

For discussion
on 21 March 2005

Legislative Council Panel on Constitutional Affairs
Matters Relating to Election-related Publicity Materials

Purpose

This paper seeks Members' views on ways to reduce paper consumption in distributing election-related publicity materials to electors.

Background

2. At present, during the conduct of election, both the Registration and Electoral Office (REO) and candidates contesting in the election send various types of election-related materials to electors in paper form. A large amount of paper is therefore consumed. In response to suggestions from a concern group that publicity materials should be distributed to electors electronically as far as possible in order to minimise the impact on the environment, REO has looked into ways to reduce paper consumption in distributing election-related publicity materials. This paper presents three options for achieving this aim.

Current Arrangements on Election-related Materials Sent to Electors

3. In line with past practice, REO sent the following election-related materials in paper form and by post to all electors in the 2004 Legislative Council (LegCo) elections:

- a poll card – to advise the elector of the polling date, polling hours, address of the polling station assigned to him, and the elector's geographical constituency, and functional constituency if applicable;
- a location map of the polling station assigned to the elector concerned;

- ❑ a guide on voting – to provide information on the steps an elector should follow when casting his vote on the polling date;
- ❑ a candidates’ introductory leaflet – to set out the relevant candidates’ personal information and their political platform (as provided by the candidates); and
- ❑ a leaflet of the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) – to remind electors of the provisions of the Elections (Corrupt and Illegal Conduct) Ordinance and the need to uphold a clean and fair election.

The weight of the above set of election-related materials, depending on the number of list of candidates contesting in the constituency concerned, ranges from about 61 grams to 123 grams (average about 76 grams).

4. In addition, as provided in section 43 of the Legislative Council Ordinance, Chapter 542, candidates may send one letter free of postage to electors of the geographical or functional constituency concerned. There is a similar provision in section 37 of the District Councils Ordinance, Chapter 547.

Options for Reducing Paper Consumption in the Distribution of Election-related Publicity Materials

5. The Electoral Affairs Commission (EAC) and the Administration are supportive of the adoption of appropriate measures in the electoral process to reduce the consumption of paper provided that any new arrangement can continue to safeguard the integrity of the electoral process.

6. Following an initial review of the range of publicity materials sent by REO to electors, our view is as follows:

- (a) The poll card (which weighs about 4 grams) should continue to be sent to electors in paper and by post. The current practice of sending paper poll cards by post serves a dual purpose of informing electors of the polling details as well as providing a checking mechanism for updating the register of electors. Based on the undelivered poll cards returned, REO can check whether the electors concerned have moved to a different residential address. Sending poll cards by post has also proved

to be an effective means of detecting suspected cases of vote planting, as the resident concerned, upon receipt of a large number of poll cards for other persons, would notice that his residential address might have been used by others for voter registration. Sending poll cards through electronic means would not serve this checking purpose.

- (b) The location map of the polling station assigned for each elector and the guide on voting, which are essential information to ensure the efficient conduct of elections, should also continue to be sent to electors in paper form and by post. (The information is currently printed on both sides of the paper which weighs about 5 grams.)
- (c) The proposal put forward by the concern group to send only one set of election-related documents to each household and to require shared-use of the documents within the household may cause confusion and inconvenience to electors. For instance, in the same household there may be members who are GC electors only and members who are also electors of functional constituencies (FC). Further, sending the documents on a household basis cannot ensure equal access of all electors to the information.
- (d) The suggestion for REO to send election-related documents to electors by e-mail may have a number of practical problems. It is not uncommon that e-mail users frequently change their e-mail addresses. An effective and efficient way to maintain an accurate list of electors' e-mail addresses and to ensure that the documents sent by e-mail are received has not been identified. So far, our research on overseas practice has found no government which collects e-mail addresses for the purpose of sending election-related documents (see paragraph 14 below).

7. With the above parameters in mind, we set out below three options for reducing paper consumption by REO in relation to election-related materials.

Option A

8. Under this option, REO will continue to send poll cards, location

maps of polling stations and the guide on voting in paper form by post. As for candidates' introductory leaflets, electors will be given a choice of whether or not to receive the leaflets by post. REO will also indicate on the poll cards that electors can view the leaflets on the website of REO.

9. Applicants for voter registration or change of registered address will be requested to indicate their choice on the new application form. For existing electors, we will make available forms for them to indicate to REO that they prefer not to receive candidates' introductory leaflets by post. The option could be publicized through advertisements and announcements in the public interest (API).

10. The arrangement will save paper, but the total reduction in paper consumption will depend on the number of electors who opt to receive the information electronically. Based on the experience in the 2004 LegCo elections, for every elector who chooses the electronic means there would be an estimated 88% reduction in paper consumption (i.e. from the average weight of about 76 grams per full set of election-related documents to 9 grams).

11. The interests of electors who are not frequent or competent users of information technology will not be affected as they can choose to receive the leaflets by post. Also, electors who wish to share one set of election-related documents in paper form may among themselves arrange for only one set of documents to be sent by post.

Option B

12. Option B is different from Option A only in that REO will cease producing candidates' introductory leaflets in paper form. The leaflets will be posted on REO's website only. This option should bring paper consumption to the minimum, but some may query whether this arrangement would affect the accessibility of candidates' information for electors who are not competent users of information technology.

Option C

13. Option C goes one step further than Option B in that REO will not produce candidates' introductory leaflets even in electronic form. We note that in some overseas countries, the electoral authorities send only poll cards to electors and leave the dissemination of candidates' information to candidates themselves (details in paragraph 15). However, there may be views that, at the present stage of Hong Kong's constitutional development when compared to

advanced democracies overseas, the public may expect the Government to continue to play a role in disseminating information on candidates.

Overseas Practice

14. In many countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, Belgium, Germany, Singapore and Malaysia, election-related documents published by the governments are sent to electors by post. Our research so far does not reveal any government that collects e-mail addresses from the electors for the purpose of sending election-related documents. In the United Kingdom, electors may choose to fill in their e-mail addresses on the voter registration forms, only for the authority to contact them when there are questions about the information contained in the forms.

15. Regarding the types of election-related documents sent by the governments, the practice varies. In countries such as Belgium, Germany, the United Kingdom, Singapore and Malaysia, electors only receive a poll card (or a similar notification/summon) from the electoral authorities. In Canada, electors also receive a follow-up voting reminder.

Role of Candidates

16. Apart from the above proposals in respect of Government's distribution of election-related documents, there is the suggestion that candidates and others involved in electioneering may contribute towards reducing paper consumption by economising on printed materials and using other means to communicate with electors. There may be room for candidates to reduce paper consumption. For instance, candidates may send only abridged versions of campaign materials and refer electors to their websites.

Advice Sought

17. Members are invited to offer their views on Options A to C (paragraphs 8-13) for reducing paper consumption in REO's distribution of election-related publicity materials, and to consider the suggestions in paragraph 16 for candidates to reduce paper consumption in their campaigns.