

How Do We Elect MLAs?

KEY:

F: Female Speaker

F: In Northern Ireland Assembly elections, we vote using a form of proportional representation called STV. Instead of just voting for one candidate by marking an X on a ballot, voters can select as many as they want by ranking the ones they like best. They can, but they don't have to. We use this system for elections to the Assembly. Eighteen constituencies, each elect five MLAs.

In this simplified version there are three seats available and five candidates running for election. The quota is 3000. This is how many votes each candidate will need to win. After counting the first preferences marked on the ballots Lauren has enough votes to be elected. In fact, she has more votes than she needs. She has a surplus. This surplus is then transferred to the candidates ranked as second favourite on her ballots. Now Fergus has enough votes to win the second seat and the value of his surplus is transferred to the other candidates.

But look, none of the candidates have enough votes to win the next seat so the least popular candidate with the fewest votes, Ella, is eliminated. Her ballots are redistributed to the remaining two candidates based on the voters' preferences. Now Sean has enough votes to be elected to the next seat. Remember there are five seats to fill per constituency in the Northern Ireland Assembly elections. The benefit of the STV method is that the majority of voters will have at least one of their choices get elected. So with STV each vote really is powerful and can make a big difference.