

Executive summary

Background

At the local elections held on 2 May 2002 in England, 30 local authorities tested a range of innovations aimed at encouraging participation in the elections, widening the range of voting methods, improving the efficiency of vote counting and increasing the information available to voters. The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to evaluate any pilot electoral scheme approved by the relevant Secretary of State. In approaching this task, the Commission starts with the belief that it is essential we respond to the changing lifestyles and new expectations of the electorate, and exploit the opportunities provided by new technologies. If such innovations are to succeed, however, they must demonstrate that they are capable of providing levels of security at least equivalent to more traditional methods of voting and win public and political confidence.

The Commission has produced an individual evaluation report for each pilot authority. These reports are available to view at <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk>. Overall, the Commission believes that the May 2002 pilots successfully widened the choice of voting method available to those interested in participating in the election and secured significant increases in turnout in some pilot areas; the process was generally well managed by the local authorities and there were no significant technical problems. Although there were concerns in some areas about possible increased risk of fraud, the Commission has identified no evidence that these fears were realised in practice.

However, there are a number of learning points to be drawn from the experience. The Commission has produced this strategic report looking at the pilot schemes collectively as the basis for making recommendations about the selection of future pilots and best practice in the management of pilot schemes.

Turnout and public opinion

In a majority of pilot authorities, turnout was up by comparison both with recent local elections and with non-pilot area local elections in 2002. In some places, turnout increased significantly – even matching the general election figures from 2001. But there were differences in performance between different pilot areas, and variations between wards even in areas that secured significant increases overall. The technology-based voting pilots appeared to have no significant impact on turnout. However, they did increase choice and flexibility for voters and those who used new methods were positive about them. The primary aim of the e-pilots was to establish the security and reliability of the voting mechanisms and to start to build public confidence; this was achieved.

NOP survey findings suggest that, overall, a majority of respondents in the 13 pilot scheme areas surveyed were aware of the new methods and 23% said that these gave them greater encouragement to vote (although nearly three-quarters, 72%, said it made no difference). 45% thought the new methods made the process of voting better with a similar proportion saying that they made no difference. Existing voters are more positive than infrequent or non-voters. Those in postal voting areas were more positive about the new methods both overall and in terms of specific attributes – which may, in part, reflect greater familiarity with them. However, 17% of non-voters did not vote despite saying that the new methods gave them more encouragement to do so. This, plus the reasons given in the NOP surveys for non-voting, reinforces previous research which has shown that, for most people, the why and what of voting are stronger (de)motivators than the how and when.

Accessibility

The Commission recognises that the desire to make voting more convenient and easier should not, directly or indirectly, disadvantage particular groups. This is a particular concern in relation to elderly and disabled people, people with limited literacy skills and those with English as a second language. The 2002 pilot schemes generated mostly positive feedback from a survey of disabled voters co-ordinated by Scope, the national disability charity. However, there are concerns about maintaining the secrecy of the electoral process for some disabled people in all-postal vote elections, and important lessons to be learnt about the provision of information and the signposting of services designed to increase access. Scope's technical assessment of the pilot schemes concluded that, although some problems with access occurred, there was a good level of disability awareness among local authorities and suppliers. The pilots provided a valuable opportunity to plan the accessibility of future voting mechanisms.

Security

Across the pilot areas, there were significant concerns expressed by a minority of electors and by some candidates and agents regarding security and the risk that all-postal voting or technology-based voting might increase the incidence of fraud or malpractice. However, the Commission has not been made aware of any evidence to suggest that the procedures led to any increase in personation or any other electoral offences, or led to other malpractice in connection with the elections.

The Commission recognises the concerns expressed by some about the potential loss of privacy and confidentiality involved in all-postal voting and remote electronic voting. Those who wish to vote privately from their own households will not have the same safeguards that people have enjoyed in casting their votes in the traditional way. One key question, therefore, is how real those safeguards are in practice. It is also important to examine how far perceptions that protection might be reduced (whether those perceptions are matched by reality or not) impact on the willingness of the electorate to use the new methods.

The benchmark against which innovative pilot schemes should be tested is not a 100% secure system. There are security and other weaknesses inherent in traditional polling station voting. The key issues here relate to voter confidence. The traditional system of voting by pencil and paper at polling stations has a very high degree of voter confidence, despite its inherent flaws. To some extent, these can be addressed by providing appropriate information and reassurance about the security features of the new voting mechanisms. However, it is also important that the new mechanisms demonstrate their robustness and continue to develop new security features. This applies to all-postal schemes as much as to those based on new technology.

The Commission also believes that, in some respects, technology should provide opportunities to increase the security of elections (for example, by improving the verification of identity before voting) and increase accessibility (for example, by providing voting information online in ethnic minority languages).



Beer mat - Basingstoke and Deane (ballot paper watermark and promotion of postal voting)

Impact on political parties

The development of alternative voting mechanisms will rely critically on the support of the political parties as well as the public. It is essential that Returning Officers actively provide opportunities for candidates and party representatives to understand the new voting mechanisms and their security features. In 2002, the selected pilot areas were required to demonstrate broad cross-party support in putting their bids forward. This support was retained in most areas throughout the process. In general, most candidates and agents welcomed the piloting of new ways of encouraging participation, and speeding up the counting process. However, some did express concerns about the loss of transparency in the election process as a result of moving voting into the 'private' sphere and out of the public arena, and through the use of automated voting and counting mechanisms that limited the scope for scrutiny.

In most pilot areas, the parties did not appear to have adapted their campaigning style to reflect the changing voting methods. As the pilots programme extends, the development of new strategies will be important, especially where there is no defined 'polling day'. Some party representatives were particularly keen to see the provision of marked registers before the close of poll, showing which electors have voted, both for all-postal and multi-channel voting methods. There is a need to clarify the legal position of this approach to establish whether it is consistent with data protection legislation.

All-postal voting

Postal voting has undoubtedly proved to be a success in terms of improving voter turnout. Turnout doubled in South Tyneside and almost doubled in Chorley, Gateshead and the pilot wards in Crawley. The average turnout for all-postal pilots was well above that for conventional ballots in the country as a whole. However, it is important to give close consideration to why some all-postal ballot experiments failed to make significant differences to turnout. The diversity of authority types and approaches has also assisted in evaluating 'what works'.

One factor influencing turnout is that some areas have a history of postal voting. For example, turnout in Stevenage (which conducted a previous pilot and has undertaken active promotion of postal voting on demand) contrasts sharply with Hackney, which has very low take-up of postal voting historically (less than 1%). Different socio-economic circumstances are also likely to have had a bearing. There is also some evidence that turnout was influenced by the type of declaration of identity used, as illustrated most vividly by the fact that Chorley secured 62% with no declaration whereas Hackney witnessed a drop in turnout to 32% with the standard declaration.

Did the declaration of identity prevent abuse? The signatures on the declaration are rarely checked (nor is there any obligation on the Returning Officer to do so). In practice, therefore, the declaration served only as a potential deterrent to fraud rather than a means of identifying attempts at personation; its existence may also have reassured some voters about the safeguards in place. It is difficult to determine the extent to which those who did not vote were deterred by the need to complete the declaration of identity, but significant numbers of voters in the pilot schemes certainly had their votes treated as invalid because of failure to complete the form correctly. Where the declaration was simplified or removed altogether, higher turnout figures tended to be recorded with no apparent increase in the incidence of fraud.

The fact that all-postal voting can significantly increase turnout has been established. Both politicians and

members of the public do have concerns about the implications for fraud, although the use of the standard declaration of identity appears to bring with it more problems than solutions. The Commission recognises that the number of pilot schemes involving changes to the declaration was too small in 2002 to make specific recommendations about how best to replace the standard declaration.

Multi-channel and electronic voting

Nine authorities tested different voting mechanisms using information and communications technology; all offered postal voting and polling stations alongside. Across the board, the hardware and software performed successfully without any significant problems. The operational success of the projects was due largely to the good working relationship and high level of trust between the local authorities and service providers.

Timetable pressures, as a result of a less than efficient central procurement process, were identified as the single greatest risk to the successful delivery of many of the projects. In many places both the local authorities and the suppliers had to undertake initial stages of system design and system building before the project had been approved. Time constraints also meant that normal good practice could not always be followed - there was very little contingency or 'slack' built into the project plans and, in some cases, security and testing documentation was not produced.

Voters' feedback suggested they found electronic voting easy, convenient and quick to use, and the pilots appear to have provided a vital first building block in establishing public confidence. However, the evidence in relation to turnout remains unconvincing at this stage, and further pilots are necessary to build on the lessons from 2002. The Commission also recognises that electronic voting pilots that were exclusively polling station-based did not increase convenience for the voter or for the election officials at the polling stations, although they did facilitate the accuracy and efficiency of the count. The cost effectiveness of such pilot schemes (without any option for remote voting) appears to be questionable.

The Commission believes they should not be a high priority for future pilots, especially in elections run on a 'first past the post' system, where the counting process is not complex.

Technology-based voting has made a good start, but it would be premature to suggest that the Government is well on its way to delivering against its commitment to having an 'e-enabled' election some time after 2006. Further piloting is clearly necessary to tease out a number of issues and to establish further the security of these voting mechanisms.

Other pilots

There were 15 authorities that used electronic counting machines, eight as part of a wider trial of electronic voting technology, seven in tandem with traditional voting methods or all-postal ballots. The speed with which results were produced varied, but all the mechanisms appeared to operate well on the night, the only significant problems arising through human error. The authorities involved reported several benefits, including greater accuracy in counting, and making it easier to match ballot papers with declarations that are returned at different times in different envelopes. Some candidates and agents were, however, concerned about the lack of transparency.

Although a number of the e-voting schemes provided an opportunity to vote early, there were only three pilots that tested new voting hours with traditional polling stations. Unfortunately, all three schemes appeared to have little success in attracting new voters. There was only one authority that tested ways to provide voters with more information about the candidates. Here, too, turnout did not appear to have been significantly influenced by the innovation, although there was limited voter feedback on which to reach a judgement.

Future pilot programme

The Commission regards it as important that future pilot schemes continue to develop multiple channels of voting to increase choice and flexibility for electors. We welcome the Government's endorsement of this approach. Over time, remote voting may well become the norm for most elections, as it appears to be more convenient for many voters. In the medium term, remote voting may be achieved through postal voting; over the longer term, as internet access and digital TV ownership grows, through technology-based voting schemes.

The future development of the pilot programme needs to be linked to a clearly articulated strategic direction, which covers all elections in the UK. The starting point for this strategy is the recently published consultation paper from the Government's e-Envoy. The Commission believes that applications from local authorities for future pilot schemes should be solicited on the basis of a clear requirement, targeted at the issues and aspects of voting that need to be tested in order to move the strategy forward, rather than local preferences.

The Commission also recommends that funding for all future pilots (over and above the costs of running a traditional election) should be provided by central government. In 2002, the entire pilot process, from procurement through to the election and subsequent evaluation, was carried out in a very short period. Future pilots must be given longer lead times. If the pilot schemes are to be tested fully, they must be able to operate in 'real life' circumstances. The Commission therefore recommends that the presumption in future should be that pilots are conducted across whole authorities or constituencies, unless exceptional circumstances apply. Similarly, a lack of cross-party support for a pilot scheme should not automatically be a bar on proceeding.

Other key recommendations include the following:

- Further pilots of all-postal voting should be undertaken at the local elections in May 2003, but must be whole-council pilots in order to test scalability. Following the 2003 pilots, the Government should be in a position to define best practice and decide whether there should be rollout of all-postal voting more widely. The Commission believes that we would be moving too quickly if we were to adopt all-postal ballots for the elections in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland next year.
- The necessary secondary legislation should be implemented as soon as possible to allow for parish council elections and local authority by-elections to be conducted on an all-postal basis without the need to apply for pilot status, as is already possible in local mayoral referendums.
- The traditional declaration of identity (requiring two signatures) should not be used in future pilots. Instead, all-postal pilot bids should incorporate proposals for testing alternatives, and methods of testing levels of fraud and attempted fraud should be regarded as an integral part of the scheme.
- The Government should develop a high-level functional specification of what each type of voting or counting scheme should deliver, and determine formal security and control attributes against which each potential technical solution can be assessed.
- A wide range of suppliers should continue to contribute towards the piloting of technology-based voting mechanisms; the suppliers used in future pilots should not be limited to those deployed in May 2002. The Government must also clarify the position in relation to the intellectual property rights over software and hardware developed using public funds.
- The Government should establish whether there is a clear legal basis for the provision of marked registers to candidates in advance of the close of poll showing which electors have voted, bearing in mind data protection principles. If the legal issues can be

satisfactorily addressed, the provision of the marked register should be tested in further all-postal and multi-channel voting pilots to establish whether the right balance can be struck between the benefits to the political parties (and potentially to turnout) and the risk of public hostility to heavily targeted campaigning.

- More pilots aimed at increasing the information available to voters about candidates would be welcome, both stand alone and linked to electronic voting; evaluation must examine qualitative and quantitative issues.
- Electronic counting pilots should use technology which is suitable for use in the medium to long term and which, if scaled up to regional or national use, could produce economies of scale.
- Early voting as a supplement to Thursday voting should not be piloted further. Future pilots should focus on testing the potential benefits of adopting weekend voting (or voting over several days) in place of Thursday voting.

Finally, the Commission believes strongly that the future development of voting methods that are more convenient for the electorate will be heavily dependent upon the establishment of a national electronic register. This would allow, for example, voters to use any polling station in the authority area or, in due course, nationwide. A national electronic register should be a key objective in the short to medium term.