

Factsheet

E-counting Frequently Asked Questions



YOUR LONDON. YOUR VOTE

Why use e-counting?

E-counting has been chosen for the London elections because it is an accurate way to count the votes and it would take too long to count the votes by hand. The London elections have always been counted in this way.

They are the largest and most complex elections in the UK with three separate ballot papers, up to four votes and three different systems used to calculate the results.

The e-counting machines can count efficiently and quickly, producing a result in 12 hours. A manual count would take three to four days.

How is an e-count different from a manual count?

The main difference between an e-count and a manual count is the counting stage. In an e-count, scanners automatically count the ballot papers, but in a manual count the papers are counted by count staff.

Registration, verification, counting and adjudication all take place in both counting methods.

Why are there three count centres?

Reviews of the London elections in 2004 found that electoral and technical expertise was spread too thinly over a large number of count centres. It would be a significant risk to count all votes in a single centre, so three centres have been chosen across London.

Is e-counting the same as e-voting?

E-counting is not the same as e-voting. E-counting involves scanning the ballot papers and counting the votes electronically. But people still vote in the usual way, completing their ballot papers by hand. With e-counting there is always a paper trail of peoples' votes.

E-voting however involves people casting their votes using either the internet or telephone. This means that the voter could vote from home or another location. At the moment, only small pilots have taken place using e-voting in elections and the technology is not yet considered to be safe or secure enough for it to be used in a large-scale election.

Why does the e-count take place the day after the election rather than overnight?

The law on the running of elections has changed considerably over recent years. It is no longer necessary for the votes to be counted as soon as polls close.

As there are many activities that need to take place after the polls close – such as security checks on returned postal votes and the secure collection and delivery of all the ballot boxes – it is better to start the count the next day. London Elects believes that it is more important to complete the count accurately with full transparency, than to rush to achieve a result overnight.

How much does e-counting cost?

The total cost of e-counting will be £4.6 million. This includes the costs of staff, e-counting machines, associated hardware and software, the design and printing of the ballot papers, ballot boxes and the technical and administrative support needed on count day.

Is e-counting accurate?

E-counting is a very accurate way of counting votes in an election. To ensure its accuracy, London Elects has run a series of tests on the system. The tests will continue until just before count day on 2 May 2008.

In September 2007, London Elects marked and manually counted 120,000 ballot papers. The system successfully counted all 120,000 ballot papers and came up with the correct result.

An independent audit of the system will also take place before election day.

Electronic images of all doubtful ballot papers – where the computer cannot read the voter's intention or where there are other marks on the paper – are sent to separate computer screens for adjudication. Elections officials interpret the voter's intent and decide whether to count the vote or reject it. No marked ballot papers can be automatically rejected by the e-counting computers.

Are the votes secret?

An individual's votes are not revealed during the e-count. In very particular circumstances a judge can request that all votes are checked after the election has taken place. Only in this case can a vote be traced back to the voter. This is also the case with a manual count.

How is fraud prevented?

Each ballot paper has a unique barcode and an additional security mark. This is to prevent electoral fraud – only ballot papers with valid barcodes will be processed and each ballot paper will only be counted once.

Can the e-counting system be hacked into?

The e-counting system is secure and secure lines of communication will be used at all times. If the network were breached, it would immediately close down. During tests of the e-counting system, London Elects has simulated attacks from hackers, which the system withstood.

What happens if there is a power failure during the count?

Each count centre has its own back-up generator, which will come on if there is a power failure during the count. All the computers and servers being used for the count have their own internal batteries to ensure that they are not immediately affected by a loss of power.

Is e-counting in 2008 the same as it was in the 2004 elections?

Since the 2004 elections, London Elects has taken a number of important steps to make things easier for the voter.

- Unlike in 2000 and 2004, the Assembly contest will be split across two ballot papers, making voting simpler. This decision was made in August 2006.
- All the ballot papers have been redesigned to maximise comprehension and usability. Voters will only use crosses to mark their papers, rather than a combination of numbers and crosses.
- In 2000 counting took place in 14 centres, in 2004 10; in 2008 there will only be three count centres. This means technical and electoral experience and knowledge will be concentrated in just three locations.

Who supplies the e-counting system?

Indra Sistemas SA will provide the technology to electronically count the votes in the 2008 London elections. Indra was awarded the contract in April 2007.

The Spanish technology company is new to the London elections but has been providing election technology for over 20 years, with experience from 20 countries worldwide.

Who operates the e-counting system?

Indra will employ people to operate the scanning machines but all other stages of the count – including registering the ballot boxes, verifying the ballot paper numbers and adjudication – will be carried out by staff appointed by the constituency returning officers. The staff will all be given specific roles and will receive training on how to use the system.

Can people watch the e-count taking place?

There will be a considerable number of people observing the progress of the counts at the three count centres. These include candidates, their agents, the media, Electoral Commission representatives and approved observers. Real-time count progress and live results will also appear on the London Elects website at www.londonelects.org.uk.

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