

Voting for Democracy

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Modern Elections in Antigua and Barbuda have generally been declared free and fair- However, the task of developing and maintaining a viable democratic culture is a continuing one. Efforts must be made continuously to improve the services offered to the electorate.

No model is entirely applicable to every country as environments differ from place to place and each country is unique in it's own way. It is generally agreed, however, that in democratic elections Certain general principles should exist if such election are to be certified as truly democratic. These include:-

1. An accurate register of electors: this should contain all those persons who qualify at any given time to vote, Each Elector being registered once only at the place of his residence,
2. Full and unimpeded access to the media, including any controlled by Government,
3. Accountability by persons and political parties for any funds donated in respect of their campaigning for seats in Parliament. Public statements must be issued of sums received, the source of the donation, and how dispersed.
4. Public Education: Election management bodies should undertake the role of informing the public on basic rights, and other pertinent data.
5. Training of all election officials, including scrutineers to assure efficiency, and professionalism and to minimize the occurrence of serious problems.

WHAT KIND OF ELECTION MANAGEMENT BODY?

It is generally accepted that the impartiality and transparency with which election administrators act are fundamental to the integrity of an election. Their powers and duties ought to be clearly defined to ensure independence.

In Antigua and Barbuda there is no provision for an Electoral Commission. Responsibility for electoral management resides with the office of the Supervisor of Elections - a constitutionally created public office.

Appointment is made by the Governor General on resolution of both houses of Parliament, Legislation in the form of the Representation of the People act 1995, sets out the duties of the person holding the office. They include the general direction and supervision over the administrative conduct of elections and responsibility for ensuring fairness, impartiality and compliance with the provisions of the Act. Removal from the post can only be for inability to exercise the functions of the office and for misbehavior; and only on the recommendation of a tribunal duly appointed by the Governor General,

Consistent with its mandate, the office of the Supervisor of Electors keeps the various candidates and their agents apprised of all important dates and decisions.

All political parties have unrestricted access to the electoral list, The List of Electors is available for scrutiny not only at the office of the Supervisor of Elections but at various other locations throughout the country. Individuals as well as political parties enjoy full access. Political Parties also participate fully in the major election processes, such as Registration, Revision and updating of the Elector's List.

No matter how a Management body is styled, proper funding is fundamental to the fulfillment of its responsibility, Staff development and training and modern equipment all play a vital role in the services provided to the public, The necessary finding then becomes the key to performance and especially to independence. Of course in most developing nations finances are scarce and the budget allotted to this office extremely limited, Antigua and Barbuda is no exception. While Parliament does provide funding for the office, it is rather limited and extra care must be used to employ cost effective measures-

WHAT KIND OF ELECTIONS?

Like most english speaking Caribbean countries, Antigua and Barbuda inherited the First-Past-The-Post system from its colonial days and have retained it unaltered to the present.

The most oft en cited: advantages of this system include its tendency to produce representatives who are accountable to a specific geographic area ; that it produces single party governments and excludes extremist parties from parliamentary representation, The disadvantages however cannot be ignored.

Minority parties are often excluded from fair representation, This can be seen from the past election results in Antigua and Barbuda,

In 1984, the Antigua Labour Party received 67.48% of the popular votes and 16 of the 17 Parliamentary seats while the ACLM Party won 22.77% of the votes but none of the 17 seats. In 1989 UNDP won 30,7% of the popular votes and only one of the 17 parliamentary seats, Under the FPTP System a party may win the majority of the votes and yet not win the election, In 1976 the PLM party won 49.89% of the votes but only 5 of the parliamentary seats while the ALP with 49% of the votes retained its dominant position with 11 of the 17 parliamentary seats..

The above figures amply demonstrate another of the oft cited criticism of the, FPTP System, i.e. that it leaves a large number of wasted votes; Votes which do not go to the election of any candidate. minority parties can become frustrated with this System seeing little hope of ever winning an election.

Proportional representation on the other hand, reduces the disparity between a party's share of the vote and its share of the parliamentary seats.

With the use of List Pi?, the emphasis is placed more on a party's program and less on individual personalities. PR Electoral System have also been cited as more friendly to the election of women than plurality majority systems, since through the use of the list parties can promote women candidates,

In Antigua and Barbuda none of the Parliamentary seats are held by women. Rarely if ever have women candidates made it past the primaries into a General Election- To date no special measures such as reserve seats or quotas have been undertaken to enhance the representation OF women in parliament,

Understandably, the minority parties have long since advocated a review of the present FPTP System. The debate continues-

GETTING THE REGISTER RIGHT

Under our present system Registration takes place once per year, from 1st July and continuing for 6 days immediately succeeding, From 6 a.m. to 8 p.m.

The qualifications for Registration are:-

A person eighteen (18) years or over who is either -

- a. A Commonwealth Citizen who was born in Antigua and Barbuda and is domiciled and resident there at the date of application for registration.
or
- b. A Commonwealth Citizen who, for a period of three (3) years immediately preceding the application for Registration has been resident in Antigua and Barbuda,

Registration units are set up in each of the seventeen constituencies. Each unit is staffed by part-time temporary clerks who assist the applicants in completing the registration. They also review whatever documentation is presented in regard to citizenship and/or domicile or residence and any other qualification for voting. Since the issue of domicile or residence can often present difficult questions, the clerks most often resolve any doubts in favour of registration, thus leaving the issue to be resolved by the Revising Officer during the revision period immediately following.

Because registration occurs only one week per year, the registration process is often hectic and the personnel are often under pressure to complete the procedure timely. Frequently, the necessary documentation is not requested and verification of these documents is extremely limited. Suggestions have been made to extend the registration period or to provide for registration twice per year. It is anticipated that this issue will be addressed shortly.

Doubtlessly, modernization of the Electoral System is one of the key issues facing not only Antigua and Barbuda but many countries. Many have opted for the introduction of Computer Generated Voter ID Cards while others have moved towards computerization of the entire electoral system including electronic voting. Both options have their merit. For smaller countries cost is often the determining factor in deciding what form modernization will take. For many, the voter identification card may be the only affordable option,

The introduction of the voter ID Card is decidedly a more efficient approach to registration. Firstly permanent Registration units could be set up as part of the electoral office as opposed to the temporary units usually set up in schools and other places during the registration period. Secondly, better trained and more experienced personnel would be available replacing the part-time clerks who are subject to change each year.

Thirdly many of the identification problems currently faced would be eliminated and updating voter histories would be faster and more accurate, The overall benefits of voter ID cards can be summed up as follows; -

1. Increased quality and accuracy of files
2. Reduced labour cost,
3. Improved service to the public
4. Better use of experienced staff
5. Strengthening security and internal control,

In Antigua and Barbuda where modernization has not yet taken place, we continue to face the usual problems of a totally manual system,

PLANNING AND PREPARING FOR THE POLL

Preparing For an election begins immediately following the issue of the Writs of Election by the Governor General, The Writs of Election are issued to each of the seventeen Returning Officers who have been previously appointed by the Governor General, and the Writs fix the date when the election shall be held.

Following a preliminary' meeting with the Returning Officers and the supervisor of elections, the names of other election officials, such as, the presiding officer, Poll Clerks, and the Messengers are submitted by the Returning Officers, The Supervisor of Elections then submits for publication in the Official Gazette and in at least one local newspaper, the Writs or Election, the names of officials who will be on duty on the day of the poll and the places where they will serve. All other notices required by law are also given wide publication in Newspapers, an Radios and T.V. Gazette Notices For the guidance of Voters are published and also posted in each constituency.

In addition to publication of documents;, Notices and instructions to voters, The Supervisor of Elections also arranges with the Media for several live discussions to be held, in order to apprise the public on all issues relating to the election,

This is very well received and the public welcomes it as they are given an opportunity to participate, particularly at the question and answer period, Mock elections are also held for their benefit,

Training of all Election Officials and others who have official standing is on-going. Almost all persons employed at an election are public servants, and as such they are expected to be impartial and highly professional. This aspect is important and there is full co-operation with the Supervisor of Elections and other resource training personnel. Training is made easier as persons who have previous experience as election workers are sought to be t-e-employed, Training manuals for all categories are simply updated, thus reducing training cost.

Contact is maintained with the government printery and after nomination of candidates, the Supervisor of Elections ensures that the printery receives this information the following day for publication in an extra-ordinary Gazette. This information is also carried on Radio, T.V. and in local Newspapers-

Arrangements are then made with the Superintendent of the printery in respect of the printing and delivery of Ballot Papers. Delivery is usually set for two to three days prior to the Poll- Delivery to the Supervisor's Office is made under public escort, where they are properly secured,

The next major schedule is the delivery of documents, equipment, materials, The day before the poll. Returning Officers are issued with all necessary equipment and supplies including ballot papers, poll books, list of Registers, the Official Seals etc.

The police is brought into the planning process and on the day of the poll provide security at all polling stations.

The Supervisor of Elections also maintains scheduled contacts with the media including foreign and overseas representative of media establishments,

THE VOTER AND ELECTORAL PROCESS

It is a challenge to Election Officials everywhere to make the electoral process open and accessible to all. While everyone can readily agree with this concept, in many countries obstacles to full participation range from problematic legislation, to a general lack of information.

The starting point of, any country's attempt to provide free and fair elections must be the education of its citizens. This must include not only information on the mechanics of voting but also the meaning of the electoral process. There is often greater ignorance among the poorest in the country as to their existing legal rights. Thus voter education is an indispensable part of civic education.

Invaluable to the achievement of voter education is the use of the media, especially the electronic media, in addition to the use of pamphlets, posters, letters and press releases. These should also be made available in Braille, Audio Cassette and large prints for persons who are visually handicapped, T.V. messages should include subtitles for voters who are deaf. Survey research can be utilized to identify those areas where the need is greatest.

As indicated, the office of the Supervisor of Elections undertakes the role of keeping the voters informed, This usually takes the form of press releases notices in the newspaper, on radio and T.V. However, improvements can be made in the system in terms of a more formalized program of voter education and especially one targeted to the disadvantaged and handicapped.

The need for legislation reform is also often crucial to achieving full participation in an electoral process, Unintentionally many Legislative Acts dealing with the electoral process create obstacles to the hearing impaired, visual, handicapped and other disadvantaged groups. They may provide requirements that are more cumbersome to these groups than the requirements for the general voting population. Or they may simply fail to make provision where' necessary,

Provision is made in our Representation of the People Act 1995, for Blind Voters to be assisted by companions. The companion must be either -

- a. A person who is entitled to vote as an elector in that constituency at the election or
- b. the father, mother, brother, sister, husband, wife, son or daughter of the blind voter and has attained the age of 18 years.

There is no legislation however dealing with other disadvantaged or handicapped groups.

Care should be taken to provide simple procedures that do not impact negatively on the visually handicapped, hearing impaired and other disadvantaged groups. Special attention should also be given to assist the elderly. Sick- and persons confined to hospitals and Nursing Homes need special assistance-

Access to premises is another area of great importance. All polling Stations must be made accessible to persons with physical disabilities. Polling Stations and also election offices should be equipped with wheelchair ramps and handrails. Where possible they should be situated on the ground floor of the buildings. Returning officers therefore must use care in selecting suitable locations.

ELECTION DAY

The first problem that may be encountered on Polling Day is late opening of the Polling Stations, however, this has not been a serious problem, Polls here open at 6 a.m. and close at 6 p.m.

Polling Stations are located in such numbers and in such areas to facilitate voting. Easy access to Voting Stations is key to ensuring large Voter turn-out.

Police security is always provided at every station and queues are usually orderly. Wearing of party colours and emblems are forbidden and electors comply with this requirement,

Before commencement and whenever new ballot Boxes became necessary, the Presiding Officer is required to display the ballot box to all present to show that it is empty before it is locked, This procedure is necessary, to eliminate any suspicion that ballots may have been placed in boxes before polling began.

Accurate up-to-date registers formerly certified by the Revising Officer are used and voters are permitted singly to enter the station in order to cast their votes. After the elector is properly identified he or she is allowed to enter the secret compartment where their vote is cast. Having immersed the appropriate finger in electoral ink the Presiding Officer then places the secret seal on the Ballot Paper, The Ballot Paper is then placed in the ballot boxes which are at all times under the supervision of the Presiding Officer, Should a Voter refuse to immerse his finger in the ink, then he would not be allowed to put his Ballot Paper in the Box.

Polling agents are provided accommodation at each Polling Station to provide assistance to the Presiding Officer in any case where identification is an issue-

At the close of the Polls, Presiding Officers lock and seal the boxes. Presiding officers then proceed to prepare Ballot Paper accounts showing ballots received, Ballots issued, unused and spoilt Ballot papers- These and other documents issued to him are then transported to the Returning Officer at the place of the count- In transporting the Ballot Boxes and other election documents and materials it is required that the Presiding Officer be accompanied by two (2) Police Officers, and Political Agents from Parties contesting the election. This regulation ensures that the boxes, the documents and other materials are delivered safely to the Returning Officer and under the watchful eye of Law Enforcement Officers as well as those of scrutineers.

Ballot counting is continuous and takes place at a predetermined location in the constituency. Before counting commences, the Returning Officer ensures that Polling Agents, the Media, the Counting Clerks are all given adequate accommodation, The public is also invited to witness the counting procedure, Immediately before the count, the Returning Officer verifies the Ballot Paper Accounts, and takes possession of all other documents which the Presiding Officer is required by law to forward to the Returning Officer, He also ensures that other items that should be returned are received, Counting commences and each Ballot Paper is counted. This rule is necessary and ensures that there is no controversy at the end of the count. Information relating to the count is given to the press at intervals during the count including the standing of contestants at the end of each Ballot box counted. Transparency is maintained through out the long process of counting and election observers are free to solicit information on any matter relating to the count, This is freely given and an atmosphere of co-operation with all parties is encouraged and cultivated,

At the close of the count Returning Officers under Police escort transport all the Ballot Boxes with Ballot Papers, and other confidential documents in sealed packets to the Supervisor of Elections, He takes possession of them and having verified that all such Ballot Boxes issued by him and other Election Paraphernalia have been returned as stipulated, he secures them in the store room provided for that purpose.

The first post-poll appraisal is held by the Returning Officers with their presiding officer and Polling Clerks in preparation for the subsequent one when the returning officers meet with the Supervisor of Elections. A full discussion takes place when any problems, encountered on Polling Day are discussed and recorded. Cognisance is taken of reports in the press, reports from the Police, reports from Parties and the Returning officer's own reports. Where election observers are deployed, upon the receipt of their report, another post-poll appraisal is held. Steps are then taken to ensure that any pit-falls encountered at polling are not repeated; and recommendations that will lead to improvements in the system of Election Day are put into place before the next one.

The absence of any report of any major or serious problems is an indication that the process on Election Day was successful and therefore qualify to be labelled as free and fair.