

Factsheet 7

E-counting in the London elections



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E-counting

The votes in the London elections will be counted electronically rather than by hand. The count will take place on 2 May 2008 and will start at 8.30am.

Electronic counting or 'e-counting' involves scanning ballot papers and using specially designed software to automatically count the votes on each paper rather than counting them by hand.

This means that the votes on ballot papers like the mayoral ballot paper, which has a first and second choice vote, can be counted at the same time. Once the votes are counted, the system calculates the results for the election.

The e-counting process

When the polling stations close at 10pm on 1 May 2008, the ballot boxes from around London will start their journey through the counting process.

The count will take place on 2 May 2008 with the constituencies divided up between three count sites in Alexandra Palace, ExCeL and Olympia.

About six million ballot papers from around London will be processed to get the results for the Mayor of London and the London Assembly contests.

The process of electronic counting consists of:

- ballot box registration
- ballot paper scanning
- verification of the numbers
- adjudication of 'doubtful' ballot papers.

Valid votes are counted throughout the process. Once all of the ballot boxes have been through this process, the results are calculated and announced.

Ballot box registration

Each ballot box has a number that links it to the polling station and borough that it came from. It also has a number on it, recorded by the presiding officer at the polling station. This represents the number of ballot papers issued at the station that should be inside.

This information is registered on the e-counting software to be used for verification later on in the counting process.

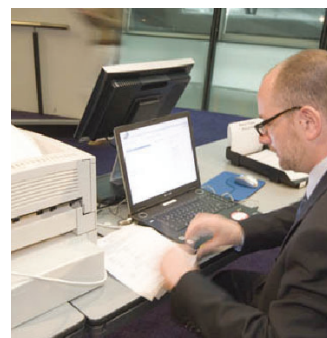
Ballot paper scanning

Once all the ballot boxes have been registered the count starts. The first ballot box is allocated to a free scanner for scanning to begin.

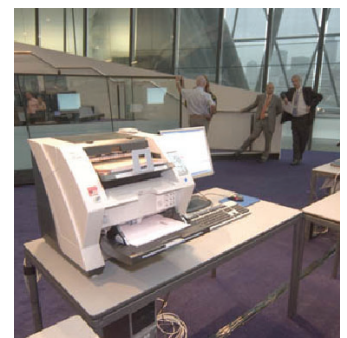
The scanner performs a number of operations at the same time.

- It checks against various security features to ensure the ballot paper is genuine.
- It counts the number of ballot papers being fed through it.
- It records how each vote has been cast and stores images of 'doubtful' ballot papers.

If a ballot paper cannot physically go through the scanner – for example if it is torn – it is entered manually into the system by an election official.



Ballot box registration



Ballot paper scanning

Verification

When all the ballot papers from the ballot box have been scanned, the total number of papers scanned is verified by comparing it with the number recorded by the presiding officer on the ballot box. If there is a difference in the numbers election staff will investigate and may re-scan a batch of ballot papers.

Once the numbers are confirmed, the votes from that ballot box are counted and recorded on to the system. The system deals with all papers where a valid vote is clear or there is absolutely no mark on a ballot paper.

Doubtful ballot papers are forwarded for adjudication.

Adjudication of doubtful ballot papers

Adjudication is split into two stages – first level adjudication and CRO adjudication.

First level adjudication

At first level adjudication, all the doubtful ballot papers are looked at by elections officials. If the voter's intent is clear, the officials manually enter the votes and accept the ballot paper. If the voter's intent is unclear, the election officials pass the ballot paper to the Constituency Returning Officer (CRO) for second level adjudication.

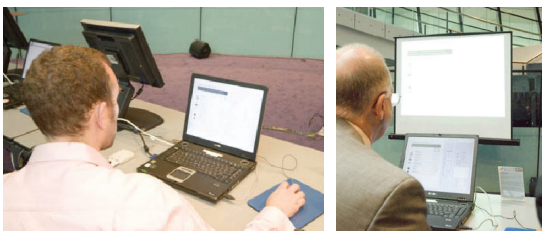
No votes can be rejected at first level adjudication.

The images of the ballot papers can be viewed on screens identical to those the election officials use, so that election observers can see the decisions being made.

CRO adjudication

The CRO adjudicates all the ballot papers that have been referred to him or her at second level adjudication.

The CRO can reject votes if they are not valid – for example if a voter has voted for too many people or they have spoiled their ballot paper. This is done in consultation with agents from the political parties.



Results

Once all the votes have been counted and adjudicated, the results are calculated. The result for the Constituency Assembly Member is announced by the CRO at the count centre.

The number of votes cast for the Mayoral candidates and London-wide Assembly seats is stored and it is sent securely to City Hall where the results are calculated. The Greater London Returning Officer will declare the results for the Mayor of London and the London-wide Assembly Members in the Chamber at City Hall.

The whole process should take around 12 hours.

The count centres

All the votes will be counted at one of three count centres on 2 May 2008. Each London constituency will be allocated to Alexandra Palace, ExCeL or Olympia.

Alexandra Palace	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Enfield & Haringey■ Barnet & Camden■ North East (Hackney, Islington and Waltham Forest)■ Brent & Harrow
ExCeL	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Greenwich & Lewisham■ Bexley & Bromley■ City and East (Newham, Barking & Dagenham, Tower Hamlets and City of London)■ Havering & Redbridge
Olympia	<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Ealing & Hillingdon■ Croydon & Sutton■ Lambeth & Southwark■ Merton & Wandsworth■ West Central (Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea, and Westminster)■ South West (Hounslow, Richmond upon Thames and Kingston upon Thames)

Further references

Factsheet 4: The London elections ballot papers

Factsheet 6: How the voting systems work

Factsheet 12: How the London Assembly is elected

www.londonelects.org.uk/election_quick_guide/what_happens_to_my_vote.aspx

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E-counting glossary

Zero report	<p>The Zero Report process ensures that the e-counting database is reset. It is performed at the start of the count before any data is loaded into the system. It shows that no votes are stored in the system and no ballot boxes and/or ballot papers have been processed. The Constituency Returning Officer (CRO) will sign the report validating the process.</p>
Registration of ballot paper accounts	<p>Registration is the process by which the number of ballot papers in each ballot box, recorded by the Presiding Officer in the polling station on the Ballot Paper Account, is input into the system.</p> <p>These numbers are used to cross check the integrity of the process by comparing them later with the number of ballot papers actually scanned by the system.</p>
Scanning	<p>Scanning is the process by which the ballot papers are digitalised and counted. To be scanned, the ballot papers will be prepared in batches.</p> <p>Each ballot box in storage is allocated to a scanner and the ballot papers are removed and divided into batches to facilitate the scanning process. The ballot papers that for any reason cannot be scanned, are manually entered by an election official.</p>
Verification	<p>Verification is the process by which the votes contained in a ballot box are authorised to be counted. The verification flags any discrepancy between the number of ballot papers scanned and the number of ballot papers that should be in the box as recorded by the Presiding Officer on the Ballot Paper Account.</p> <p>If the numbers match, the box can be authorised. If they do not match, the ballot box can be re-scanned to check for consistency.</p> <p>The Constituency Returning Officer (CRO) will issue a verification statement of all the totals while the counting of votes is under way.</p>
Adjudication	<p>The e-counting system deals accurately and efficiently with the vast majority of ballot papers – those where there is a clear valid vote or votes and those with absolutely no marks.</p> <p>Those ballot papers where the voter’s intention is not clear are referred to an election officer for adjudication. Adjudication has two stages: first level, dealing with simple decisions resulting in accepting the vote; second level for more doubtful ballot papers, for CRO adjudication.</p> <p>Guidance on adjudications is agreed with the CROs and discussed with political representatives before the count takes place.</p>
Rejection	<p>Votes are only rejected by the CRO, under one of the categories in the elections rules.</p>
Results/declaration	<p>Once all the ballot papers are processed and all the votes counted the system calculates the results.</p> <p>In the case of the London Assembly Constituency Member, the CRO, in consultation with the candidates/agents, can then validate the results and announce them publicly. The results for the Mayor of London and London-wide Assembly Member contests are sent to City Hall where the system calculates the results and the GLRO announces them.</p>

E-counting process

