

BRIEFING NOTE:

SURVEY OF ASSEMBLY MEMBER'S VIEWS ON INTRODUCING ELECTRONIC VOTING INTO THE ASSEMBLY CHAMBER

28 November 2007

1. Introduction

As part of the Inquiry into Electronic Voting in the Assembly Chamber, the Procedures Committee requested a survey of MLA's views on the issue. This survey was to help the Committee in their deliberations. The Committee agreed a series of questions and a questionnaire was sent to each of the 108 MLA's with a copy of a research paper on electronic voting attached as background.

The results of the initial survey were reported to the Committee on 14 November 2007. As some parties were under-represented in the response, however, it was decided to run the survey again giving Members the opportunity to respond either electronically or in hard copy.

As responses to the first survey were received anonymously, it was not possible to simply add the results of the second survey to those of the first survey as some Members will have replied twice. This briefing paper therefore presents the results from both surveys along side each other for comparison, but does not attempt to combine the results.

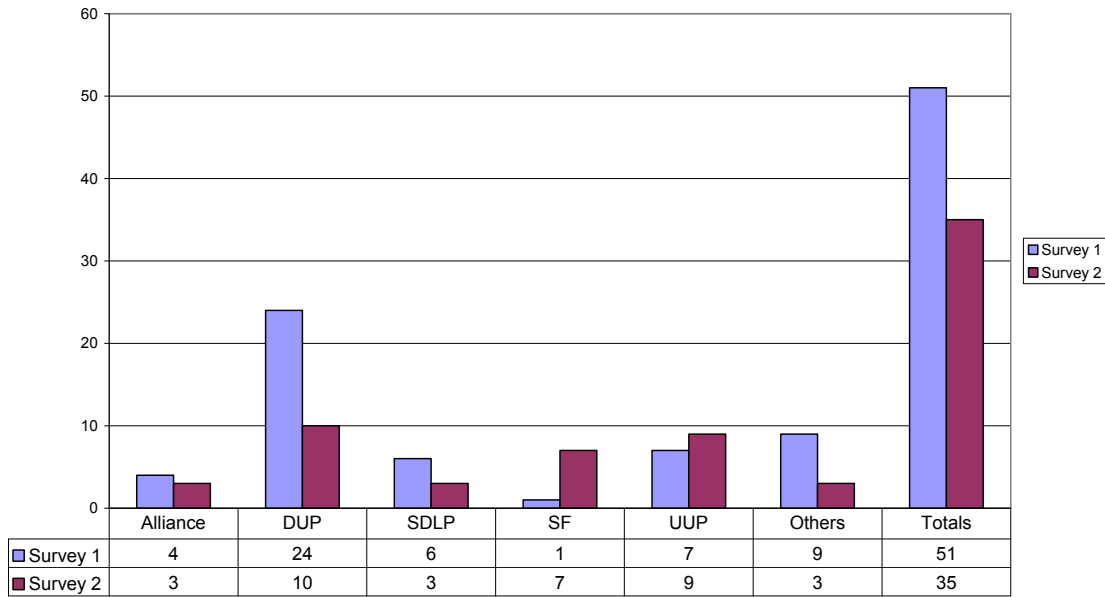
In keeping with the structure of the previous report, this report provides information on the number of responses to the survey and then sets out the results for each of the five questions asked in the survey, followed by a brief summary of the comments which some Members included. The questionnaire used for both surveys is attached at appendix A.

2. Response to the Survey

Of the 108 questionnaires that were distributed to the MLAs, 51 were returned in the initial survey - a response rate of 47%. The response to the second survey was lower - only 35 (32%) were returned - which is not too surprising as some Members may have been reluctant to respond twice to the same survey.

Figure 1 presents a breakdown of the political party of the respondents to both surveys.

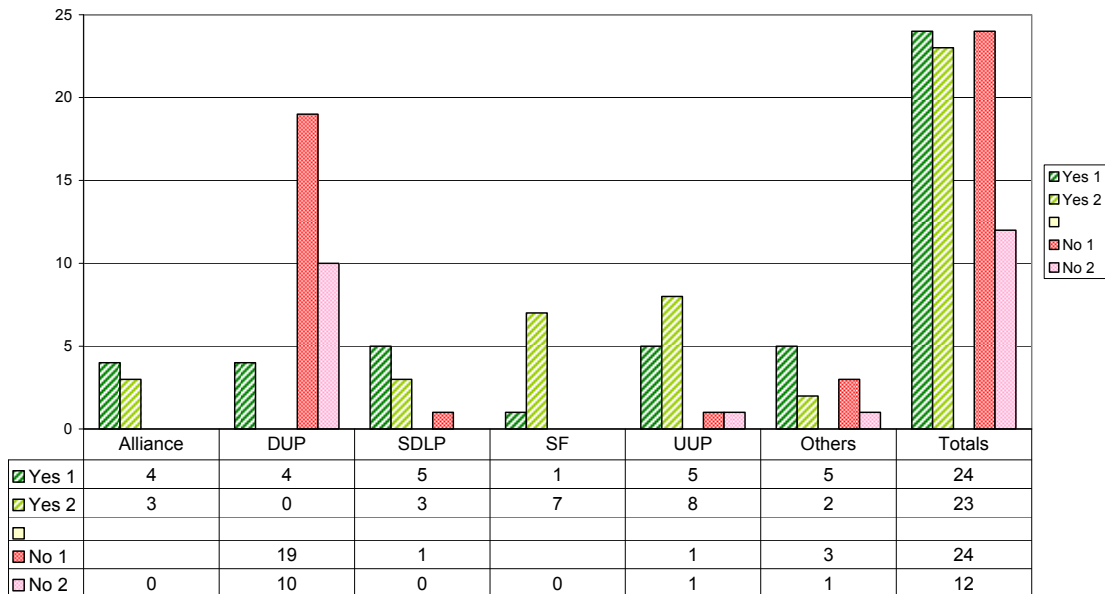
Figure 1. Response to Survey



3. Would you be in favour of the introduction of an electronic voting system in the debating Chamber?

Figure 2 provides a breakdown of responses to this question (for both surveys) by political party.

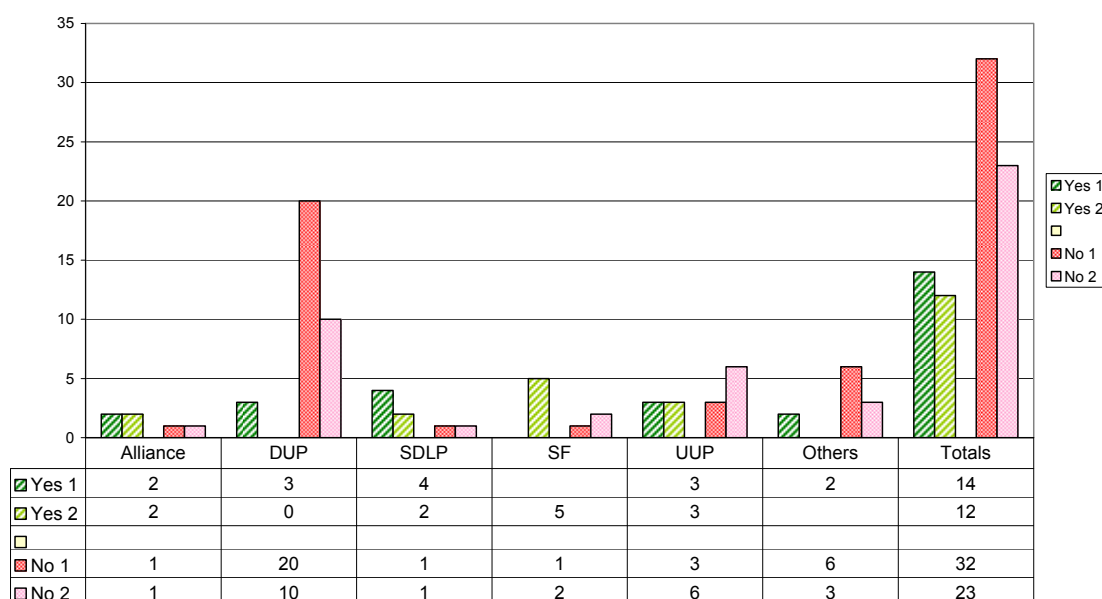
Figure 2. In favour of electronic voting?



4. Would you be in favour of a “Decision Time”¹ as in the Scottish Parliament, when votes are taken together?

Given the apparent efficiency of the Scottish Parliament’s system of having a “decision time” at the end of the days sitting when Scottish Members vote electronically on all of that days matters, MLA’s were asked if this was a system that they would like the Northern Ireland Assembly to adopt. Figure 3 provides a breakdown of responses to this question (for both surveys) by political party.

Figure 3. In favour of "Decision Time"?

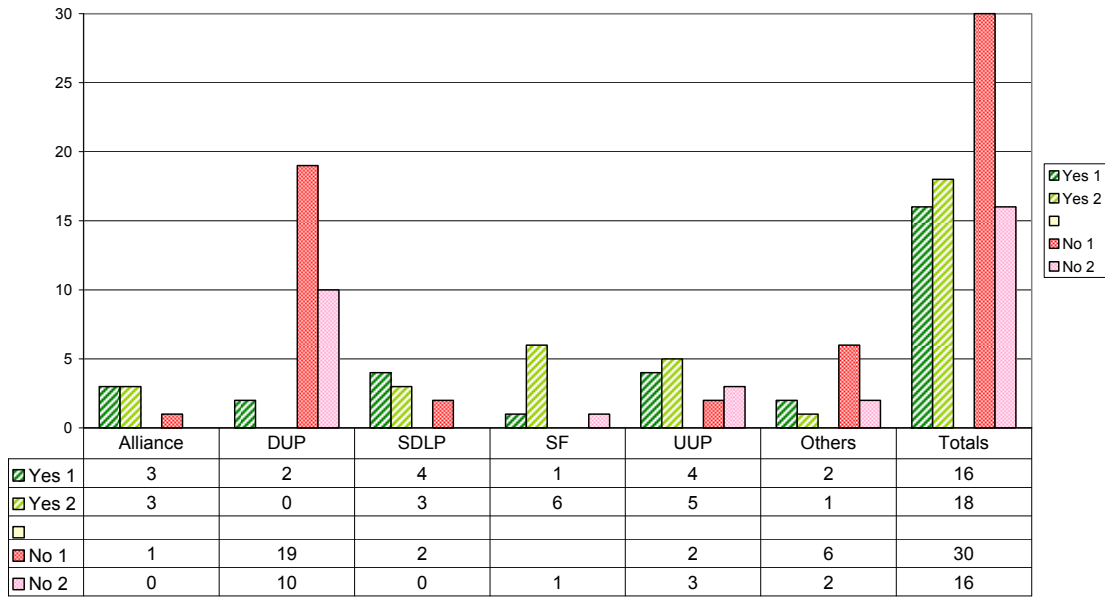


5. Would you be in favour of electronic voting for all votes and not just in place of divisions?

Members were asked if they would be in favour of all votes in the Chamber being taken electronically or only in place of divisions. Figure 4 provides a breakdown of responses to this question (for both surveys) by political party.

¹ The Scottish Parliament has all its votes for each day at 5.00pm at the end of each day’s sitting.

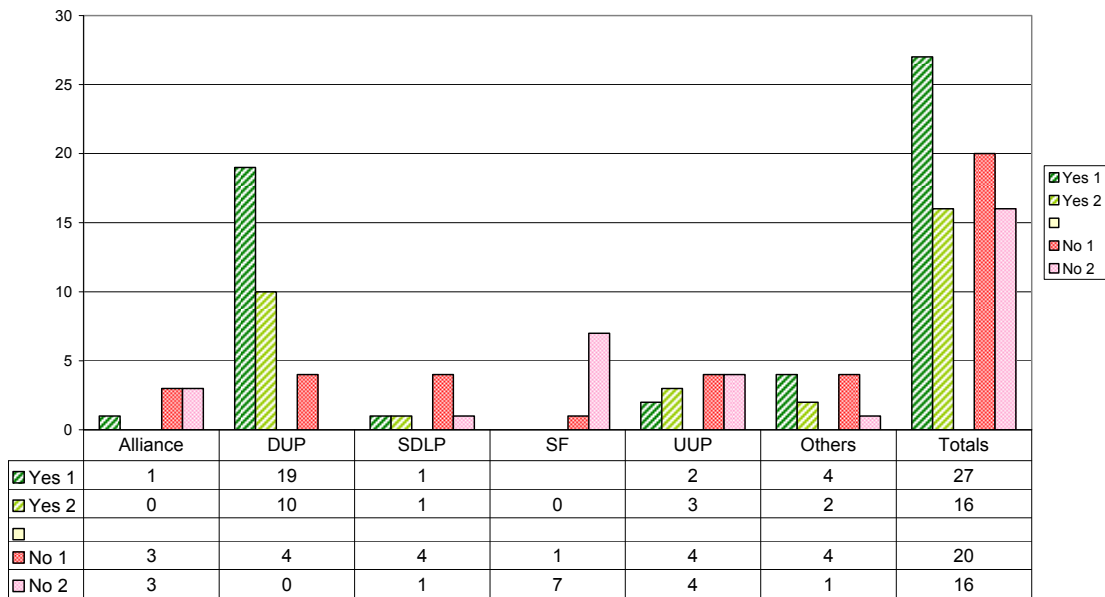
Figure 4. In favour of electronic voting for all votes?



6. Do you feel that the current system is sufficient?

Figure 5 provides a breakdown of responses to this question (for both surveys) by political party.

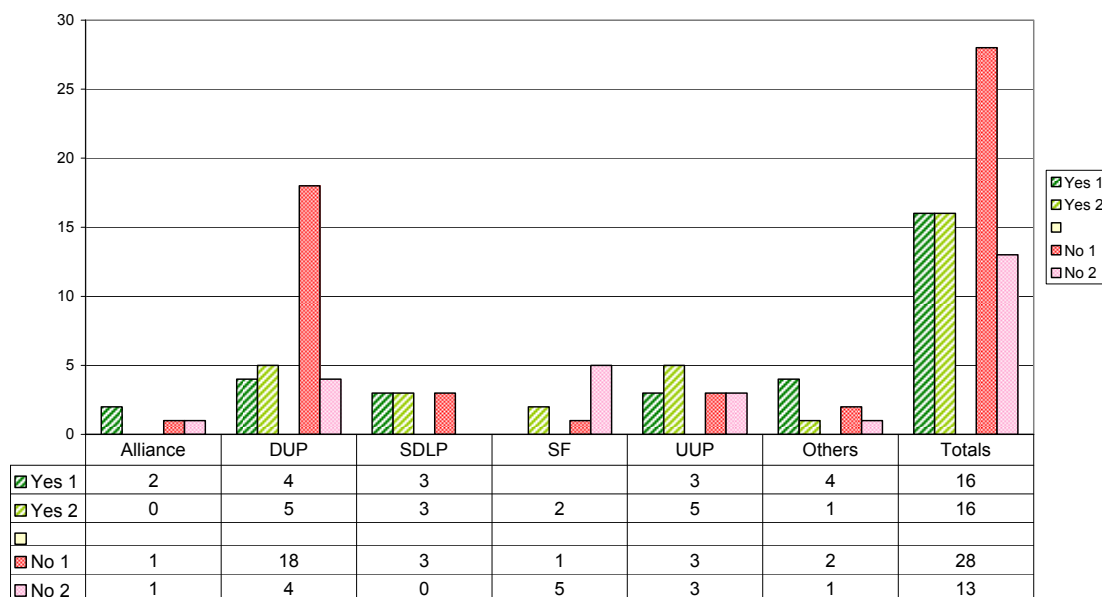
Figure 5. Do you feel current system is sufficient?



7. Do you feel that changes could be made to improve the current system without introducing electronic voting?

The Members were asked if they felt that there were other measures which could be taken which would improve the current system without introducing electronic voting. Figure 6 provides a breakdown of responses to this question (for both surveys) by political party.

Figure 6. Do you feel that improvements could be made without electronic voting?



8. Summary of Comments

Members were given the opportunity to expand on their answers to the set questions in the questionnaire and 5 members chose to do so in the first survey. Of these five members there were a variety of views, for and against electronic voting. The two comments which were against electronic voting pointed to two different reasons; firstly that electronic voting would limit a MLAs opportunity to network and to lobby for their position and secondly that the current system is a valued tradition and should remain for that reason.

Of the other comments one felt that it was too cumbersome and wasted members' time, another felt that the system should be changed but was open to electronic voting or other changes and the third felt that a simple show of hands would be a sufficient for most votes in the Chamber.

In the second survey, there were four additional comments from members who were in favour of electronic voting. One Member felt that "decision time" would allow more flexibility for Members and staff. Another felt that the use of electronic voting could be extended to obtain agreement on views expressed during debate. The third comment related to cost, which it was pointed out

could be reduced if the system was installed alongside other work in the chamber. Finally, one Member simply stated that they would be happy to consider any proposal put forward for improvement without introducing electronic voting.

9. Conclusions

Taken together, the results of both surveys would appear to indicate that there is overall marginal support in favour of electronic voting, with the majority of Members opposed to the idea of a “decision time”.

While there appears to be marginal support in favour of electronic voting, there also appears to be marginal support for the view that the current system is sufficient.

The results are less clear in relation to the question of whether or not electronic voting should be used for all votes or only for divisions, going against using it for all votes in the first survey and marginally in favour of this in the second survey. A similar situation has arisen with the last question on whether improvements could be made without the introduction of electronic voting, with results going firstly one way and then the other.

The conclusions are tenuous as the results are slightly marred by the mixed response rates and the need for a re-run, but hopefully this will nevertheless provide a useful indication of the views of Members on this issue.

Appendix A. Electronic Voting - Member’s Questionnaire

The Committee on Procedures is currently conducting an inquiry regarding the introduction of Electronic Voting in the debating chamber. There are a number of issues which need to be considered before such a decision can be made.

Some of the main advantages and disadvantages in introducing electronic voting are as follows:

Advantages

- Voting times could be shorter
- An instant count would be recorded
- Members could see votes on a screen

Disadvantages

- Voting systems can be expensive
- Introducing a system could be disruptive in the chamber
- An end to the “theatre” of divisions
- No more networking in the lobbies

The Committee on Procedures are very interested in the initial views of members regarding this issue and would be very grateful if you would take the time to answer the questions below to better inform the inquiry. All responses are accepted in confidence and the results of the survey will not be attributed to individual MLAs or Parties.

Please indicate your Political Party: _____

	Yes	No
1 Would you be in favour of the introduction of an electronic voting system in the debating Chamber?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 Would you be in favour of a “Decision Time” ² as in the Scottish Parliament, when votes are taken together?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3 Would you be in favour of electronic voting for all votes and not just in place of divisions?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 Do you feel that the current system is sufficient?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5 Do you feel that changes could be made to improve the current system without introducing electronic voting?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
<p>Please outline any further comments in the space below or alternatively contact Vincent Gribbin, Research and Library Services, ext 21802.</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>		

² The Scottish Parliament has all its votes for each day at 5.00pm at the end of each day’s sitting.