

Design of STV Ballot Papers for 2007 Local Government Elections

The Consultation Paper issued by the Scotland Office on 9 June 2006 concerning the design of the ballot paper for the Scottish Parliament elections in 2007 indicated *“that Scottish Ministers are considering a possible layout for the Local Government ballot paper that aims to help voters see the political groups of candidates more clearly.”*

We take this to mean that where a party nominates two or more candidates, those candidates would be grouped together on the ballot paper. We are aware that members of some parties have been lobbying for this. This suggestion has sometimes been presented as a possible means of helping voters who will be new to the STV voting system. On other occasions the intention appears to have been to obtain an advantage for a party that was intending to nominate more than one candidate in many wards.

The purpose of an STV-PR election is to secure the election of the candidates most representative of the electors who vote, within the constraints of electing either three or four councillors from each ward. The STV ballot paper must, therefore, be designed in a way that facilitates the voters identifying on the ballot paper the candidates they want to vote for. Party affiliation will be one attribute of the candidates that voters will look for in deciding the order in which to mark their personal preferences. Party affiliation is an important attribute, but it is only one attribute and its importance will not be the same for all voters.

It is now standard practice for UK ballot papers to show the party affiliations of candidates by both a permitted description and a party emblem. It is arguable that it would be of further assistance to voters if candidates of the same party were grouped together on the ballot paper. However, any advantage this would have for voters must be set against any disadvantage it could have for the voters. In particular, the grouping together of candidates whose permitted description is “Independent” could be confusing for voters as these candidates are not presenting themselves as an organised group, unlike all the other grouped candidates on the ballot paper.

If the candidates are to be grouped by party, consideration then needs to be given to the order in which the parties will be presented and the order of the candidates within each group.

Ballot papers with the candidates in alphabetical order of family and given name have been used for the District Council STV elections (and other STV elections) in Northern Ireland since 1973. So far as we are aware, there are no plans or demands to change the layout of the STV ballot papers used in Northern Ireland. Specimen Ballot Paper **A** shows an STV ballot paper with the candidates names presented in alphabetical order by family name and then by given name. (The data were taken from a group of four wards in Edinburgh that may form one new four-member ward, with expected numbers of candidates based on previous levels of local support for the respective parties. The party emblems were copied from the website of the Electoral Commission and all are reproduced at the same size.)

Specimen Ballot Paper **B** shows the same candidates grouped by party, with the parties presented in alphabetical order and the candidates within each grouping

presented in alphabetical order of family and given name. In this instance, the candidates who share the permitted description “Independent” appear at the top of the list because the names of the contesting parties all begin with “Scottish”. This arrangement is likely to be confusing for voters because, while their names may be grouped together, the “Independent” candidates are in no way a “group”.

If the parties are presented in alphabetical order, the “Independents” are likely to be at the top of the ballot paper in every ward contested by any “independent” candidate. The following parties with names in the range “A” to “H” of the alphabet contested one or more wards in previous local government elections in Scotland:

2003

- British National Party
- Countryside Party
- Firefighters against the cuts
- Green Independent Party

1999

- Brechin Independence Group
- Christian Independence Party
- Communist Party of Great Britain
- Democratic Left
- Faslane Peace Camp
- Humanist Party

Not all of these parties are currently registered with the Electoral Commission, but some of them may register again and contest the 2007 elections. Then their party names would appear on the ballot papers above all the “Independent” candidates if the candidates were grouped by party and the parties were presented in alphabetical order. If the British National Party nominates candidates for the local government elections in 2007 it is almost certain to be at the top of the ballot paper in every ward it contests.

One way of ungrouping the “Independent” candidates would be to include them in the alphabetical list of parties in alphabetical order of family name and given name. Specimen Ballot Paper **C** shows how the previous list of candidates would then be presented to the voters. Like Specimen Ballot Paper **B**, this presentation is also likely to be confusing for voters.

If the candidates were grouped by party, their names could be presented in alphabetical order within each group. Alternatively the candidates could be listed in some other order decided by each party. Any such approach is likely to lead to further confusion for voters as there is no simple way of deciding the appropriate order of the names of “Independent” candidates other than strict alphabetical order.

While we appreciate that grouping candidates of the same party together may be of some advantage to some voters, we consider that the disadvantages would outweigh the advantages. **Accordingly, we recommend that there should be no grouping of candidates by party.**

If there is genuine concern about the well-established effects of alphabetical ordering of candidates and of positioning at the top and bottom of the list on the ballot paper, we suggest consideration should be given to presenting the candidates' names in a random order decided by a blind draw within each ward. We are aware that some legislations, eg Tasmania, take this a stage further and use 'Robson rotation', in which every candidate's name appears an equal number of times in every position on the ballot papers issued within a ward, but we consider that would be a step too far for the elections in 2007.

The three Specimen Ballot Papers all include "instructions to voters" at the head of the paper. The wording and layout of these "instructions" have been adapted from those used on ballot papers in many STV elections. They have been refined over several years in the light of voters' comments and experience of approaches that minimise voters' mistakes. We would commend their use.

The Specimen Ballot Papers also include a specific "Vote here" instruction above the column of boxes where voters should mark their preferences. We suggest the inclusion of such a heading to this column to minimise the risk of voters marking their preferences in any space to the right of the candidates' names. The preferences so recorded may be perfectly valid, but such a paper would have to be processed manually when the ballot papers are scanned. This simple column heading should reduce that need and so speed processing.

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Fairshare Voting Reform

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Fairshare is a cross-party and non-party organisation set up in February 2001 to campaign for the introduction of the Single Transferable Vote system of Proportional Representation (STV-PR) for local government elections in Scotland. In January 2005 Fairshare extended its objectives to promote reform of the voting systems used for all public elections in Scotland. Fairshare is constituted as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee and maintains a network of Registered Supporters.

Election for the City of Edinburgh Council

North-east Ward











To vote:

Write the figure **1** in the box next to candidate you *most* wish to be elected.

Write the figure **2** next to your *second* most preferred candidate.

Write the figure **3** next to your *third* preference, *and so on*.

You may express *as many preferences* or *as few preferences* as you wish, but do not write the same figure more than once.

Do NOT mark this ballot paper with an 'X' or a '✓'	Vote here
ABRAHIM Ali Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Liberal Democrat Party	
BROWN William Ian Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Green Party	
CRANSTON Helen Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Liberal Democrat Party	
JACKSON Heather Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Independent	
KHAN Saeed Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Labour Party	
LINES Lynsey Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish National Party	
MACDONALD Donald Alexander Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Labour Party	
MASTERS Peter Martin Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	
MCKAY Michael Gordon Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Independent	
ROBERTSON Peter Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish National Party	
ROSS George Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	
SINCLAIR Emma Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Labour Party	
WILSON Sonia Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Independent	
You are entitled to vote in secret Please do NOT fold this ballot paper	

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MCKAY Michael Gordon Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Independent	
WILSON Sonia Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Independent	
MASTERS Peter Martin Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	
ROSS George Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	
BROWN William Ian Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Green Party	
KHAN Saeed Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Labour Party	
MACDONALD Donald Alexander Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Labour Party	
SINCLAIR Emma Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Labour Party	
ABRAHIM Ali Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Liberal Democrat Party	
CRANSTON Helen Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish Liberal Democrat Party	
LINES Lynsey Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish National Party	
ROBERTSON Peter Address1, Address 2, Address3, Edinburgh EHn nLL Scottish National Party	
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