

COUNTING: THE COST

MAKING THE GLA
COUNT QUICKER,
CHEAPER AND
MORE
TRANSPARENT



ANDREW BOFF
GLA CONSERVATIVES
GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY

INTRODUCTION

The counting of votes for the GLA elections can be complicated affairs. Three electoral systems are employed to get the result: the election for Mayor is conducted using a supplementary vote; the 14 constituency members of the London Assembly are elected using first past the post with the 11 top up members being selected using the 'Modified d'Hondt Formula'¹. Whilst the complexity of the count may be challenging, the procedure for voters, once they understand what they are voting for, is relatively easy.

This complexity of counting has resulted in Greater London Returning Officers choosing to use eCounting systems.

With the experience of four elections for the GLA and criticism of the conduct of the 2012 count² it is time to reflect upon the strengths and weaknesses of the procedure and whether there is anything that can be done to improve them

HISTORY OF COUNTING LONDON'S VOTES

Since 2000 there have been four elections for the Greater London Authority. After each of the last three the Assembly has convened an Election Review Working Group to discuss any issues which may have arisen and learn from the experiences.

Due to the cost of providing electronic counting machines ballot papers need to be transferred to large counting centres throughout London rather than counting in the 14 London Assembly constituencies. In 2012 there were three of these at Alexandra Palace, Excel and Olympia. This collation process leaves little time for the count to take place on the same evening and so the count starts on the next day.

2012 delays.

The complexity added by bringing all the ballot papers into central counting areas invites a risk that one failure could have far reaching implications. At the 2012 count there was a power outage at the Alexandra Palace counting centre resulting in the counting machines having to be reset. This one interruption meant that the final seat to declare, Brent & Harrow, delivered the result 5 hours later than the target time. The effect of that one incident meant that the Mayoral Election was not declared until 11.51pm³.

1 London Elects "Counting the votes" <http://www.londonelects.org.uk/im-voter/counting-votes>

2 Letter from Gareth Daniel - <http://www.lgcplus.com/Journals/2012/05/08/v/p/p/Gareth-Daniel-Letter-GLA-count.pdf>

3 Daily Telegraph - London Mayor election and local election results 2012: as it happened

EXAMPLES FROM ABROAD

In seeking to make the count quicker and more transparent the Greater London Returning Officer has sought to address the issues without fundamentally changing the method of counting. However, experiences from democracies abroad suggest a cheaper, more transparent and quicker alternative which requires no expensive commitment to technology – counting votes in polling stations.

International comparisons reveal that Britain is in a minority in the way in which it moves ballot papers to central counting centres in order to tally the votes. Of 62 democracies surveyed only 22 countries transfer ballot papers to another centre for the purposes of the count⁴.

Of these 22, many conduct parts of the counting process, such as verification and initial tallies in the polling station.

Counting in polling stations is often recommended by international observers in order to make the count process more cost effective and transparent⁵. After the events at Tower Hamlets, a count in polling stations may have prevented some of the chaos that led to their delays at the 2014 local elections⁶.

LOCALISE OR CENTRALISE?

Since 2000, the GLA Returning Officer has used electronic ballot counting providers to deliver the results. The GLA has held the view that whilst a manual account could be cheaper they believe it has a number of weaknesses because⁷:

- The count would take longer;
- It could result in more human errors;
- It would result in less real time data at the time of the election;
- Constituency returning officers would be unable to attract sufficient staff to count;
- That a switch to manual counting would be seen as 'regressive when there is ever increasing use of electronic and social media'.

Costs

The elections in 2012 came to £20.3 million⁸

-
- 4 <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/local-elections/9244994/London-Mayor-election-and-local-election-results-2012-as-it-happened.html>
- 5 Establishing the Rules of the Game: Election Laws in Democracies - Louis Massicotte, Andr Blais, Antoine Yoshinaka - ISBN: 0-8020-8564-4.
- 5 ACE electoral college network - <http://aceproject.org/main/english/vc/vcb.htm>
- 6 BBC - Tower Hamlets election count 'poorly organised' - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-28120621>
- 7 GLA contract GLR016 002 Contract for electronic count - 2016 GLA Elections <http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor-assembly/gla/electing-mayor-assembly/GLR016%20002>
- 8 London Assembly's Elections Review Working Group - 2012 Mayoral and London Assembly Elections
- 9 Approximate figures courtesy of London Borough of Hackney - 22/04/15

BUDGET SUMMARY - ELECTIONS 2012

Employee related (The London Elects team)	£1,600,000
Election costs, including London Boroughs and E-counting	£16,130,000
Advertising and other communications	£2,800,000
Hire of count centres	£470,000

Included in these figures are the costs of the electronic counting contract which, in 2012, will be £3.6 million.

The number of polling stations can vary widely between different wards and boroughs. Borough's websites reveal a total figure of 2,941 polling places. If each of these is staffed by three polling officers (a presiding officer at £380 and two poll clerks at £260 each⁹) and the hall hire is at the recommended rate of £350 this produces a London wide figure of £3,676,250 to cover 15 hours of voting and 2 hours of setup. On a pro-rata rate this would infer an additional £735,250 to add 3 extra hours for the counting process.

There may, of course be some additional costs but, even if these are double this estimate, over £2 million would be saved from the £3.6 million required by the current contract for eCounting.

Complexity of count

Whilst it can be accepted that first past the post and the party list votes would be straightforward to tally in the polling station, there could be questions about how the supplementary votes could be redistributed in a polling station based scenario. Without labouring the point, the complex election systems in other countries (such as Australia) which have multiple reallocations of preferences, have managed to overcome this system by ensuring good communications between the polling station and the returning officers¹⁰.

CONCLUSIONS

This report does not aim to provide a firm recommendation to move over to a system of counting in polling stations: it does, however, establish that using that method could result in faster counts with considerable savings and increased transparency. In any review of the system of counting conducted by the Electoral Commission, counting in polling stations should be considered as a viable alternative to electronic counts. A pilot would help inform those decisions

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Electoral Commission should authorise a pilot polling station count project in London.

¹⁰ Australian Electoral Commission - <http://www.aec.gov.au/voting/counting/>