

Report: How the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election was run | Electoral Commission    Search    Report: How the 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election was run    You are in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections section Home Northern Ireland Assembly elections On this page About the election Registration and turnout The voter experience The administration of the poll Campaigning Recommendations: Online electoral registration Recommendations: Further improving the STV count Recommendations: Review of the electoral observer scheme Recommendations: Registration of party names and descriptions for use on ballot papers Recommendations: Transparency and accessibility of candidate spending Recommendations: Imprints Recommendations: Extending investigative and sanctioning powers Recommendations: Reporting use of social media Recommendations: Performance standards Recommendations: Donations and loans Download our full report First published: 28 June 2019 Last updated: 7 August 2019 About the election On 5 May 2016 there were a number of different polls held across the UK. This report looks specifically at the administration of the Northern Ireland Assembly election. Our overall assessment is that the May 2016 Northern Ireland Assembly election was well run. People were satisfied with the process of registering to vote and with the process of voting, whether they cast their vote in person at a polling station or by post. The count was conducted efficiently, with significant improvements in the planning compared to previous elections. Registration and turnout A total of 1,281,595 people were registered to vote in the Northern Ireland Assembly election on 5 May 2016. Overall turnout at the election was 54.9%, ranging from 64.6% in Fermanagh and South Tyrone to 49.6% in North Down. By comparison, turnout at the May 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election was 55.7%. Turnout at the 2015 UK Parliamentary election in Northern Ireland was 58.5% and at the 2014 European Parliamentary election was 51.8%. A total of 703,744 ballot papers were cast, of which 14,126 were postal votes (2% of votes cast). Unlike the rest of the UK, where postal voting is available 'on demand', voters in Northern Ireland are required to provide a valid reason as to why they cannot attend their polling station on polling day. The voter experience Our public opinion research suggests that most voters believed the election was well-run and were satisfied with the process of registering to vote and voting. 88% of respondents were satisfied with the procedure for registering to vote and 91% expressed satisfaction with the voting process. The administration of the poll Overall the Northern Ireland Assembly election was administered professionally and efficiently. The Chief Electoral Officer made significant improvements to the delivery of the count following concerns over the time taken to complete previous election counts in 2011 and 2014. Changes to the set-up of the count venues, to the management of the verification stage, and to the primary sort of ballot papers all contributed to a quicker and more efficient count. A new test of count staff and performance monitoring has ensured that more effective count staff are now in place at each count venue. Preparations for the count, including training of staff, was done thoroughly and resulted in a smooth, well-run process. Overall communications were very good with regular announcements provided to candidates, agents and the media. Each count venue had a dedicated information point and media liaison officer who provided handouts of the result of each stage of the count to those present. Effective use was also made of Twitter and EONI's website to provide real time results to the public. All of these are welcome developments which have done much to improve confidence and transparency in the count. Campaigning Our post-election survey of candidates suggests that the majority of candidates were satisfied with the administration of the elections and agreed that

the rules on spending and donations were clear. We identified a number of accredited observers and applicants to be observers who potentially had political party affiliations, and upon further investigation we withdrew accreditation from 12 observers before the election. Unfortunately, at some count venues, we were made aware that a number of other accredited observers were clearly showing support for political parties and their candidates. The Commission is very concerned and disappointed that the observer scheme was abused at the Northern Ireland Assembly election. Accredited electoral observers who show support or bias for a political party or a candidate at a count seriously undermine the credibility and confidence of the electoral observation programme. In light of this we now intend to conduct a full review of how we accredit electoral observers in the UK, with any revisions to the process to be in place before the next scheduled elections in Northern Ireland in 2019.

**Recommendations: Online electoral registration**

**Recommendation 1: Online electoral registration** Both the Chief Electoral Officer and the Northern Ireland Office are committed to extending online electoral registration in Northern Ireland. The Chief Electoral Officer has put the necessary technical requirements in place within the Electoral Office to ensure the launch of the online digital portal for electoral registration in Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Office have also drafted legislation that will amend the law to allow for online registration in Northern Ireland and this should make its way through the UK Parliament during the autumn. The introduction of online registration in England, Scotland and Wales has been very successful and there were high levels of applications made online in advance of the elections in 2015 and 2016. We are therefore pleased that online registration will now be extended to Northern Ireland. For our part we will work with the Chief Electoral Officer to promote the online registration portal to the public in Northern Ireland and encourage people to use it to register to vote and/or to update their details on the electoral register. To assist in planning for this it would be helpful if the Northern Ireland Office announced a date for the introduction of online registration in Northern Ireland to assist in planning for such activity.

**Recommendations: Further improving the STV count**

**Recommendation 2: The Chief Electoral Officer should explore further the potential for further efficiencies in STV counts, including the use of the full mini count model** Given that the next scheduled elections to use STV in Northern Ireland are not until 2019, there is sufficient time to build on the successful work undertaken so far. The Chief Electoral Officer, working with his senior staff, should conduct a further review of the count process and test the potential benefits the mini-count model could bring to STV election counts in Northern Ireland.

**Recommendations: Review of the electoral observer scheme**

**Recommendation 3: The Commission will conduct a review of the electoral observer scheme** The Commission's observer scheme has been running now for almost ten years. At the Northern Ireland Assembly we found some evidence that the scheme was being abused. In light of this we will now conduct a full review of how it operates across the UK. Any revisions to the process will be in place before the next scheduled elections in Northern Ireland in 2019.

**Recommendations: Registration of party names and descriptions for use on ballot papers**

**Recommendation 4: Registration of party names and descriptions for use on ballot papers** We continue to recommend that where a candidate represents a political party on a ballot paper, it should be clear to voters which party the candidate represents. The legal provisions for registration of party descriptions present risks of confusion for voters and restrict the participation of political parties. The UK Government should work with the Electoral Commission to reform the provisions on party descriptions.

Recommendations: Transparency and accessibility of candidate spending Recommendation 5: Transparency and accessibility of candidate spending To improve transparency and accessibility of candidate spending returns, we have previously recommended that Returning Officers across the UK should be required to publish spending returns online as well as through the existing methods of public inspection. We support the recommendation in the Law Commissions' review of Electoral Law which proposes a method for implementing this change through legislation. Recommendations: Imprints Recommendation 6: Section 143 of PPERA should be extended to Northern Ireland In the interests of transparency and to ensure consistency in the use of imprints on campaign literature across the UK, the UK Government should seek to apply Section 143 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendum Act 2000 to Northern Ireland before the next set of scheduled elections in 2019. Recommendations: Extending investigative and sanctioning powers Recommendation 7: Extending investigative and sanctioning powers We continue to recommend extending our investigative and sanctioning powers at major elections for offences relating to candidate spending and donations, including at Northern Ireland Assembly elections. It will be important for Governments and Parliaments across the UK to work together on introducing the Commission's new powers for different sets of elections. Recommendations: Reporting use of social media Recommendation 8: Reporting use of social media at future elections We will give further consideration to how campaigners should report spend on social media at future elections. As spend in this area grows, there is the potential for less transparency if expenditure on social media is not easily identifiable within the spending returns, because social media is not a specific reporting category. This will need to be considered as part of reviewing all of the expenditure reporting categories to ensure that they remain proportionate and relevant to future trends in campaigning. In case any of these changes would need to be implemented through legislation, we recommend that the UK Government and Parliament should consider the timing needed for implementing changes before the next major elections. Recommendations: Performance standards Recommendation 9: Extend the performance standards framework in Northern Ireland In light of the introduction of online registration the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland should introduce an Order to extend the performance standards framework to Northern Ireland. Recommendations: Donations and loans Recommendation 10: The UK Government should introduce secondary legislation to allow for the publication of partial information on donations and loans to political parties and regulated donees in Northern Ireland The UK Government, through the NIO, should publish a timetable to ensure that the necessary secondary legislation is put in place to allow the Commission to publish partial information on donations and loans received by political parties. This should be done as soon as possible. The Commission will continue to be available to assist NIO to ensure the legislation is appropriate. Download our full report 2016 NI Assembly election report Related content Report on the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election Read our report on the May 2022 Northern Ireland Assembly election Report: How the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election was run Read our report about how the 2011 Northern Ireland Assembly election was run Report: The March 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election Read our report about the 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly election Report: Voting in 2017 Read our report about voting at the general election in 2017