Scotland’s Democratic Future: Exploring Electronic Voting

The Returning Officer Perspective

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Depute Returning Officer for the City of Edinburgh
Outline

• Some practical thoughts about technology in elections
  – Perspective of Electoral Administration
  – Thoughts not necessarily and developed argument
• My experience – electoral events in Edinburgh and across Scotland
• The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) – background and history
• The Current Context for delivering elections
  – Budgets, febrile atmosphere, technological change
• What is an election? Where can technology help
  – Already electronic....
• Lessons from eCounting
• Don’t forget the fundamentals –
  – be led by Principle not Technology
• RO’s concerns....
eVoting....
Personal Introduction

• Depute Returning Officer for City of Edinburgh
  – Operationally Responsible for delivering all electoral events: European Parliamentary, Uk Parliamentary, Scottish Parliament, City of Edinburgh Council, Referendums

• Major events:
  – Approx £1.2million budget
  – 145 Polling Places/350 stations / 1200 staff
  – Electorate approx. 370,000 of whom 80,000 are postal voters
  – Over 1200 count staff
  – Significant engagement with media, political parties, governments, Police, suppliers etc.

• Other events - Community Councils, BIDs
• Secretary to the EMB.....
The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB)

- Set up under the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011
  - Act gives the Board “the general function of coordinating the administration of local government elections in Scotland.”

- Independent of both UK and Scottish Governments; accountable to the Scottish Parliament

- Returning Officers, their Deputies and Electoral Registration Officers under the leadership of a Convener who is appointed by Ministers
Roles

• Two specific roles:
  – (a) **assisting** local authorities and other persons in carrying out their functions in relation to local government elections;
  and -
  – (b) **promoting best practice** in local government elections by providing information, advice or training (or otherwise)

• ensuring that **the interests of the voter** are kept at the centre of all election planning, delivery and administration
The Approach

• How to achieve that Objective and Principles?
  – Consensus: where possible
    • Building on experience and relationships
  – Guidance: where needed
    • Based on model from Electoral Commission
  – Directions: where appropriate
    • After consultation
It is all about confidence

“..... the referendum will produce a result that is accepted as accurate.”

Confidence in the process...confidence in the result.

Do everything in the interest of the voter!
EMB & Electoral Events in Scotland

• Direct oversight of local government elections – directions to ROs and EROs (consistency and contingency)

• Recommendations for UK Parliamentary

• Support for the Chief Counting Officer for the Scottish Independence Referendum (2014)
Scotland’s Biggest Electoral Event...ever

**Scale**
- The largest electorate **4,283,938**
  - Including 16/17 year olds
- Greatest number of postal voters **792,621** (18% of registered electorate)

**Profile**
- Extreme scrutiny from the campaigners, voters
- Major and intense media coverage: Scotland, UK, and internationally

**Impact**
- A momentous constitutional decision for Scotland **and** the UK
....and it went well

• Huge Turnout
  – Turnout of **84.6%** (3,623,344 votes counted)
  – **93.7%** turnout of postal voters (20% of votes cast)

• Very few rejected papers
  – Only 3,429 (**0.095%**) papers rejected at count
  – Only 2.67% of postals rejected at postal vote checking

• No queues at Polling Places at 10pm
  – But very busy with queues at 7am

• Result was accepted, operation widely praised by campaigners, observers and media
  – Critics – and there were critics - limited to “fringe”
  – No legal challenges / petitions
The Current Context

- **Tight Resources** – electoral events are expensive, complex projects; funding is limited and capacity of councils is shrinking

- **An engaged electorate** – for good (turnout) and bad (scepticism, conspiracy and Twitter); often a febrile atmosphere

- **Technology** – attractions and concerns
  - Help with resource pressures?
  - Address concerns of the electorate
How to run an election

• **2 Who’s and 2 How’s**

• **Who Can Vote?**
  – **Must** be on the Electoral Register **OVER 16**
  – Accurate and complete Electoral Register
  – You can register online at [gov.uk/register-to-vote](http://gov.uk/register-to-vote).

• **Who to vote for?**
  – “nominations” & the ballot paper

• **How do they Vote?**
  – Polling Places, Proxy or Postal Votes
  – Vote is **secret** (to avoid fraud!)

• **How did they vote?**
  – Verifying and
  – Counting the Votes
### An election – 2 who’s, 2 how’s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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But don’t lose sight of the fundamentals....

Technology can assist at every point....
We have “e-Elections” we are already digital

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<td>Nomination process often managed online</td>
<td>Postal vote verification</td>
<td>eCounting of votes at Scottish Local Government elections</td>
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eCounting Lessons

• Clear advantages for the process: speed, traceability, transparency
  – Compare Northern Ireland
• Potentially cost saving
  – Staff vs cost of system
• Challenges in implementation
  – 2007 experience
  – Lessons from that in terms of governance, procurement, political involvement etc
  – Driven by system instead of principle?
• Highlights opportunities and risks which would apply to eVoting
  – Some unforeseen
Electronic voting could increase voter turnout and save money, but many Brits are worried around the risks to the democratic process posed by hacker groups.

The Institution of Engineering and Technology (IET) is calling for the new government to embrace the latest technology and ensure future general elections can be conducted using electronic voting.

The IET believes e-voting will encourage more young people to cast their vote and could reduce costs of the traditional paper voting, which hasn't changed since 1872.

"If it's possible to cast your vote on TV shows like Britain's Got Talent using your smartphone or the internet, people will rightly ask why they can't do the same for the General Election," said IET Vice President Prof Will Stewart.
An Electoral Administrator’s Perspective

- RO has personal accountability for the delivery of the election according to the rules
  - Answers to the courts if this goes wrong
  - May transfer responsibility, never accountability
  - Naturally risk averse – aware of the challenges!

- Will see clear opportunities for eVoting
  - Potentially saves money, increases participation, improves integrity

- Aware of risks
  - Costs money, excludes sectors of the population, risks integrity (hacks, system files, no traceability etc)
Confidence is the Currency of Elections

• Electoral Administrators are keenly aware that elections are built on trust
• Confidence in the result is built on confidence on the processes and the people who operate them
• Confidence is fragile and must be protected
• If it is lost the whole enterprise is at risk
• Technology is attractive but need to remember the fundamentals
  – For example secrecy of the ballot
Secrecy of the ballot

• Recent debate over “selfies”
• Misunderstanding of requirement for secrecy
  – Protection of the voter
  – Voting without influence (threat or bribe)

• People forget where these principles came from
The Fundamentals

• Article 21 – UN The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

(1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
(2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
(3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Secrecy of the ballot!

• FUNDAMENTAL
• FORGOTTEN
• FRAGILE
Secret ballot vs show of hands
Elections that are trusted

• Returning Officers – guardians of integrity
  – Personal accountability
  – On the side of the voter
• Will want to see innovations assessed on the basis of the fundamental principles of safe elections
• Driven by principle NOT technology
• Just because you can doesn’t mean you should