

FINAL REPORT

European Parliamentary Elections (UK and The Netherlands)
23rd to 26th May 2019



Dr John Ault

15th July 2019



European Parliamentary Elections – 23rd to 26th May 2019

Final Report on Election Observation

Objectives

1. To objectively observe the electoral process across the United Kingdom, The Netherlands and Belgium for the European Elections – 23rd to 26th May 2019.
2. To advise the relevant electoral bodies on the results of the observation for the improvement of electoral practice within the UK and The Netherlands.
3. To support the local and national election bodies with constructive feedback on areas of concern so that they may consider remedial action.

Methodology

Democracy Volunteers deployed two teams to observe the national elections to the European Parliament in the UK and The Netherlands. A third team was deployed to the same elections in Belgium, which features in a separate, forthcoming report.

Because of the ongoing debate concerning the UK's membership of the European Union a decision was made relatively late in the process to observe the elections in the UK. Plans were in place some months in advance to observe elections in both The Netherlands and Belgium. Polling day in the UK and The Netherlands was on Thursday 23rd May and on Sunday 26th May in Belgium. A separate final report will be issued for our Belgium observation.

All observations were 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. In the Netherlands the team of 4 observed 30 polling stations, all in South Holland. In Belgium the team of 8 observed 14 polling stations, and in the UK the team observed 166 polling stations, all of which were in England. These broke down as:

Eastern	5
East Midlands	15
London	13
North East	16
North West	51
South East	18
South West	37
West Midlands	7
Yorkshire & Humber	4

The Core Team



Dr John Ault FRSA FRGS (United Kingdom) was the Head of Mission for the European Parliamentary 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, and 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 European Parliamentary 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 as a researcher for a number of organisations including the universities of Harvard and Bristol.

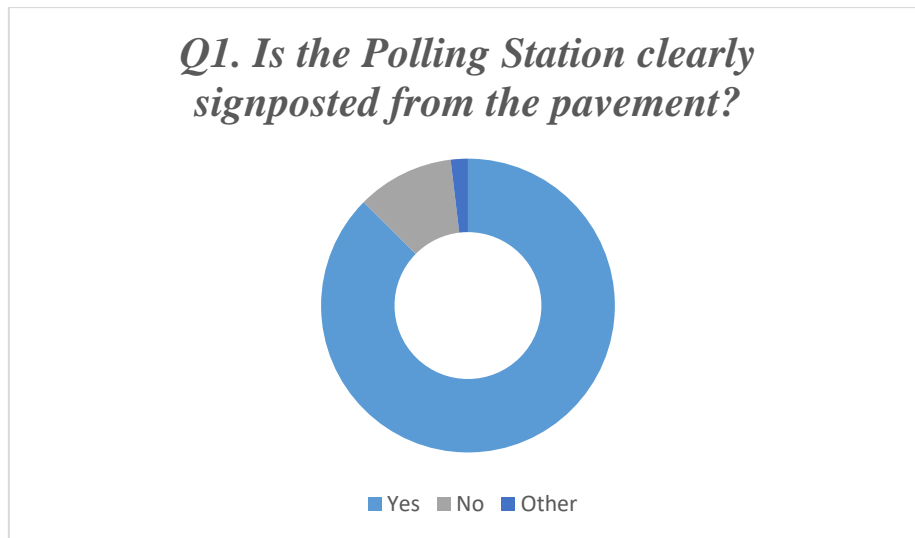
FUNDING DECLARATION

Democracy Volunteers received financial support for this deployment, in England, from a Crowdfunder specifically associated with the deployment for the European Elections in the UK. All those who donated were known to the organisation and no individual's donation was more than £250. Those observing in The Netherlands and Belgium were self-funded by those attending. No financial support was granted to the organisation by any institution.

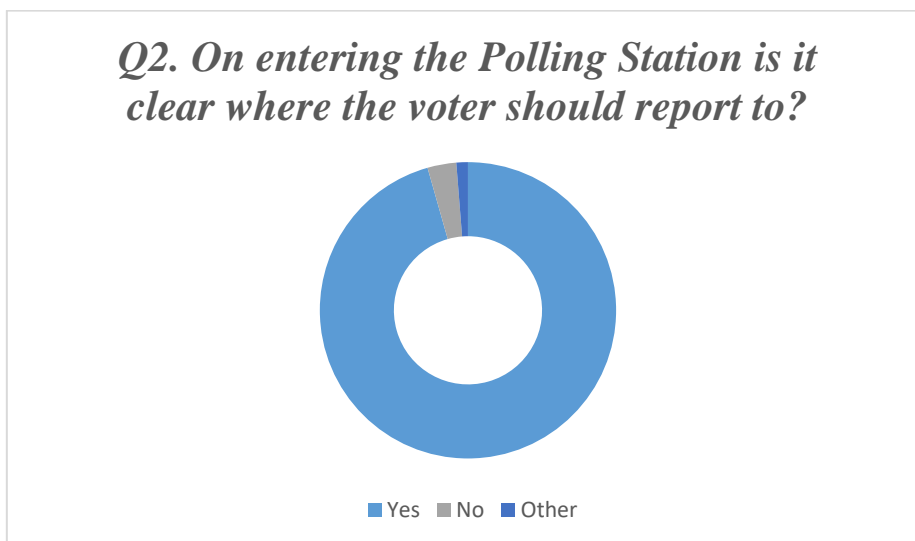
CREDITS

We would like to thank the UK's Electoral Commission for their assistance in making our preparations for the deployment in the UK possible. We would also like to thank the elections staff at the Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations for their assistance in preparations for the observation in The Netherlands.

Results of the Observation (United Kingdom)

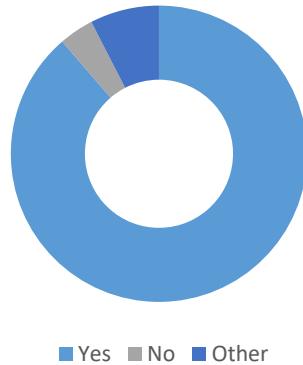


QUESTION 1: Signposting of the polling stations was generally good but observers did raise concerns in 13% of cases. More consideration should be given to signposting as this is below average in comparison to other elections we have observed.



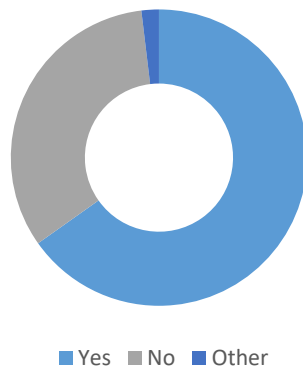
QUESTION 2: In 96% of polling stations it was clear where voters should report to. In general, confusion only existed where there were multiple ballot boxes in the same room.

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



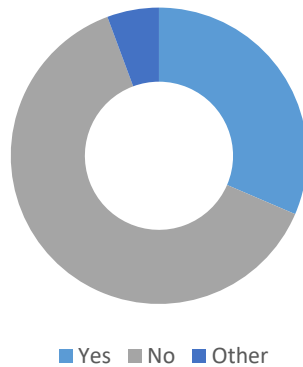
QUESTION 3: Observers were generally satisfied that disabled access was in place in the vast majority of polling stations. However, in 4% of polling stations it was not apparent how those with physical disabilities would access the station and in a further 8% this was something that would have proved challenging. In most cases this was concerning the access over steps or through poor placement of the polling booth designed for wheelchair access.

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



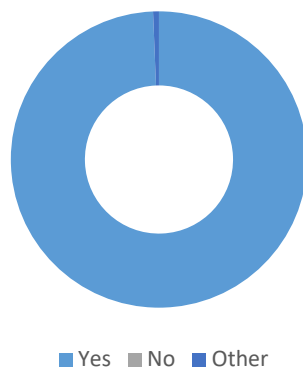
QUESTION 4: Polling staff were generally aware that an observation team might be operating. In 65% of instances observer ID was checked by polling staff.

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



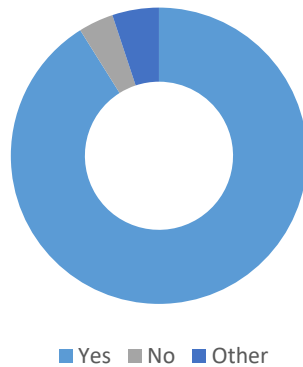
QUESTION 5: Only 31% recorded any details at any point during the observation, however, this was not always at the start of the observation. 63% of polling stations did not record attendance at all.

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



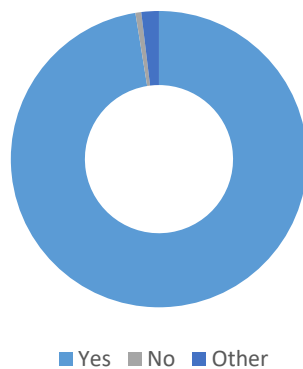
QUESTION 6: 99% of polling stations had two members of polling staff on duty at all times. On no occasions were staff left alone to administer the process and only on one occasion were staff not permanently in place.

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



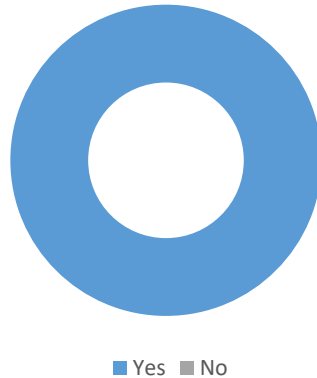
QUESTION 7: An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such, allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at 10pm, was observed. All the ballot boxes observed, bar six, were sealed. Notably three of these ballot boxes were in Preston. However, in 5% 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?



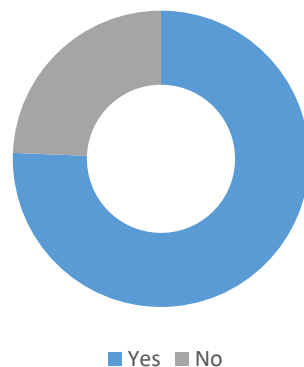
QUESTION 8: All but four of the polling stations observed were properly equipped with the requisite pencil and poster.

Q9. Are there any political leaflets in sight and/or on the route to the booth within the polling station?



QUESTION 9: Observers identified no inappropriate literature in any of the polling stations.

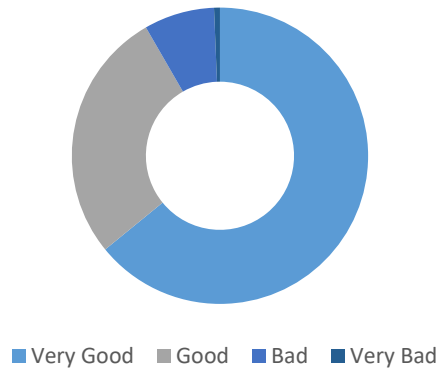
Q10. Was there evidence of 'family voting' in the polling station?



QUESTION 10: In 24% of polling stations, our observer team identified so-called ‘family voting’. 5.8% 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’.¹

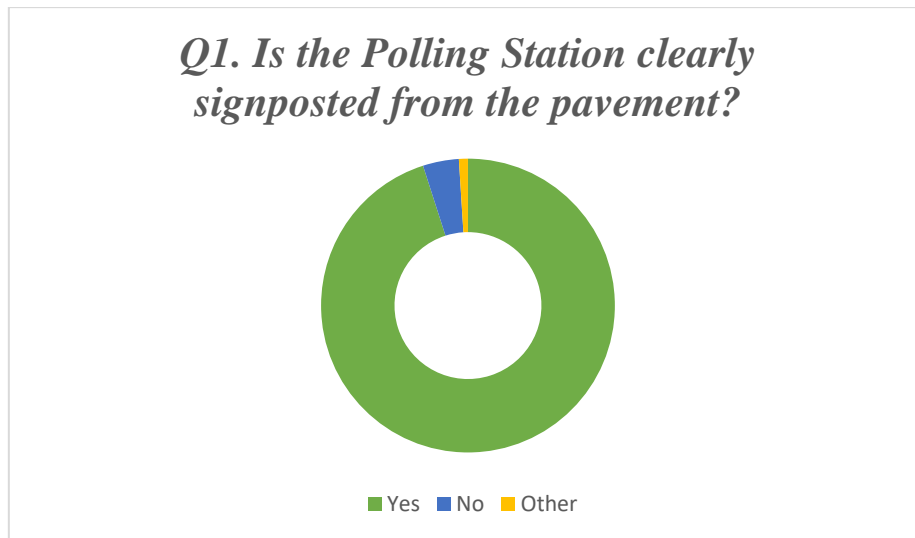
¹ <http://www.osce.org/>

Q11. Overall how do you rate the quality of this polling station?

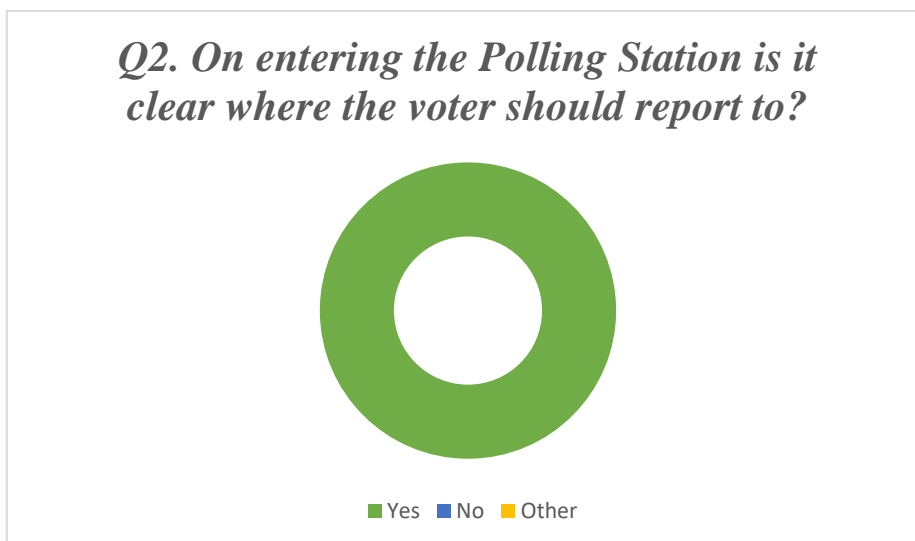


QUESTION 11: Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 64% of polling stations were reported to be 'Very Good', 28% 'Good', 8% 'Bad', and 1% were 'Very Bad'.

Results of the Observation (The Netherlands)

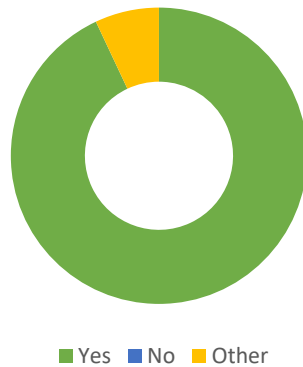


QUESTION 1: Signposting of the polling stations was generally very good but observers did raise concerns in 5% of cases.



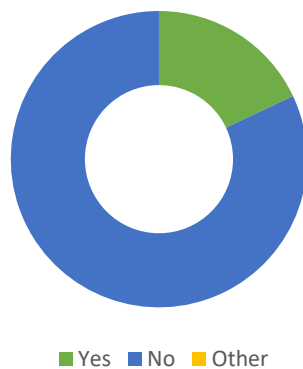
QUESTION 2: In 100% of polling stations it was clear where voters should report to.

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



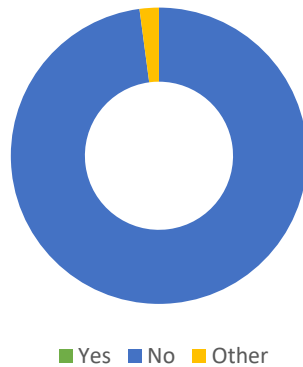
QUESTION 3: Observers were generally very satisfied that disabled access was in place in the vast majority of polling stations. However, in 7% of polling stations whilst there was disabled access available it was not necessarily well signposted.

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



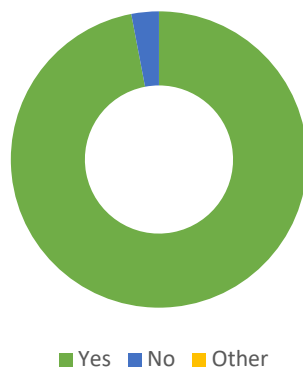
QUESTION 4: Generally, the observer team were not required to show their ID to polling staff.

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



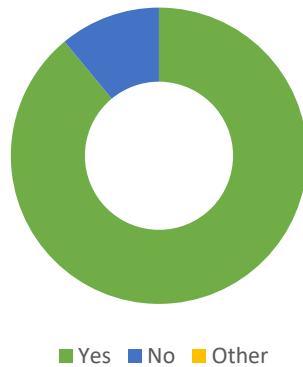
QUESTION 5: On no occasions was the presence of our observer group formally recorded. On two occasions ID was either photographed or their presence was noted on an unofficial form.

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



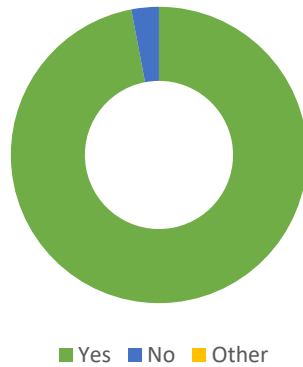
QUESTION 6: 97% of polling stations had three members of polling staff on duty at all times. Only on one occasion were fewer than this number in attendance.

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



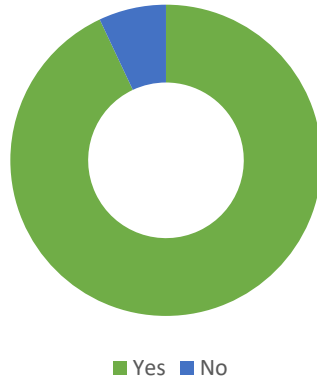
QUESTION 7: An important aspect of the electoral process is that the ballot should be secret and maintained as such, allowing no one access to the ballot papers. The process for closing and sealing a ballot box, from the opening of the polls at 7am and closing at 10pm, was observed. It was concerning that three ballot boxes were not sealed with the appropriate padlock that had been provided.

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



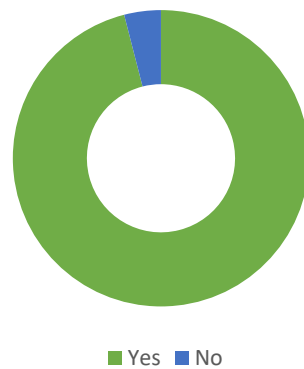
QUESTION 8: All but one of the polling stations observed were properly equipped with the requisite red pencil and poster.

Q9. Are there any political leaflets in sight and/or on the route to the booth within the polling station?



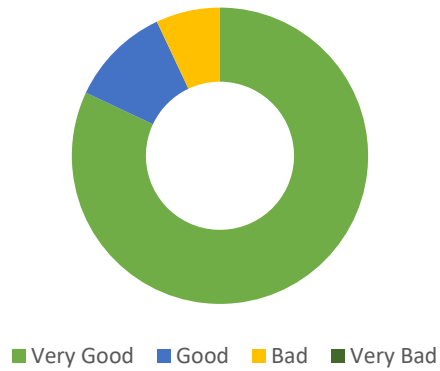
QUESTION 9: Observers identified inappropriate information in two polling stations which were considered to be political. One of these was a list of local councillors in the local municipality and the other was pro-EU literature in another – See Recommendations.

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



QUESTION 10: Our observer team identified so-called 'family voting' in just one polling station.

Q11. Overall how do you rate the quality of this polling station?



QUESTION 11: Observers were asked for an overall rating of the polling station they had attended. 82% of polling stations were reported to be 'Very Good', 11% 'Good', 7% 'Bad', and 0% were 'Very Bad'.

CONCLUSIONS – UNITED KINGDOM

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.

Family Voting

We continue to believe that ‘family voting’ is the single biggest challenge to the credibility of voting in polling stations in the United Kingdom. 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.

Our observer team saw ‘family voting’ in 25% of the polling stations attended which, bearing in mind the team records all the voters who attend polling stations, means that 6% of all the voters who were observed attending polling stations were involved in this practice.

The 6% 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.

- **R1** 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.

Limitations on EU Citizen Voting

A number of our observer teams identified, either through direct observation or from polling staff, that non-UK EU citizens had been turned away from voting at polling stations. In some cases, when voters showed the polling staff the correspondence they had had with the local council, they still were unable to vote and numerous eligible voters were disqualified from voting. This was a very unsatisfactory situation which arguably had a notable impact on the election.

In one case our observer team identified a tendered ballot being issued to a voter who was an EU voter, but it was not made clear that this would not be counted in the election.

- **R2** We would recommend that electoral registration should be uniform for every voter who is qualified to vote at an election.
- **R3** We believe that the use of tendered ballots should be phased out as they give the voter the false impression that their vote is being counted.

CONCLUSIONS – THE NETHERLANDS

This was generally an extremely 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. We have recently issued a report to the Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations concerning the March elections for the Provincial and Water Board elections. We would reiterate those recommendations to the Dutch government but also add two supplementary areas of work.

Time to Vote

Our team is presently working on a more formal academic paper concerning the time it takes for voters to be processed in elections. This will be published in due course. But, as before, we are concerned that voters often take a long time to vote in The Netherlands.² A great deal of this time is due to the size of the ballot paper but we feel that the supporting evidence of how long voters take to vote should be understood as part of the Ministry's plans to streamline voting.

Voters invariably took approximately sixty seconds to vote but the maximum we observed was 143 seconds. This time clearly leads to queueing for other voters as regularly there are only three polling booths available in a polling station. This backing up increases the possibility of 'family voting' as it may lead to voters entering polling booths together.

- **R1** We would reiterate our support for trials in The Netherlands to attempt different forms of ballot paper either along the planned pilot of the Norwegian system or the Finnish ballot system which we recommended following the March elections.

Political Literature

In some polling stations, mainly municipal buildings, the observer team saw what was arguably politically biased information. This took different forms: lists of party representatives on display and also pro-EU literature.

Whilst the former are often in place on a permanent basis they should be considered politically sensitive during polling day. The latter is perhaps understandable in the context of an election to the European Parliament but their being available does suggest an institutional bias in favour of the European Union. Although we take no position on this, we do feel that some parties do not take the same pro-EU position as others and the availability of political material in polling stations should be challenged.

- **R2** We would encourage the reminding of polling station staff to assess the presence of political material in polling stations and to remove it or cover it during election day.

² This is the time it takes from the moment they are given their ballot paper to the time they place it in the ballot box.

Appendix A

The Westminster parliamentary constituencies observed were: **Eastern** - Luton South, Luton North and St. Albans, **East Midlands** - Nottingham North, Nottingham South and Nottingham East, **London** - City of London & Westminster, Islington North & Finsbury, Vauxhall, Bermondsey North and Old Southwark, Westminster North and Holborn & St. Pancras, **North East** - Darlington, Stockton North, Stockton South, Sedgefield, Middlesbrough, Redcar and Middlesbrough South & East Cleveland, **North West** - Preston, Ribble Valley, Chorley, South Ribble, Fylde, Manchester Central, Manchester Gorton and Manchester Withington, Warrington North, Warrington South, Tatton, Macclesfield, Congleton and Crewe & Nantwich, **South East** - Oxford East, Oxford West & Abingdon, Wantage, South West Surrey and Runnymede & Weybridge, **South West** - St. Ives, Truro & Falmouth, Camborne & Redruth and St. Austell & Newquay, North Cornwall, South East Cornwall, Plymouth Moor View and Plymouth Sutton & Devonport. **West Midlands** - North Shropshire **Yorkshire and The Humber** - Leeds North West, Leeds North East, Leeds East, Leeds Central and Leeds West