Electronic voting

In 2002 polling station-based electronic voting was used in three constituencies (Dublin North, Dublin West, and Meath) for the first time at Irish elections. The government 's aims in introducing the new system were to remove the errors present in manual voting, to prevent unintentional spoiling of ballots, to speed up the counting process, and to support a positive image of the country in its use of information technology. The Powervote/Nedap 'Election Management System' (EMS), which had already been used for elections in the Netherlands and Germany, was selected to run the new electronic voting and vote counting system. This system consisted of three main components: firstly, the Nedap voting machine combined the previous functions of ballot paper, ballot box, and polling booth. Voters simply cast their vote by pressing the buttons on the display panel of the stand-alone machine, which contained a screen similar to a ballot sheet. The electorate was familiarised with the voting procedure by pamphlets delivered to every elector, as well as a travelling road-show of the voting machines throughout the three constituencies in the weeks prior to polling day. The predicted confusion amongst the electorate did not materialise, and most people were impressed by the simplicity of the new system. The second component of the EMS was the ballot module which was a small portable electronic device stored in the voting machine. This recorded the votes, and each module was sent to the central counting centre, where they were transferred to the third component, the Integrated Election Software (IES) system, which counted the votes. The EMS system was thus not that advanced and hardly supported the image of a technologically advanced country, since voters still had to travel to their respective polling stations to vote, and the modules containing the votes had to be manually gathered and brought to a count centre. Rather than replicate the mobile voting methods of voting via text messaging, the Internet, and telephone used in several British local council elections in 2002, the Irish government adopted EMS because it carried less risk of electoral fraud. The benefits of technological advance were far outweighed by the necessity of protecting the integrity and security of the voting process.

The performance of the new e-voting system received a mixed response. The predicted efficiency did not transpire, as the results took up to five hours to produce. The results of all counts were announced simultaneously, thus giving the losing candidates no time to prepare for the disappointment of defeat. This dehumanising aspect of the electronic count was bitterly criticised by all candidates, a mood encapsulated by the emotional response of former Fine ael deputy leader, Nora Owen, when her twenty-one years service in the Dail came to an end in 91one brutal moment92 (Donnelly, 2002). She declared 91it was like being stabbed ery quickly92 (Donnelly, 2002), and the Minister for the Environment and Local Government, Martin Cullen, later admitted that this aspect of the electronic count had been 91pretty disastrous92 (Weeks, 2003: 266). Surprisingly, there was little public reaction to the possible threat to the validity of the voting process. The computer code for the ES software is not available in the public domain, instead it is held as a 'proprietary secret' by the Nedap/Powervote company (Lillington, 2002). Voters must simply trust that the system counts their votes correctly, and they have no definitive way of knowing whether the results are correct. Indeed, a post-election report conducted by Zerflow warned that the voting machines could easily be tampered with (Hennessy, 2002).

There are also benefits; once electronic voting goes nationwide, the Gregory method of transferring

votes (currently used in the Irish Senate elections [and for STV elections in Northern Ireland - ed.]) could be introduced to eliminate the random element in distributing surpluses under the current counting process. Despite the loss of tally data on the geographical spread of the parties' votes, another tangible benefit is the availability, for the first time, of details on all the preferences of each vote. Analysis of the data indicates that the Greens were the most preferred recipient of preferences outside a voter's favoured party. It also confirms that Sinn Fein won fewer seats than the Greens and the PDs, despite a greater first preference total, because they attracted fewer transfers than any other party (Collins, 2002). The data also showed that with an average of 12 candidates per constituency, 80% of voters cast at least three preferences, while only 40% bestowed more than four preferences (Gallagher, 2003: 106). Hopes that the excitement generated by a new system would improve turnout was greatly misplaced, since the decline in participation in the three operational constituencies was greater than the national average, a record low turnout of 62.6%. The government announced that the electronic voting system would operate nationwide for the 2004 local and European Parliamentary elections, following its successful extension to a further four Dublin constituencies in the second Nice Treaty referendum of October 2002.