervisors would then report back the first preference totals back to the central calculator who would collate information from all of the teams to produce the quota and result of the first stage of the count.

The central calculator would then advise count supervisors of what to do at the second stage of the count (either to count the surplus of an elected candidate's votes or the next preference on an excluded candidate's ballot papers) and the value of the vote. Count supervisors would then instruct their tables to do this and return the result to the central calculator's table. This process would continue through each stage and sub-stage until the count was completed.

We acknowledge that mini-counts have never been used at STV elections before in Northern Ireland and that significant planning work would need to be undertaken before proceeding with this process. Such a move to a mini-count process would require a review of all the resources used by the EONI at election counts and the development of a new audit trail for ballot papers. In particular new paperwork would need to be developed for count tables that would allow for effective record keeping in a clear manner so as to allow for effective central collation. This model would also create an enhanced role for count supervisors and other key staff in the count. There would need to be a full review of the training programme provided to count staff with a new count manual put in place.

On 1 December the EONI conducted a small internal exercise in one of their offices to further explore the mini-count process where further issues were identified with the paperwork used and how staff would need to be trained in a mini-count process. It was agreed by EONI staff that a much larger scale trial of a mini-count would need to be conducted before implementing this process in full at a STV election on Northern Ireland.

We strongly encourage the Chief Electoral Officer to further consider how the mini-count process can be effectively used to improve STV counts in Northern Ireland.

In particular the Chief Electoral Officer should review the cost of an STV count and compare this to the potential savings that could be made using the mini-count model. Following the May 2016 poll the Chief Electoral Officer should publish the costs of the count running over two days at each count venue. This would then allow him to identify savings which could accrue from the change to a mini-count model. In doing so the Chief Electoral Officer would be able to publish a costed business case for the mini-count model, with associated up-front costs being off-set by savings in time and money through counts being completed more quickly. Such a review would strengthen the case for reform of the count process amongst stakeholders and the appropriate authority for funding each of the various elections that use STV in Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Office should give a commitment as to when this will happen.

In our view we are satisfied that mini-counts are an effective model for improving the efficiency and transparency of counts. It is clear that implementing such a move ahead of the May 2016 elections would be challenging, but the Chief Electoral Officer should consider further if any elements of the mini-count process can be effectively trialled in 2016, be it on a small scale across all count venues or with a greater focus on one count venue.

The Chief Counting Officer for the Referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union has directed that Counting Officers ensure that verification and count arrangements are broken down into a number of self-contained 'areas' smaller than the voting area, with the totals for each of these 'areas' aggregated into a single total for the voting area. The Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland should use the opportunity this provides to test this type of approach and to use the lessons learnt to inform how the mini-count model can be incorporated into an STV count.

Recommendation two: Develop a new communications strategy

Given the complexities of a STV count it is understandable that there is a general lack of understanding of how the process works (particularly around the transfer of votes) amongst some candidates, the media and the public in general. Taking this into account and the time it can take to complete some parts of the count it is clear to see how frustration can grow during the count.

Since 2011 the EONI have made significant improvements to communications at all count venues in Northern Ireland. This has included the use of plasma screens to relay information on what is happening in real-time, the establishment of information points, more announcements by Returning Officers, improved media briefings and count guides being provided to all candidates and agents at the time of their nomination. We welcome these developments and would encourage the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff to build on this positive work.

To further improve communications we would recommend that the Chief Electoral Officer develops a detailed communications strategy that should be used by the EONI to ensure consistent messaging across the organisation. Such a strategy should include key messages and detailed plans to ensure that stakeholder

expectations can be better managed. Particular stakeholders who should be considered would include candidates, elected representatives, the media and voters. Developing and implementing such a strategy would have the potential to improve understanding and expectation of the count process and provide a tool to ensure effective communication processes are in place across all count venues. The Commission is happy to share its knowledge and expertise in communications with the Chief Electoral Officer in the development of any communications strategy.

In conjunction with this it may also be beneficial for the EONI and the Electoral Commission to produce a memorandum of understanding to clearly define the roles and responsibilities between the two organisations. Such a memorandum would help to improve working relations and assist stakeholders in their understanding of the roles of both organisations.

Recommendation three: Undertake a review of resourcing at count venues

In our report on the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election we highlighted that staffing was one of the contributory factors to the delays that occurred at the count. In one count venue 45 staff failed to show up on the first morning of the count and at another 30 pulled out in the days leading up to the poll leaving insufficient time to recruit and train additional staff.

During the workshops held in October senior staff from the EONI outlined the difficulties they had in retaining good staff, particularly at a supervisory level. Given the structure of the EONI and the infrequency of electoral events it is difficult to build relationships and maintain loyalty from such a large pool of temporary staff.

The Chief Electoral Officer is currently undertaking a review of the structures of the EONI and how it will look in the future. As part of this process we would recommend that he reviews his staffing plans with a view to establishing partnerships with organisations that have a large pool of experienced staff, in particular local councils. Such a review should be completed with agreed staffing structures put in place ahead of elections in 2019.²

Recommendation four: Review the use of current technologies at count venues

It is unlikely that a move to electronic counting at STV elections in Northern Ireland will happen in the foreseeable future. However this should not exclude the Chief Electoral Officer from considering how other forms of technology can be effectively used within the current legislative requirements for a count.

At the workshops there was some discussion on how more could be done to make better use of technology. As outlined earlier the EONI have already used technology to improve communications at count venues with clear benefits.

Building on this, and as part of his review, the Chief Electoral Officer, should consider options for making better use of technology at future elections in Northern

² After the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election the next scheduled elections using STV in Northern Ireland are the 2019 European Parliamentary election and local council elections.

Ireland. Any such solutions should be tested and put in place well ahead of elections in 2019.

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