

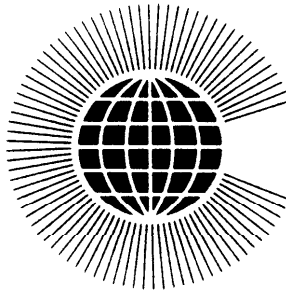
# Voting for Democracy

Conference of Commonwealth Chief Election Officers  
Queens' College Cambridge - 23-26 March 1998

---

## GETTING THE REGISTER RIGHT

Mr Doodnauth Singh SC  
Chairman, Guyana Elections Commission



**Commonwealth Secretariat**

## PART III

### Getting the Resister Right

### Voter Registration and Voter Identification in the Electoral Process in Guyana

#### 3. Historical Background:

- 3.1 Voter registration and voter identification developed as essential elements in the electoral system when elections were introduced in the political culture of Guyana. The requirements for these elements were included in electoral laws that were made from time to time, by the legislature. Up to and inclusive of the 1957 General Elections, the relevant laws vested executive powers for the electoral process in the Governor, and administrative responsibilities in a Commissioner of Elections and a Chief Electoral Officer. These officers were appointed by the Governor to whom they were accountable in respect of their duties and responsibilities.
- 3.2 Voter registration was voluntary in 1957. Anyone desirous of voting in the Election, would complete and submit a statutory application form to a district registration officer. These forms were available from designated public offices like Post Offices, District Administration Offices and Police Stations. The qualifying age for voting remained at 21 years under the principles of universal adult suffrage which was first introduced in 1953.
- 3.3 Voter registration was compulsory in 1961. The exercise was conducted on a house-to-house basis by enumerators. Also, in 1961, the Governor's electoral powers were transferred to a Minister of the Government. Transfer of these powers was in keeping with the letter and spirit of

the concessions granted by the British Government at the 1960 British Guiana Constitutional Conference, which among other things, provided for responsibility for internal affairs (including electoral matters) and security to be assigned to a Minister.

3.4 Responsibility for voter registration was therefore, assigned to the Minister of Community Development and Education to whom the additional responsibility for internal affairs and security was assigned for the first time in 1961. After the 1961 General Election, responsibility for these matters was assigned to the Minister of Home Affairs in whose portfolio responsibility for electoral matters remained until 1992 when it was vested in the Elections Commission.

#### 4. Qualifications for Registration

4.1 Up to and inclusive of the 1964 General Election, the qualifications for registration remained the same as in previous elections. Applicants were required to be British subjects of the age of 21 years or upwards, and domiciled in Guyana, or resident in it for two years immediately before the stipulated qualifying date.

4.2 After independence in 1966, and for purposes of the 1968 General Election, the qualifying age was changed to 18 years or upwards. The other conditions remained the same, except in the case of future elections which were held before 1992, registration was extended to Guyanese who were living overseas in other countries. Overseas registration was discontinued in respect of the 1992 General and Regional Elections as part of an electoral reform process. This condition remained in place for the 1997 General and Regional Elections.

4.3 The period of domicile or residence for Commonwealth citizens in Guyana was reduced to one year immediately preceding the stipulated qualifying date. Certain classes of persons were not eligible to be registered as in previous registration exercises. These were persons who were certified to be insane or otherwise adjudged to be of unsound mind or persons convicted for any offence connected with elections.

5. The Form of Resistration

5.1 The system of registration was either voluntary in earlier years including 1964, or automatic/compulsory in later years including 1961. Under the voluntary system, persons were to apply for registration in response to notices published in every polling division, notifying the places and times where and when registration was being done; or when registration application forms were available. Under the automatic/compulsory system, enumerators were employed to register qualified persons by making house-to-house visits to register such persons, and to issue Identity Papers to persons who were registered in the process. The enumerators were accompanied by Scrutineers who observed the registration processes.

6. The Identity Paper

6.1 Persons who were to be registered as voters, were required to provide certain personal information such as name, address, date and place of birth, occupation, sex height, colour of eyes, distinguishing marks, and to sign as well as impress the left thumb print on a registration form which was to serve as an Identity Paper. The form was completed in duplicate, the original being handed to the person who was registered, and the duplicate being retained in the official records. The Identity Paper would be replaced in 1997 by the Voter Identification Card.

6.2 In the event the Identity Paper was lost or misplaced, provision was made in regulations for voting for the voter with this disadvantage, to produce other forms of identification acceptable to the Presiding Officer and Polling Agents on Polling Day. Such other forms of identification were a Passport or Travel Document or the National Identification Card which was introduced in 1968 for purposes of identification generally. In exceptional circumstances, a registered voter could be identified under oath by another registered voter or Polling Agent subject to acceptance by the Presiding Officer and the other Polling Agents. These and any other form of identification would be eliminated by legislation which stipulated that the electronically produced Voter Identification Card was to be the only acceptable form of identification for voting in the 1997 General and Regional Elections. The dictum was "No Card, No Vote." The objective being accuracy and transparency in the voting processes.

## 7. Scrutineers

7.1 Scrutineers were first introduced into the electoral system in 1964. The services of Scrutineers were also utilised in the registration processes for the 1997 General and Regional Elections. As in 1964 so it was in 1997, scrutineers were nominated by the political parties represented in the legislature. The scrutineers were employed by the Elections Commission and paid from public (Government) funds allocated to the Commission for the registration of Voters.

7.2 Scrutineers observed the registration process and inspected registration documents in every registration office/district. In the 1997 voter registration exercise, scrutineers accompanied registration officers

and observed the registration process as it was implemented on a house-to-house basis. The supportive roles of the scrutineers contributed significantly to the accuracy and successful completion of the voter registration exercise. Scrutineers were also employed to provide support in the distribution of the electronically produced Voter Identification Cards at established distribution centres and then from house-to-house towards the closing period of the distribution exercise.

8. Claims, Objections; Corrections and Appeals

- 8.1 Preliminary Lists of voters were produced at the end of the voter registration exercise. The Lists were affixed to certain public buildings including the office from which the registration exercise was administered. After a prescribed period for Claims, Objections, Corrections and Appeals, a Final Voters List for each polling division was completed and publicised.
- 8.2 Copies of these Lists were provided to the political parties represented in the legislature. Copies were available for inspection at the offices of the Elections Commission and at the offices of the Divisional Registrars.
- 8.3 Divisional registration officers and officers at the central offices of the Elections Commission and the National Registration Centre were always available to assist with information regarding the preliminary lists and the final (corrected) lists of voters. The final voters lists were also available to local and international observers who observed the democratic electoral process in Guyana in respect of the 1997 General and Regional Elections.

9. Electoral Reform

9.1 Inter-Party Committee on Electoral Reform: A parliamentary Inter-Party Committee on Electoral Reform (IPCER) was established to consider matters relating to reforms in the electoral system, and to enable the enactment of legislation to give effect to reforms that were considered necessary. The members of the Committee were appointed from among members of the political parties represented in the National Assembly.

9.2 The Committee held many meetings and considered many matters referred to it by political parties, interest groups, individuals and the Elections Commission. Among the matters considered and approved by the Committee, was the use of electronically produced Voter Identification Cards as the only means of voter identification on polling day. Amending legislation to permit the use of these cards was enacted by the National Assembly as recommended by the Committee.

10. Voter Identification Cards

10.1 For the first time, voter identification cards were used in the electoral system in Guyana in the 1997 General and Regional Elections. The system for production of these cards was purchased from the firm of Thomas De La Rue Limited of the United Kingdom. The purchase was funded through a generous grant received by the Guyana Elections Commission from the European Union. The company's Multiple Identification Document Issuing System (MIDIS) is one of the most widely used personal computer network system for the controlled production of personal identification documents-

- 10.2 The MIDIS system was used to produce identification cards for 459,712 (99.6%) of the 461,415 names on the Final Voters List. Cards were not produced for 1,703 names on the list, as in respect of these names, there were either insufficient information or certain names were duplicated.
- 10.3 The system was also used to produce 1,350 replacement cards. Technical errors may have been made in the production process in respect of some of the originally printed cards. In other cases, the originally printed cards may have been lost, misplaced or damaged.
- 10.4 Certain personal information on each elector on the Final Voters List were imprinted on the voter identification card of the elector. The elector's name and signature or thumb print were also imprinted on the elector's card.
- 10.5 The personal information on each elector and the elector's signature or thumb print were recorded on a Master Registration Card (MRC) which was prepared by a registration officer in respect of every elector. The MRC is the source document which was prescribed for use in the registration process.
- 10.6 The MIDIS system allowed for the photograph and signature or thumb print images of an elector to be scanned into the computerised module of the system from the Master Registration Card (MRC) of the elector. Also imprinted on the face of the card are the name and any given name or names of the elector, as well as the date of birth, the MRC number and the gender of the elector. The imprinted information also included the electoral district, division and sub-division in which the elector was registered. On the back of the card, is imprinted narrative information on the ownership and use of the card as well as the signature of the Chairman of the Elections Commission.



10.7 The voter identification cards were produced on a security printed Teslin material with various security features. The Teslin cards were laminated with a heat-sealing material after they were printed in the system. The Teslin material and the laminating material were provided by De La Rue Limited in sufficient quantities to enable uninterrupted production within the specified period for production of cards for all the names on the Final Voters List. These features ensured the production of cards of high quality and integrity. Confidentiality, integrity and use of the cards are protected by law.

11. Database Integrity Tests

11.1 An independent consultant to the Guyana Elections Commission conducted database tests prior to distribution of the voter identification cards. These tests were conducted in consultation with staff of the Information Systems and Voter Identification Card Departments.

11.2 A database of cards produced was compared with the database of the Final Voters List to ensure that cards were not produced for persons who were not listed on the Final Voters List. The results of this exercise established that there was consistency in the two databases. The tests were undertaken in respect of small districts as well as in respect of selected divisions of large districts.

12. Distribution of Voter Identification Cards

12.1 Distribution of the voter identification cards commenced after the successful completion of the database tests. Distribution of cards commenced 30 September, and continued until 14 December 1997 in respect of electoral districts in the coastal areas, and until 15 December 1997 - Election Day in respect of electoral districts in the hinterland areas.

13. Utilisation of Voter Identification Cards

13.1	Number of electors on Final Voters List . . .	461,415
	Number of Cards produced . . .	459,712
	Number of Cards distributed . . .	430,974
	Number of undistributed Cards returned	
	to Centre . . . . .	28,738
	Votes cast on Election Day . . . . .	408,003
	Number of Cards to be returned by	
	by Law . . . . .	22,971

14. Promotion of the Programmes

- 14.1 The voter registration and identification card programmes were promoted by the Elections Commission through sustained participatory voter education activities in communities in the rural, urban and hinterland areas. The programmes were also promoted through regular public relations and publicity exercises in the media.
- 14.2 Participants in the promotional activities were invited from and identified by religious and civic organizations, trade unions, and youth and student groups, and political parties. Funding for these activities was provided by certain international organizations and friendly governments which support democratic processes as well as institutions that are committed to upholding these processes. Local government funding for the Elections Commission was also unsparingly available to support the promotional programmes and activities on a regular basis.

15. Conclusion

15.1 The Guyana Elections Commission remained committed to its mission to ensure the entrenchment of a democratic culture in Guyana. In pursuance of its constitutional responsibility, this independent electoral management authority applied its energies and spared no individual or collective effort in getting the electoral register right in order that every qualified citizen was registered; and was therefore, able to vote without fear in the General and Regional Elections of 15 December 1997.

15.2 The Voter Identification Card was the essential element which was introduced into the electoral system to ensure that only qualified registered voters were to be able to vote in the elections. That the electoral processes and the elections were managed in a free, fair and transparent manner, is now an essential part of the history of the Guyana Elections Commission which I had the honour and privilege of serving as Chairman.

Doodnauth Singh, S. C.,  
Chairman,  
Guyana Elections Commission,  
41 High Street,  
Kingston, Georgetown,  
GUYANA, SOUTH AMERICA.

24 February, 1998