

FINAL REPORT

North Down, Strangford and Belfast East
Northern Ireland Assembly Elections - 2nd March 2017



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7th March 2017



Northern Ireland Assembly Elections – March 2nd 2017

Election Observation – North Down, Strangford and Belfast East

Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the North Down, Strangford and Belfast East constituencies of the Northern Ireland Assembly.
2. To advise the local and national election bodies with the data identify issues within the voting process in Northern Ireland.
3. Support local councils and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

Methodology

A team of 5 observers, registered with the UK's Electoral Commission, made 74 separate observations in polling stations across the North Down, Strangford and East Belfast constituencies. This constitutes our largest deployment of observers in 2017 so far.

In North Down the team observed 46 of the 71 ballot boxes in the constituency – (65.8%).

In Strangford the team observed 17 of the 67 ballot boxes in the constituency – (25.4%).

In Belfast East the team observed 11 of the 75 ballot boxes in the constituency – (14.7%).

In total the team observed 34.7% of all the ballot boxes across the electoral area of Northern Ireland: Belfast Area Electoral Office (B).

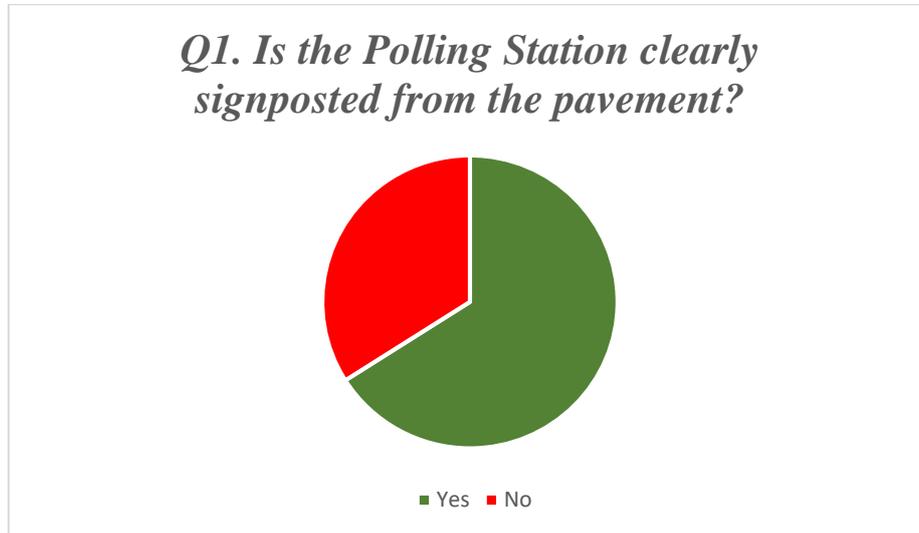
Each observation team was generally split into pairs to allow for objective observation and they then agreed their opinions of the electoral process before submitting data to the central team. The survey was conducted online so data was collected, and could be checked, live. In some cases, where polling stations had four or more ballot boxes the team sometimes deployed in larger numbers, especially at peak periods of footfall through the polling stations.

The observations generally took between fifteen and thirty 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.

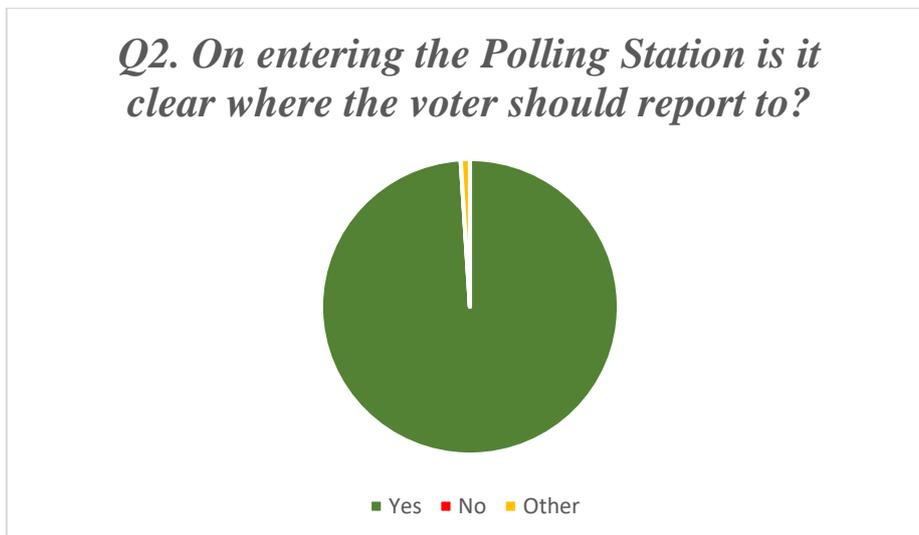
Each team of observers was contacted throughout the day by the central team to ensure that observation was as uniform as possible.

Results of the Observation

The observers answered the following questions in order as they progressed with each observation at each polling station:

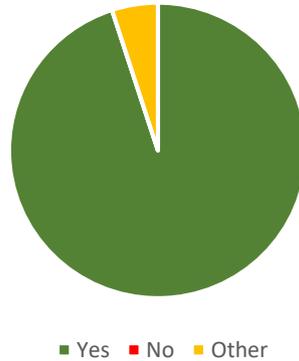


QUESTION 1: There were significant issues that the observers discovered with signage from the road. In some cases, polling stations were not clearly identifiable although this issue would less affect people who are conscious of the local area and their usual polling station. However, 34% of polling stations being not adequately signposted is a significant number which should be considered in the future. (Specific data will be made available to *The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland* in due course).



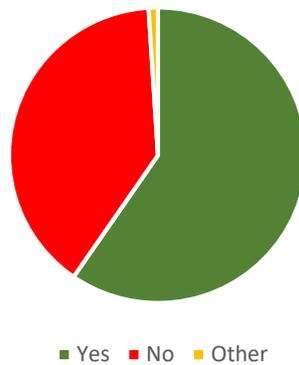
QUESTION 2: Observers identified no issues in terms of where voters should report in the polling stations. This was made especially simple by a triage system of a polling station manager directing voters to the relevant ballot box within the building.

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



QUESTION 3: 95% of observations indicated that access to the polling station was clear. Another 5% suggested that some aspects of the polling station (such as the designated polling booth for wheelchair users) was inadequate.

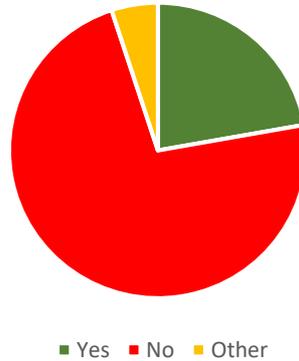
Q4. Did the polling staff ask to see your ID on arrival?



QUESTION 4: Polling staff seemed to be unaware that an observation team might be operating across the constituency, the formal procedure for identifying, and then recording, that observers had visited the polling station was not followed in the vast majority of cases.

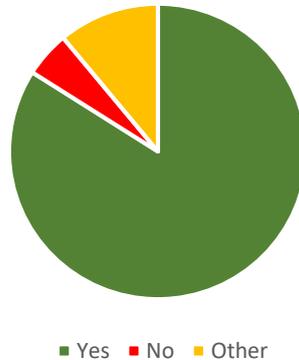
Only 60% of the time did observers have their credentials checked on arrival at the polling station. However, only 39% did not check the ID of observers on arrival at the desk in the polling station.

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



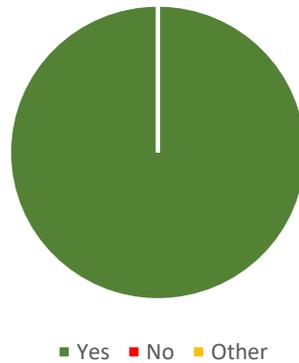
QUESTION 5: However, we also asked observers to note if the polling staff took a note of the ID that the observer was wearing. In each case this was an Electoral Commission badge which was numbered. Only 22% of polling stations recorded the ID details of the observers on arrival and another 5% did this after a period of time, not on arrival. 73% of polling stations did not record attendance at all.

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



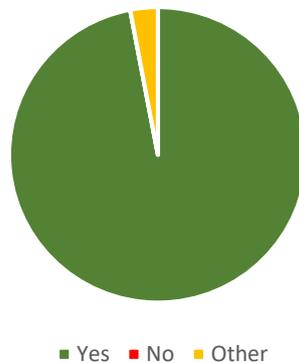
QUESTION 6: Many polling stations are multiple polling stations so there were always members of staff within the building but per ballot box this was another matter. Whilst in attendance only 84% of ballot boxes had two members of staff permanently in attendance to check ID and issue ballots. Another 11% did at times and at other times one of zero. In 5% of cases there were never two members of staff at the desk to issue votes and check ID.

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



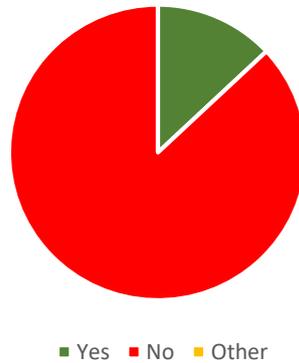
QUESTION 7: An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at. All the ballot boxes observed were sealed.

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



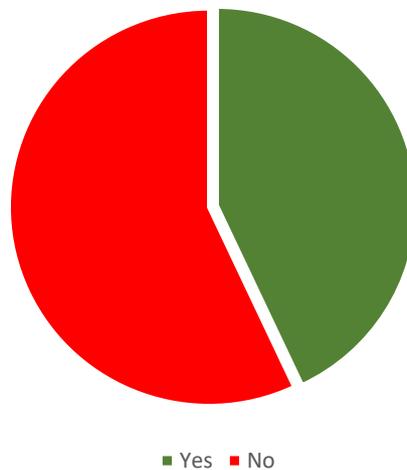
QUESTION 8: 97% of polling stations had the requisite posters informing voters how to cast their vote using the STV voting system as well as working writing equipment – 3% did not.

Q9. Are there any political leaflets in sight within the Polling Station?



QUESTION 9: This question was asked primarily to illicit whether improper political activity was taking place within the polling station as parties, in Northern Ireland, are permitted to campaign outside the polling station and much of it makes its way into the polling booths where it remains. On 13% of occasions observers identified literature within the polling station – in most cases this was removed periodically by members of staff.

Q10. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?



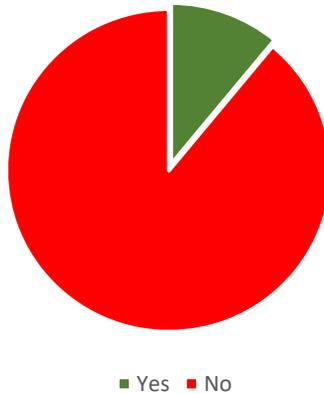
QUESTION 10: In only 43% of cases, our observer team identified so-called ‘family voting’.¹ OSCE/ODIHR, which monitors elections within the UK, describes ‘family voting’ as an ‘unacceptable practice’.² It occurs where husband and wife (or other family members) vote together. This figure constitutes the highest percentage ever that we have identified whilst observing.³ It was rarely, if ever, challenged by polling station staff.

¹ See Note on page 8.

² <http://www.osce.org/>

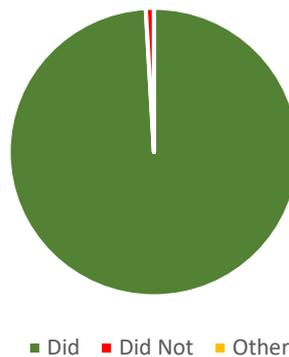
³ This figure means that family voting was identified in 43% of polling stations.

Q10A. What numbers of voters were involved in family voting?



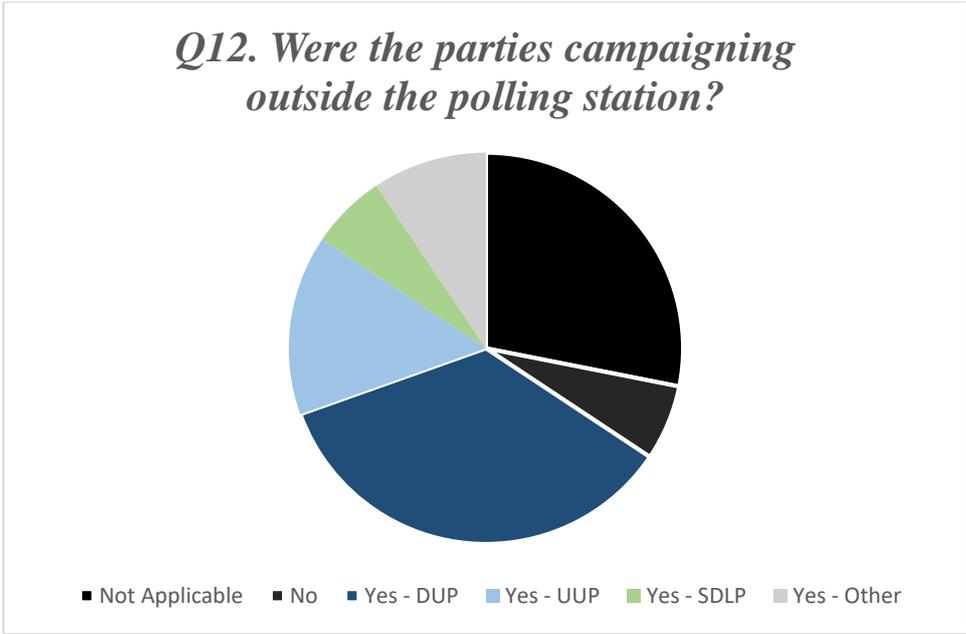
QUESTION 10A: In 2017, our observer group is also being asked to tally the number of voters who enter the polling station whilst the team is in attendance. They are also asked to record the number of instances of family voting they identify and the number of voters engaged in it. Thus a more accurate figure can be achieved compared to Question 10. Although family voting was identified in 43% of polling stations the actual percentage of voters who engaged in family voting was 11% - over 1 in 10 of all voters did not, or were unable, to cast their vote secretly.

Q11. What percentage of voters did not have the required ID with them and were turned away?



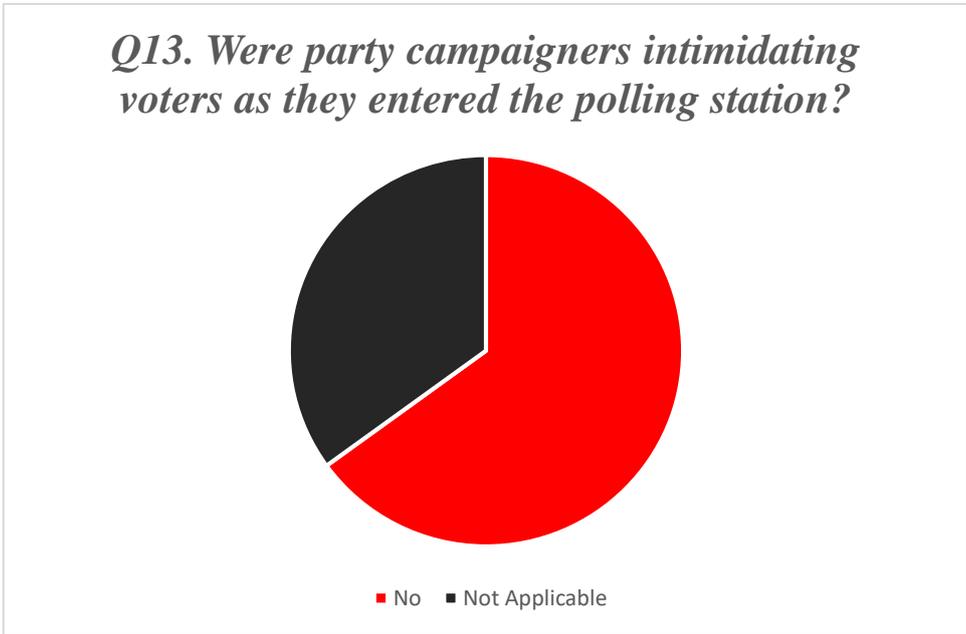
QUESTION 11: The use of ID is normal in Northern Ireland and it is a requirement to be issued with a ballot at a polling station. However, despite this the observers identified 1% of occasions when voters were turned away from voting as they did not have one of the designated forms of ID.

Q12. Were the parties campaigning outside the polling station?



QUESTION 12: In Northern Ireland, parties regularly campaign outside the polling stations. This is not normally seen in Great Britain but it was something that the observer team was asked to comment on as part of their observations. This activity is regulated as part of a Code of Conduct which the parties sign up to and which can be found in Appendix 3 of the EONI guidance for candidates and agents. On some occasions they were present and observers were asked to record which parties were present if at all.

Q13. Were party campaigners intimidating voters as they entered the polling station?



QUESTION 13: We also asked our observers to assess whether the party representatives were acting in a way that could be considered as intimidation towards the voters as they entered the polling station. Party campaigners on no occasions seemed to be collecting numbers as might be anticipated by tellers. Only 65% of polling stations had campaigners in attendance and on no occasions was their behaviour considered to be intimidation by the observers.

CONCLUSIONS

Access to voting was clear and despite the nature of the weather throughout polling day officials dealt well with the process. However, an awareness of the nature of observation, and even the existence of observers, seemed entirely new and the process by which they should deal with observers seemed unclear.

Although the team were asked to survey extra issues than usual concerning party activity outside polling stations none of these seemed relevant to the final observation as the process was very good natured and not until the evening were some of the parties observed at polling stations.

However, the most significant finding of this observation to the three constituencies of Belfast East, Strangford and North Down is the highly significant percentage of those polling stations where family voting occurred. The fact that over 1 in 10 of voters were not able, or were not willing, to cast their vote in secret is of concern to the observer team and will be forwarded to the Electoral Commission and The Electoral Office for Northern Ireland for further discussion.

NOTE

When considering what the observers identify as ‘family voters’ the following were included as being ‘family voting’ – all of which were observed on March 2nd.

- Using another person’s ballot paper to cast their vote for them.
- Relay voting – where one voter receives a ballot, completes it, (which is then deposited by the family member) then completes the family member’s ballot and deposits it – thus they have effectively voted twice.
- Overseeing the vote being cast by a family member.
- ‘Assisting’ a family member when completing their ballot.
- Two voters using the same polling booth to cast their votes together.
- Discussing with a family member how they are completing their ballot in the polling station.