

Contribution from John Bennett

Sirs

As a former Greater London Returning Officer, previously Deputy GLRO and otherwise involved in electoral administration for 50 years, I am well aware that the GLA's election rules (uniquely in England and Wales) provide as the default for electronic counting of paper ballots by scanning but not electronic voting.

Some issues of robustness, integrity, confidence and acceptance are, however, common to both counting and voting systems.

I have long advocated that we must – and eventually inevitably will – progress to e-voting as succeeding generations lose the wish to use paper-based systems.

I comment as follows on the questions posed and would be happy to amplify if required:

The benefits of e-voting include:

- Greater convenience for the voter
- Options for the voter to obtain / keep a “receipt” or audit trail of how they have voted
- Elimination of accidental “spoiling” and a substantial reduction (if not the elimination) of adjudication
- On-screen translation of voting instructions into community languages
- Cost offsetting as voters migrate from postal arrangements to online
- Phasing in, so as not to disadvantage the computer-less or computer-illiterate
- Avoidance of recounts and speed / certainty as to the results

Impact on turnout should be no less than neutral and may be positive but the main point would be ease and convenience of voting, coupled with auditability of the process, and speed / accuracy of computing the results.

Phasing (i.e. a period of multi-channel voting, as piloted in the early 00s) would ensure that no-one was disadvantaged.

The increased cost of the period of multi-channel voting would be exacerbated by the cost of research to achieve the most secure e-voting solution possible. However, in the longer term, the savings to be achieved through reduced / eliminated postal voting and reduced / abandoned polling stations would compensate. I.e. the cost profile would be front-loaded but achieve savings eventually.

E-voting at the polling station would provide the opportunity for giving voters a receipt / record of their vote but would be an expensive, and arguably unnecessary, step between current provision and the ‘multi-channel voting’ transitional model.

E-voting in other countries has been mixed and we must absolutely avoid the mess that has occurred in some US states in regard to the non-independent / non-transparent validation of software.

Public assurance would ideally be 100% but in the real world a level of assurance that equates to online banking is probably sufficient.

Independent testing, operation and oversight of the software / programme would be vital to ensure the integrity of the ballot, with the facility for subsequent challenge / investigation through the judicial system under the same rules as to secrecy of the ballot that apply at the moment.

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