

CONFERENCE OF COMMONWEALTH CHIEF ELECTION OFFICERS

Queens' College Cambridge, England

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Voting For Democracy

Introduction

St Vincent and the Grenadines is an independent country having obtained its independence from Britain in 1979. The Constitution guarantees free and fair elections - 'with one man one vote'.

The members of the House of Assembly are elected once every five years. The Senators, who also sit with the elected members, are appointed by the Governor General on the advice of the Prime Minister and the leader of the Opposition respectively.

To be eligible for a seat in the House of Assembly a member must be a:

(a) Vincentian 21 years and over;

Or

(b) Commonwealth citizen who has resided in St Vincent and the Grenadines for a period of twelve months immediately before the date of nomination.

State of the Modern Election

The Representation of the People Act, 1982 provides for the free and fair conduct of elections. With the introduction of this Act a new voter registration process was introduced and Identification Cards were issued.

The practice of immersing one's finger in indelible ink and the use of the poll book in which Voters' names were recorded were dispensed with. An elector must present his ID card to the Presiding Officer and his name is checked off on the electors' list before he is allowed to vote.

Election Offences

Our election laws prohibit the practice of personation in the case of an elector; and it is an offence to bribe an elector to gain his vote.

Election Management Body

Our Constitution states that there shall be a Supervisor of Elections whose duty it shall be to exercise general supervision over the registration of voters in elections of Representatives and over the conduct of such elections.

The Supervisor is appointed by the Public Service Commission after consultation with the Prime Minister.

The Supervisor of Elections in carrying out his functions is not subject to the direction or control of any other person or authority.

A Deputy Supervisor of Elections is appointed by the Public Service Commission after consultation with the Supervisor of Elections.

There are fifteen Registering Officers (one for each Constituency) and they do registration on a continuous basis.

Photographers, Key Punch Operators, Typists and other support staff complement the work of the management body.

A Constituency Boundaries Commission consisting of three members is appointed in the following circumstances:

- (a) whenever a census of the population of St Vincent and the Grenadines has been held;
 - (b) whenever Parliament has amended the law so as to alter the number of the Constituencies into which St Vincent and the Grenadines is divided;
- Or
- (c) on the expiry of eight years after the Commission last reviewed the boundaries of the Constituencies.

Kind of Elections

Our system is first-past-the-post which has worked well since the attainment of adult suffrage in 1951. This system allows for one vote per elector as opposed to an elector voting for a list in proportional representation.

In the first-past-the-post system, it is possible that a party receiving a minority of the votes can win the elections having gained more than half the seats contested. This comes about if there is gerrymandering, thus frustrating the will of the electorate. Our system, with some flaws, has stood the test of time,

Getting the Register Right

No elector is allowed to vote:

- (a) in more than one Constituency;
- (b) more than once in the same Constituency;
- (c) Without first producing an ID card.

To be eligible for registration a voter must:

- (a) attain the age of 18 years;
- (b) be a citizen of St Vincent and the Grenadines;

Or

- (c) be a Commonwealth citizen who has resided in St Vincent and the Grenadines for at least twelve months prior to his **registration**.

There are fifteen(15) Constituencies each **having** a **Registering** Officer who does registration on a continuous basis **throughout** the year.

The schedules for registration are sent to the political parties and. also posted up at the centres where registration is done. The local Radio Station **plays** an important role by letting the Populace know the times and places for registration.

When an elector presents himself for registration he must produce a Birth Certificate to verify his age and his mother's maiden name. After he is registered he is photographed then issued with an Identification Card which must be presented when he goes to cast his vote.

If an elector loses his ID card he can still be identified at the Polling Station because the Polling Station card with photograph and other details of the elector is supplied to the Polling Station on polling day.

Where the Governor General issues a writ for an election in a Constituency he declares the period ending fifteen days after the issuing of the writ to be a special voters registration period.

Provision is made for transfer of voters from one Constituency to another, or from one polling division to the next within a Constituency, once certain requirements are met.

These persons who have had a change of name after they have registered are encouraged to seek a change of name on the electors roll (by filling out a form).

The Supervisor of Elections publishes quarter lists. These are issued to the political parties and are also posted up in places frequented by the electors.

Planning and Preparing for the Poll

It is of paramount importance that the planning and preparation for the poll be done with the utmost care. The political parties are kept up to date with the different stages in planning and preparation.

Fifteen days special registration is conducted immediately following the issuing of writs for election. During this period Registering Officers attend daily at Registering Centres during which time transfer of electors from one constituency to another also takes place.

Returning Officers and their assistants are appointed and they assist in the selection of Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks who are appointed by the Supervisor of Elections.

Ballots are printed after the nomination of candidates who must deposit \$500. which they are refunded if they gain not less than one-eighth of the votes cast.

At this stage, all election officials are trained by senior staff at the Electoral Office. They are trained in the use of the different forms and in particular how the poll is to be conducted.

A final list of electors must be available at least four days before polling day.

Polling Stations are carefully selected and equipped to ensure their smooth functioning and also the secrecy-of the poll.

Role of the Media, Political Parties and Election Observers

The media plays a great role in the dissemination of information such as the;

- (a) publication and broadcasting of interviews;
- (b) printing of posters and pamphlets for the Electoral Office;
- (c) publication of names of electoral officials and the location of Polling Stations.

The political parties have unfettered access to electoral information at all times. They are encouraged to help in the registration process by bringing out their supporters to be registered.

St Vincent and the Grenadines never had election observers at our elections though the Prime Minister at the last general elections threw out an open invitation to groups and individuals to observe those elections. It is of great importance that there is transparency at all stages of our elections.

The Voter and the Electoral Process

Voter education is crucial to the electoral process. All election notices are placed in the Government Gazette and in at least one newspaper and they are also aired on radio and television.

Posters are displayed on public and private buildings throughout the entire election period.

Preliminary list of electors are posted in various localities and the electorate is encouraged to scrutinize these lists and to make objections and claims if it is considered necessary to do so.

Radio broadcasts and telecasts form part of the education process. The Supervisor of Elections outlines the voting procedure and also enlightens the electors on the penalties for election.

Women are not hindered in any way from participating fully in the electoral process. As a matter of fact the two major political parties have very vibrant women's leagues.

Women are the trail blazers during the campaign period, going from house to house and they also play leading roles at public meetings and recruiting party activists to be agents in the Polling Stations. Many of them do work as Polling and Counting Agents.

There are presently two women-members of the House of Assembly.

Cost of Elections

The cost of elections in St Vincent and the Grenadines is met from the Government's consolidated fund. We are always able to meet our financial commitments for the elections.

There is no law setting a ceiling on how much funds a political party may spend during its election campaign.

Training and Technology

Training in the organisation has been an ongoing process more so with the introduction of the computerised system for the National Identification Cards.

Training was focused on the use of new equipment and the production of quality Identification Cards. All members of staff were exposed to the training.

Training sessions were done in St Vincent and the Grenadines, with resource personnel drawn from De La Rue of England, and our local Public Service.

Areas covered included Data Entry, Image Capture, Printing, Finishing and Quality Assurance.

Election Day

Polling Stations open promptly at 7:00 am and close at 5:00 pm with the strictest security being employed throughout the day.

Every ballot paper is stamped on its counterfoil with an official stamp to ensure that the ballot marked by the elector is the same one delivered to him by the Presiding Officer.

After marking the ballot, the elector returns it folded (so that the mark or X cannot be seen) to the Presiding Officer who inspects it for the official stamp.

The elector then immerses his right fore finger in the indelible ink after which the Presiding Officer removes the counterfoil from the ballot and deposits the latter in the box.

The Presiding Officer may vote for a blind or incapacitated voter if he is unaccompanied.

Much emphasis is placed on secrecy at the polls. Every Officer, Clerk and Agent at the Polling Station must maintain and aid in maintaining the secrecy of the voting and they may not disclose before the poll is closed to anyone outside the Station what has transpired during polling.

All unauthorized persons are prohibited from entering the precincts of the Polling Station and they may not congregate within one hundred feet.

A special feature of the day is the banning of sale of all intoxicating liquors.

At the close of the polls the ballots are counted using tally sheets, the Presiding Officer ensuring that each ballot is seen by all present and that its authenticity is verified.

After the count a preliminary result is transmitted to the Supervisor of Elections who declares the results.

A final count of the votes is done on the following day.

After the Event

An election petition may be filed with the High Court by:

- (1) a person who voted or had a right to vote at the election to which the petition relates;
- (2) a person claiming to have had a right to be returned at such election;
- (3) a person alleging himself to have been a candidate at such election.

The petition shall be presented within twenty one days after the return made by the Returning Officer.

At the time of the presentation of the petition or within three days afterwards, security for the payment of all costs, charges and expenses that may become payable is made.

At the conclusion of the trial, the judge shall determine if the candidate declared the winner is confirmed or it may order that a new election be held.

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