

**II CONFERENCE OF THE GLOBAL ELECTORAL
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**“VOTER EDUCATION—BELIZE’S EXPERIENCE 1999 –
2003”**

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INTRODUCTION

Civic Vs Voter Education

Basic understanding of civic life, rights and responsibilities, politics and how one is governed is of great import to the people of any democratic society. Such knowledge raises the level of civic competence and responsibility and pride, and can only be developed through civic education at all levels of our educational institutions. Civic education encompasses voter education. Voter education limits its focus on increasing the awareness of voters and potential voters, informing on the laws pertaining to voting and voter registration, the voting processes and the importance of elections. It has been recognized that there is a direct correlation between a well-informed electorate and voter participation. So it has as its ultimate objective increased participation at the polls.

Who Should Conduct Voter Education

While civic education should be a part of the school curriculum, Electoral management Bodies may be mandated with the task. This can be done in partnership with Civil Society organizations. One key principle is to ensure coordinated efforts through the electoral management bodies with one primary goal—that of a well-informed electorate.

The Experience in the Caribbean

National Electoral Management Bodies in most CARICOM countries are empowered to perform tasks related to electoral administration. That is the conduct of voter registration and national elections. The legal framework regarding voter education for most countries also places the responsibility on the Electoral Management Body. For the most part, however, Electoral Management Bodies have limited voter education to basic information campaigns prior to an election and or periodic registration exercises. Therefore, voter education is not continuous and consistent. Augmenting this is that the information campaigns pertain to the law and the ads are done in legalese and not translated into the local language. While the efforts impact on the smooth running of an election, and must be applauded, it is limited to the election season only. Because, Voter Registration in the CARICOM Region is both continuous and voluntary, education is significant.

DEVELOPING A VOTER EDUCATION STRATEGY FOR BELIZE

Who are We?

The Electoral Management Bodies of Belize consists of the Elections and Boundaries Commission and the Elections and Boundaries Department. Section 88 of the Belize Constitution created the Commission. The Chairman and all four Members are appointed by the Governor-General acting in accordance with the Prime Minister as follows: the Chairman and two Members after consultation with the Leader of the Opposition; and the other two Members acting with the concurrence of the Leader of the Opposition. At the inception of the Commission in 1978, the Governor-General appointed the Chief Elections Officer, while the Commission appointed Registering Officers and other Staff Members. This changed 10 years later in 1988, by an amendment to Section 88 and subsequently in 1989, an amendment to the

Administrative Provisions of the Representation of The People Act. As a result, the Department came into being making all Staff Public Officers appointed by the Public Services Commission answerable to a Ministry and a Minister. The Commission confers its powers and duties on the Chief Elections Officer with regards to Electoral Administration.

Assessment – Situational Analysis

The overall objective of a voter education strategy was to build a climate of transparency and confidence in the Electoral Management Organization of Belize. It formed a part of the Department's work programme in the off-election season starting November 1999. The Findings of a Situation Analysis conducted in June to August of 1999 suggested:

- A growing lack of confidence in the Electoral Management Bodies—the Department and the Commission
- An uninformed Staff regarding:
 - the electoral system
 - the law pertaining to registration organization and their role
- No one was responsible for Voter Education
- Only basic voter information was made available to the public
- Training for Polling Day Agents was never attempted
- An anxious media was already exploiting the situation
- A budget for continuous voter education was non-existent

Plan Of Action

Voter Education was included as one of three functions of the Department and therefore, included in the Department's objectives and performance targets since 1999. Initially, there were two phases—firstly focus was on empowering staff through staff development. Secondly, a voter training package was developed and Registering Officers were trained as trainers. They subsequently went into the community to carry out face-to-face workshops. Linkages were made with like organizations such as educational institutions, the Media and Political Parties as major stakeholders.

Utilizing a mix of methods, a voter education campaign was formally launched in November 1999 with an Open House called Voter Appreciation Day. This became an Annual event for showcasing countrywide, the work of the Department. The mix of methods since 1999 includes:

- a) Utilizing the Media—
 - A 15-minute radio show on Monday nights at 8:00 p.m. called
 - Staff as guests on talk shows
- b) Community Outreach—
 - Making the Office more accessible by expanding services to 3 areas
 - Registering Officers in each District Office providing direct training to secondary and tertiary level institutions and NGO's
 - Taking registration to annual Fairs sponsored by institutions such as Youth and Women's Groups, the Belize Defence Force, etc.
- c) Workshops—"National Dialogue for a Culture of Democracy"
 - For Civil Societies
 - For Political Parties and Activists
 - For members of the Clergy

- d) Popular Theatre—
 - Advertisements in the popular languages
 - Theme song encouraging people to vote

- e) Publications—
 - Brochures on the following themes:
 - Voter Registration
 - About Us—All You Want to Know
 - The Referendum Act
 - The Election Process

 - Manuscript entitled “*Selecting Our Leaders Past & Present*”
 - Flyers
 - People friendly Annual Report—1999, 2000, 2001
 - Manuals for Election Officials and Polling Agents

- f) Launching and updating of Website: belize-elections.org

- g) Paid Advertisements on:
 - Television
 - Radio
 - Newspaper

- h) Training of Election Workers—
 - Some 36 workshops trained 2,408 persons

Cost of Voter Education

This campaign was carried out as a part of the Department’s workload during the off-election Season. Partners in the training came from other government departments e.g. trainers who conducted Election Workers’ workshop were volunteers from other government departments. Our brochures and reports were typed and formatted by Staff. Some were printed by the Government Printer at a minimal cost, while others were fully produced by the Staff.

There was no budget for voter education therefore voluntary endeavour was maximized. The mix of methods used targeted different groups. As a result, actual cost of the voter education campaign was minimal. From the pre and post election evaluation, it has been determined that the awareness is such that voter education needs to be formalized to give it the attention it deserves, including the provision of a budget and staff.

CONCLUSION

This 3 ½ years Voter Education campaign was taken on as a personal mandate. It will need to be institutionalized as a definite function of Belize’s Electoral Bodies, and not only as an advertising and/or communication strategy. There is in place information based on the evaluation of the present programme. This can be incorporated into the planning for a voter education programme as an integral part of election management.