

2002 Elections in the Commonwealth Caribbean: The Electoral Experience of Jamaica and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago

Elections as a political process serve as the single most important mechanism for citizens to participate in the selection of a government. When conducted to international standards, elections tend to confer legitimacy on a government. In the Commonwealth Caribbean, the electoral experience varies and tends to reflect not only the socio-political culture of the member state but also its particular electoral system.

The most distinctive feature of elections in the Commonwealth Caribbean is the use of the Westminster style of parliamentary democracy, where the legislative function of the state is vested in an elected assembly. Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica are Commonwealth members that gained independence from Great Britain in 1962. Both countries have a bicameral parliament and a prime minister. Trinidad and Tobago declared itself a republic in 1976 and has a president elected by the Parliament in place of a governor general. In Jamaica the governor general is the official representative of the British monarch.

Both states use a first-past-the-post election system, which requires electors to vote for one candidate only. The candidate with the most votes is declared the winner, and the party securing the highest number of seats forms the government. This type of election system is normally credited for its simplicity in terms of administration as well as the speed that it allows in vote tabulation and the dissemination of election results. On the other hand, the system is criticized for not operating well in a multiparty environment and for tending to exclude small political parties that often fail to achieve any significant electoral gains in terms of winning seats. It is also criticized for favoring the development of political parties and policy platforms based on clan, ethnicity or region.

The Trinidadian Elections of October 7, 2002

Trinidad has a population of 1.3 million, with more than 800,000 electors on the Voters List and 36 electoral districts. The division of party loyalties by ethnicity or region is much more evident in Trinidad than in Jamaica. In Trinidad there is a stark divide on ethnic lines between those descended from African slaves and descendants of East Indian laborers who immigrated after slavery was abolished. This ethnic divide is reflected in party loyalties. At least 40% of the Black population supports the People's National Movement, while 40% of the Indian population supports the United National Congress.

Since gaining independence in 1962, Trinidad and Tobago has conducted elections that generally have been regarded as free and fair. In the 2000 election, the United National Congress was returned to power with a narrow majority of 19 seats in the 36-member parliament. The December 10, 2001 general elections were called because of serious internecine conflict in the United National Congress and accompanying charges of widespread corruption. The 2001 election resulted in an electoral deadlock with the two major political parties—the United National Congress and People's National Movement—securing 18 seats each. When the president appointed People's National Movement leader Patrick Manning as prime minister, the United National Congress declared the decision unconstitutional.

Serious political bickering and confusion as well as a parliament without a speaker led to fresh elections on October 7, 2002, the third in three years. One hundred and four candidates drawn from six political parties contested the polls. The People's National Movement secured 20 seats and 50.7% of the votes, and the United National Congress secured 16 seats and 46.5% of the votes.

The final results were:	%	Seats
Peoples National Movement (Conservative) - (PNM)	50.7%	20
United National Congress (Social Democratic) - (UNC)	46.5	16
National Alliance for Reconstruction - (NAR)	1.1	---
Citizens' Alliance - (CA)	1.0	---

This election has been instrumental in propelling forward the debate on the need for constitutional reform to prevent the recurrence of electoral deadlock, which stymies the political growth of the country.

The Jamaican Elections of October 16, 2002

Jamaica's October 16, 2002 election was the country's fourteenth parliamentary election since universal adult suffrage was granted in December 1944. The People's National Party, led by Mr. Percival Patterson, secured a fourth consecutive term as the governing party, with 34 seats. The Jamaica Labour Party obtained 26 seats, and smaller political parties, including the recently formed United Peoples Party and the alliance created by the National Democratic Movement and the National Jamaica Alliance, did not obtain sufficient votes to win seats in the parliament.

The election was declared by many observers as a well-organized and properly executed event, culminating in full acceptance not only of the final results but also of the electoral system and administration. This came against the backdrop of a history of adverse and harsh criticisms of the entire Jamaican electoral system, including the registration of voters and election day procedures.

Until recently, there had never been a satisfactory degree of confidence in the electoral process. There were serious flaws in the voter registration process, which produced a National Voters List of questionable accuracy. Election day procedures were also manipulated through bogus voting; the stuffing, stealing and defacing of ballot boxes; infiltration of the system by political activists and thugs; and worst of all the emergence and continued perpetration of the scourge of violence. This violence was usually played out as the harbinger of election day itself and impacted negatively on the collective morale of the electorate and general public.

To prevent the continuation of this despicable state of affairs, a movement toward serious electoral reform gathered momentum in the 70s with the formation of the Electoral Advisory Committee in 1979. This committee has successfully implemented reform in several critical areas, including:

1. Enumeration and Registration of Voters.
2. The Preparation and Publication of the National Voters List.
3. General Administration of the Electoral System.
4. Polling Procedures including Voter Identification.

5. Other legal reforms including the creation of a Constituted Authority vested with the powers to halt the taking of the poll on election day and to initiate the voiding of election results.

Pre-Election Arrangements

Preparations for the 2002 General Election included the recruitment of presiding officers and poll clerks. More than 26,000 applications were received. The applicants were vetted by the political parties, and a pool of approximately 18,000 presiding officers, poll clerks, supervisors and reserves was assembled. For the first time, election workers voted prior to election day, on October 11, 2002, along with the military and police. This allowed election day workers to be registered in one constituency and yet work in another. Specialist presiding officers were recruited to work in constituencies that had a history of over-voting or intimidation. These workers were transported into the constituency and transported out at the end of the poll. Constituencies where the specialist presiding officers were used, which had a history of 100% or near 100% turnout, reported voter turnout much closer to the national average.

Voters List Preparation

The new Elector Registration System (ERS), which was introduced in 1996, was completed prior to the 2002 General Election. Continuous registration of electors was instituted April 1999, replacing the house-to-house method of registration that was conducted in 1997. The preparation of the Voters List included the removal of deceased electors and the correct placement of persons registered during the house-to-house registration exercise conducted in 1997. The Voters List was also cross-matched using fingerprints to ensure the removal of duplicate registrations. Prior to the 2002 General Election the major political parties agreed publicly that the Voters List of May 31, 2002 was the cleanest list used.

Polling Station Locations

Agreement was reached by October 31, 2001 on the location of all polling stations, and only locations that were no longer available were reviewed. These agreements will remain in force until November 1, 2003.

Election Center

An election center was established to enhance the management, transparency and interaction of all stakeholders in the period between nomination day and Election Day. The center included representatives of the main political parties, PNP, JLP, NDM and UPP; the Political Ombudsman; a representative of Citizens Action For free and Fair Elections, CAFFE; a representative from the Jamaica Constabulary Force, JCF; and the Director of Elections. Scheduled meetings were held to discuss any issue affecting either political or electoral matters. Political matters were addressed by the Political Ombudsman, and electoral matters were handled by the Director of Elections

Observers

Election observers were allowed into the polling station to observe the taking of the poll. There were international teams of observers organized by the Carter Centre of Atlanta, led by former President Jimmy Carter, as well as smaller groups from the United Nations and the Caribbean

Common market (CARICOM). A local observer group, Citizens Action for a Free and Fair Election (CAFFE), led by Dr. Lloyd Barnett, Attorney-at-Law, also observed the poll.

Summary

The establishment of a Constituted Authority with broad powers to halt the taking of the poll and initiate the voiding of election results, the increase in penalties for offences related to voter registration and election offences, and the creation of a pool of qualified election day workers were some of the strategies that a tremendous positive impact on the conduct of the election. The result was an election conducted to international standards and declared free and fair by international and local observers, based on the principles of transparency, integrity and one person-one vote.

The final results were:

Number of electors -	1,301,638	
Number of ballots cast-	768,758	- 59.06%
Number of rejected ballots-	7,393	- 0.96%

Seats:

Jamaica Labour Party -	26
Peoples National Party -	34

The electorate will again go to the polls during the course of this year to elect local government representatives.

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