

# FINAL REPORT

Northern Ireland Local Elections  
2nd May 2019



Dr John Ault

2<sup>nd</sup> July 2019



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# Northern Ireland Local Elections – 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2019

## Final Report on Election Observation

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### Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across Northern Ireland – 2<sup>nd</sup> May 2019.
2. To advise the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland and UK electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within the UK.
3. To support the local and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

### Methodology

A team of 26 observers registered with, and accredited by, the UK's Electoral Commission made 320 separate observations across the 1,463 different polling stations (ballot boxes) in Northern Ireland. This constituted approximately 22% percent of all of the polling stations in Northern Ireland. The observer team of 26 was made up of observers from the United Kingdom (17), Republic of Ireland (2), Russia (2), Italy (1), Austria (1), Germany (1), Canada (1) and USA (1).

Each observation was conducted in pairs to allow for objective observation, following which the two observers agreed their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data to the central team. The survey was conducted online so data was collected, and could be checked, live.

The observations generally took between thirty and forty-five minutes per polling station as the observers were asked to ensure that they attempted to see the entire process, which included staff greeting electors on arrival at the polling station. The numbers of polling stations observed were:

• Antrim and Newtonabbey	33
• Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon	24
• Belfast	56
• Causeway Coast and Glens	17
• Derry and Strabane	28
• Fermanagh and Omagh	5
• Lisburn and Castlereagh	27
• Mid and East Antrim	41
• Mid Ulster	27
• Newry, Mourne and Down	25
• North Down and Ards	37

Each team of observers was contacted throughout the day by the central team to ensure that observations were as uniform as possible. The organisation of polling stations was generally very well run across each council area, voters could see how to access voting and staff were trained to manage the process. In Northern Ireland there is an agreed code of conduct between parties. Our data gathering and subsequent recommendations also reflected on this agreed Code of Conduct - *Canvassing in the Vicinity of Polling Places* - which states<sup>1</sup>:

- Canvassers shall be polite and courteous at all times when speaking to members of the public. They should be careful to avoid any behaviour which may leave them open to complaints of harassment or intimidation.
- Canvassers will not engage in canvassing activities inside the grounds of a polling place.
- Canvassers should not stop, or in any way impede, the free flow of vehicular traffic entering or leaving the grounds of a polling place.
- Canvassers should not restrict or in any way impede pedestrian access to any entrance of a polling place.
- Canvassers shall not attach flags, emblems, banners, posters or any other item used in connection with canvassing to a polling place or to any part of its perimeter wall or fence.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eoni.org.uk/getmedia/cb795297-286b-48dd-82b8-63f751a78d29/Local-Council-Elections-2019-Guide-for-Candidates-and-Agents>

## The Core Team



**Dr John Ault FRSA FRGS (United Kingdom)** was the Head of Mission for the Northern Ireland local elections and is the Executive Director of Democracy Volunteers.

John has worked in elections throughout the UK and the United States since the 1980s. He has observed on behalf of the OSCE/ODIHR in parliamentary elections as far afield as Kazakhstan and is a former chair of the UK's Electoral Reform Society. He has also previously been elected to local government in the UK as well as being appointed to the South West Regional Assembly.

He has observed numerous elections for Democracy Volunteers including the Norwegian parliamentary elections, the UK general election in 2017, the Finnish presidential and Dutch elections in 2017, 2018 and 2019. He has also been a consultant on the subject of electoral and parliamentary reform in Moldova.

He is an Honorary Research Fellow at the University of Exeter and has previously lectured at Canterbury Christ Church University and the University of Manchester. He specialises in elections and campaigns and has published a number of books on the subject, including his doctoral thesis on electoral campaigning.



**Alex Ollington FRSA (United Kingdom)** was Deputy Head of the Northern Ireland local elections observation and is Head of Operations for Democracy Volunteers.

In his role at Democracy Volunteers, he plans all aspects of the observation including the advanced work on observer deployment. He is also one of the directors of the organisation.

He received both his undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the University of Exeter studying International Relations. He has observed elections for the National Assembly for Wales in 2016, the UK General Election in 2017 as well as the Finnish Presidential election in 2018 among other international and domestic observations.

He coordinated with the International Elections Study Centre in May 2018 to facilitate the attendance of a team of Russian observers from the civil society organisation GOLOS at the English local elections.

Alex has previously worked with veterans at the Royal Hospital Chelsea as part of the fundraising and communications department finding funding for future projects as well as a researcher for a number of organisations including the universities of Harvard and Bristol.



**Harry Busz (United Kingdom)** was the political and campaign analyst for the Northern Ireland local elections. He is a recent graduate, having gained a BSc in Human Geography at Cardiff University and an MA in International Relations from Exeter University. He has participated in multiple domestic and international observations such as the 2019 UK local elections in Northern Ireland, the provincial and Water Board elections in The Netherlands and the recent UK parliamentary by-election in Newport, Wales.

During his time at university, he wrote his undergraduate dissertation on voter behaviour in the 2016 EU referendum in the South Wales Valleys after choosing to study both political and electoral geographies. His master's degree focussed on the ideologies and key political elites behind the referendum result in the context of political cleavages in UK politics. Now working in economic development and regeneration in local government, Harry has also written briefing papers for Democracy Volunteers whilst acting as the editor of the organisation's sister website, The Election Observer.

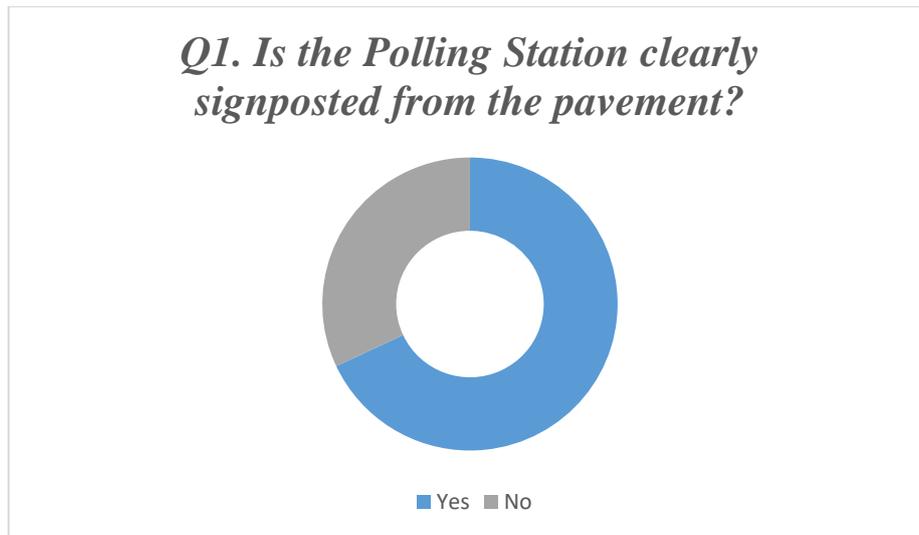
## **FUNDING**

Democracy Volunteers received a grant from the Andrew Wainwright Reform Trust towards the costs of the observation in Northern Ireland. We are very grateful for this support as it allowed us to support some new observers to attend the observation free of charge. However, this funding was supplemented from the organisation's general fundraising and with a small payment from most of the observers themselves. No payment or financial support was received by any party or authority, whether governmental or otherwise, towards the costs of the deployment. Again, we thank our observers, who are all volunteers, for their time and support for the deployment.

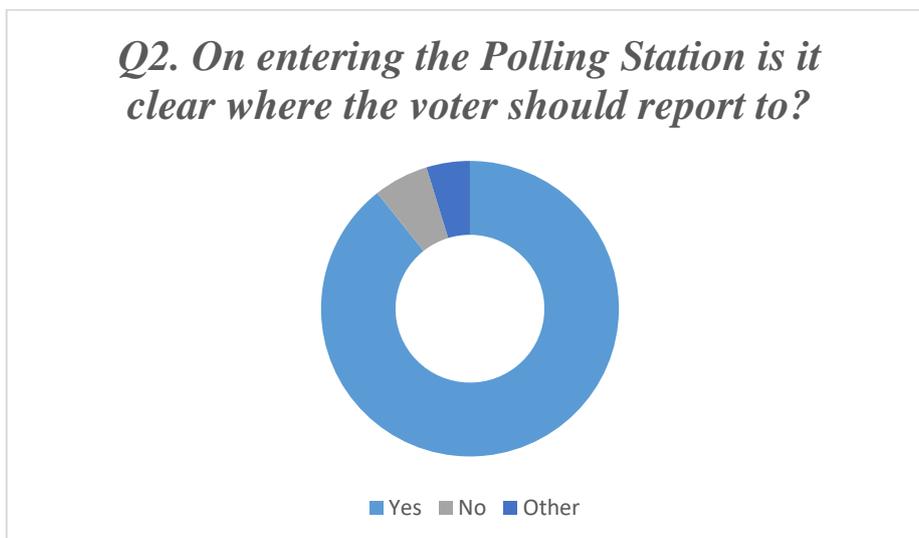
## **CREDITS**

We would like to thank the Electoral Commission for their assistance in making our preparations for the deployment in Northern Ireland possible and also for the assistance of the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in making logistical arrangements, such as the mapping of polling stations, possible.

## Results of the Observation

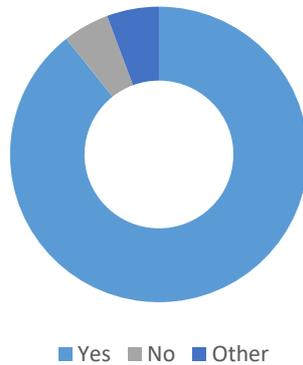


**QUESTION 1:** Signposting of the polling stations was generally good but observers did raise concerns in 32% of cases. More consideration should be given to signposting as this is relatively poor compared to other elections we have observed.



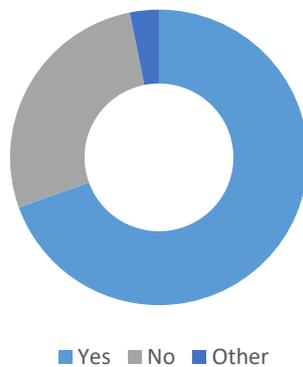
**QUESTION 2:** Northern Ireland has a large number of multiple polling stations where several ballot boxes are placed in one room or around buildings. This can lead to some confusion but invariably staff were available to direct voters to the correct area. The proliferation of multiple polling stations also led to some voters either attempting to, or managing, to deposit their ballot paper in the wrong ballot box.

***Q3. Was it clear how disabled voters would access the Polling Station?***



**QUESTION 3:** Observers were generally satisfied that disabled access was in place in the vast majority of polling stations. However, in 5% of polling stations it was not apparent how those with physical disabilities would access the station and in a further 6% this was something that would have proved challenging.

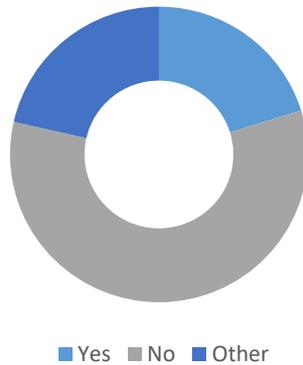
***Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?***



**QUESTION 4:** Polling staff were generally aware that an observation team might be operating across Northern Ireland and the formal procedure for identifying, and then recording, that observers had visited the polling station was followed in the majority of cases.

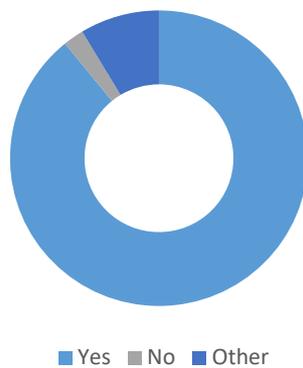
On a number of occasions staff did consult with higher authority as the issued Electoral Commission ID did not conform to the information that the presiding officers had been issued with.

***Q5. Did the staff record your ID number on a form?***



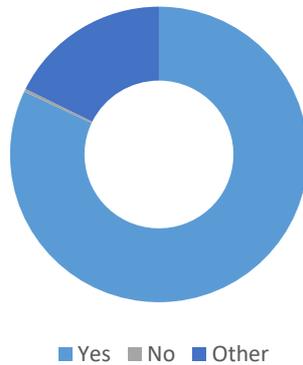
**QUESTION 5:** Only 41% recorded any details at any point during the observation, however, this was not always at the start of the observation. 58% of polling stations did not record attendance at all.

***Q6. Are there two staff on duty in the polling station as you arrive?***



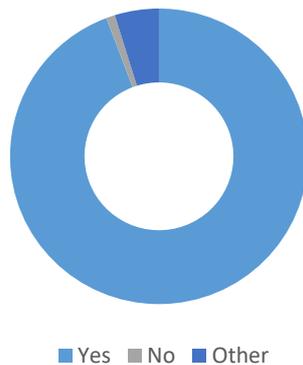
**QUESTION 6:** 89% of polling stations had two members of polling staff on duty at all times. However, in 2% of cases staff were left alone to administer the process and in another 9% staff were not permanently in place.

***Q7. Is the Ballot Box clearly sealed with cable ties?***



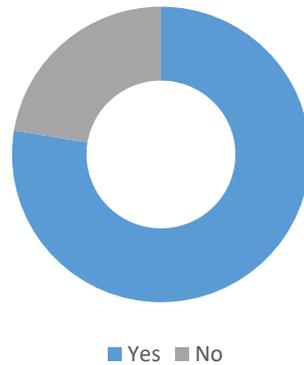
**QUESTION 7:** An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such, allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at 10pm, was observed. All the ballot boxes observed, bar one, were sealed. However, in 18% of cases the observation team identified that ballot boxes were not sealed in the manner expected. In some areas coded cable ties had been issued so that it was clear that the box had been sealed throughout the day. In some cases, these were used for one of the sealing points on the ballot box rather than all.

***Q8. Is each polling booth equipped with an explanatory poster and a pen/pencil?***



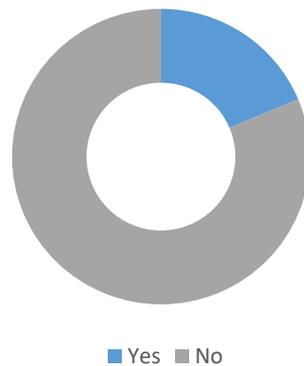
**QUESTION 8:** All but three of the polling stations observed were properly equipped with the requisite pencil and poster.

*Q9. Were there party canvassers outside the polling station?*



**QUESTION 9:** Observers identified party political campaigners outside 78% of polling stations.

*Q10. Are there any political leaflets in sight within the Polling Station?*

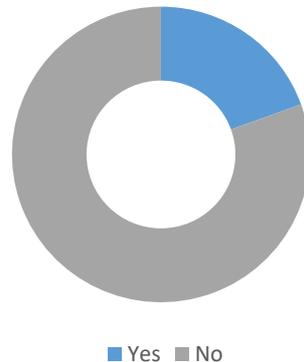


**QUESTION 10:** This question was asked primarily to elicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station.<sup>2</sup> On 19% of polling stations the observer group identified political leaflets inside the polling stations. Invariably these leaflets were left by voters in polling booths having been given them outside the polling stations by the political parties. Our Belfast team, and others, also reported possible politicised activity by some polling staff. (See Recommendations)

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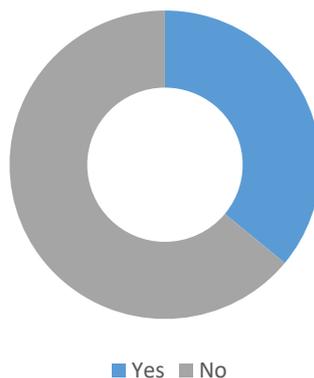
<sup>2</sup> This question did not just relate to literature specific to this election but observers were also asked to identify if other literature, such as MP or councillors' surgeries were on public display – advertising the names of candidates and/or parties.

***Q11. Were there polling agents in attendance at the polling station?***



**QUESTION 11:** On nearly 20% of occasions our observers identified party polling agents in the polling station. These were: Sinn Fein (39), DUP (12), SDLP (11), APNI (1), Others (12). A key aspect of using the right of stationing polling agents in the polling station is that it allows parties to assess the integrity of the electoral process. However, the obligation of this privilege is that: ‘Polling agents must observe the requirement of secrecy (Appendix 2). In particular they must not, before the close of poll, pass any information to anyone about: the name of anyone who has voted, the electoral number of anyone who has voted [or] the official mark.<sup>3</sup> Polling agents correctly were not wearing party colours. See (Recommendations)

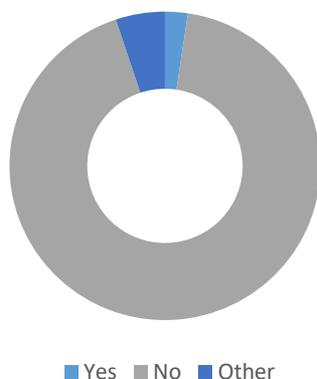
***Q12. Have party campaigners attached signs, banners or flags to the polling station?***



**QUESTION 12:** On 36% of occasions parties had placed signs, banners or flags on some part of the polling station. In some cases, this was even associated with a party political marquee.

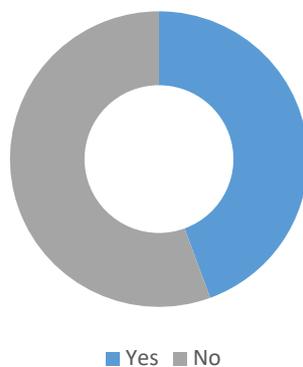
<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eoni.org.uk/getmedia/cb795297-286b-48dd-82b8-63f751a78d29/Local-Council-Elections-2019-Guide-for-Candidates-and-Agents>

***Q13. Were party campaigners intimidating voters at any time you were in, or around, the polling station?***



**QUESTION 13:** Invariably voters were allowed unrestricted access to the polling stations by party campaigners. However, on a very few occasions party campaigners did show some negative behaviour to some voters.

***Q14. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?***

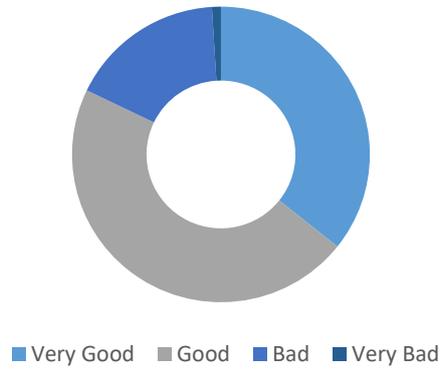


**QUESTION 14:** In 44% of polling stations, our observer team identified so-called 'family voting'. 9% of all voters observed were directly involved in, or affected by, 'family voting'. This was predominantly family members sharing polling booths, several spouses viewing the voting intentions of their spouse or direct collusion. Only in exceptional circumstances was any action taken. The OSCE/ODIHR, which monitors elections within the UK, describes 'family voting' as an 'unacceptable practice'.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.osce.org/>

***Q15. Overall how do you rate the quality of this polling station?***



**QUESTION 15:** Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 36% of polling stations were reported to be ‘Very Good’, 46% ‘Good’, 17% ‘Bad’, and 1% were ‘Very Bad’.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This was generally a very well-run election. Presiding officers and poll clerks were invariably very welcoming and friendly to the observer groups and we would like to thank all those that helped in our work. There were some concerns raised by polling staff in some areas about unannounced observers arriving but, unlike our normal practice, we had informed the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland in advance about our intended deployment.

### **Family Voting**

We believe that ‘family voting’ is the single biggest challenge to the credibility of voting in polling stations in Northern Ireland. It is a practice that means many women, elderly and young voters do not have access to a secret ballot – which is their right. As with several recent elections that Democracy Volunteers have observed, we continue to be concerned about the significant levels of ‘family voting’ at polling stations. The 9% of voters affected by family voting persists apparently due to the lack of awareness amongst the public and staff alike. Family voting should be prevented and when seen it should be interrupted. On several occasions we even observed staff who observed the practice but, despite this, did not interrupt.

Our observer team saw ‘family voting’ in 44% of the polling stations attended which, bearing in mind the team records all the voters who attend polling stations, means that 9% of all the voters who were observed attending polling stations were involved in this practice. We saw 218 cases of family voting across Northern Ireland on polling day across 139 separate polling stations.

We would recommend that officers, and the presiding officers, take time to be aware of this and intercede when they see it. Evidence, as provided by the OSCE/ODIHR, suggests that this practice most affects women voters as the secrecy of their ballot is restricted.

### **Party campaigning outside polling stations and political literature**

Polling stations in Northern Ireland regularly have party campaigners outside them. Of the 320 polling stations the observer teams visited only 22% had no political activity outside them. They were invariably easily identifiable as they generally wore party colours. However, as is the norm in Northern Ireland, party political literature is often given out to the public to assist the voter with party information such as where on the ballot paper their candidates can be found. As such, a great deal of this literature can be found abandoned around polling stations, whether in bins or tables, but also, more concerningly in polling booths. On some occasions our observer teams did suggest that these teams of campaigners were over-persistent with some voters.

The observer teams identified political literature in 19% of polling stations - regularly in polling booths themselves - which had not been removed by staff.

Our teams also felt that some polling stations were not entirely suitable as some less direct identity-based paraphernalia was also in evidence. Whilst we feel some of these are minor

infractions, we do believe that polling stations should be politically sterile within their precincts.

Our observer teams also saw a considerable number of polling stations where party political paraphernalia and/or flags and banners were attached or within the curtilage of the polling station. This would seem to be in contravention of the agreed Code of Conduct concerning *Canvassing in the Vicinity of Polling Places*.

### **Polling Agents**

Our observer teams were also asked to record if polling agents were present in polling stations which is a right for all parties. These were present in 19% of the polling stations visited. On a few occasions polling agents received either messages or calls on their mobile phones and, whilst no evidence was collected that this was inappropriate, this could have potentially led to a breach of the Requirement to Secrecy to which they are signatories.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

**R1. Family Voting:** We recommend that the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland implement strategies to discourage ‘family voting’ in polling stations. This could be done by two methods. Polling staff should receive, as part of their training, advice on how to deal with spotting and discouraging the practice. This should also be seen as a national problem which needs attention by the production of polling station signage that would help to influence those who are unaware it is unacceptable.

**R2: Family Voting:** We also believe that posters designed specifically to discourage family voting should be displayed in all polling stations as a minimum requirement and in polling booths where possible.

**R3. Party Literature:** We would encourage the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to augment training for polling staff to ensure that they regularly check polling booths to remove extraneous political material.

**R4. Party Code of Conduct:** We would encourage the Electoral Office for Northern Ireland to remind political parties of the voluntary Code of Practice to which they are signatories.

**R5. Party Code of Conduct:** We would recommend that the party Code of Conduct should be updated to include the role of polling agents, loud speaker cars and the length of time candidates and/or their agents can spend in polling stations without due cause for their attendance with party emblems.

**R6: Polling Agents:** We would recommend that polling agents have their mobile phones taken from them whilst conducting their duties in the polling stations.