

## VOTER PARTICIPATION in BELIZE VIA THE LENS OF MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS

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Belize's political culture has demonstrated, among other things, the following, that:

- \*\* We speak or participate politically en masse primarily at the ballot box or polls.
- \*\* Voting tends to be anti-administration, as we tend to “talk gainst” and “vote gainst” the government and/or the party in power.
- \*\* This is sometimes done with some restraint as it occurs over time, but oftentimes done with vengeance as in affording winning parties with supermajority or wide margins of win.

The latter abovementioned occurred in 1989, 1998, and more recently in 2008 and in 2020. Prior to 1998, the anti-administration political culture changed administrations at every election for four consecutive election periods—as in 1984, 1989, 1993, and 1998. In 1984, the UDP won the Parliamentary elections for the first time, with 21 of the 28 seats and 53.3% of the votes. Then, five years later, in 1989, PUP garnered the election, though with a small margin of 15 out of 28 seats and 50% of the votes and so on. At 1998 the PUP garnered a supermajority of 26 out of 29 seats and 59% of the votes and held on to two consecutive terms; then were swept out of office and the winning platter taken over by the UDP in 2008 with 25 out of 31 seats. Thirteen years and three consecutive governments later, the UDP were sent home in 2020 when the people gave the PUP 26 out of 31 seats. All of the above in the same anti-administration political culture stance.

Belize's political culture has also demonstrated a higher value for Parliamentary elections over Municipal elections as voter turnout is invariably high or higher for Parliamentary elections. The only times that voter turnout is high for Municipal elections is at the time of double elections, when both Municipal and Parliamentary are called on the same day. This is the case at 2003 when voter turnout for the Municipal elections was an average of 71.85%, and again in 2012 when the average was 67.5%. The Parliamentary elections for 1998 used a new electoral list, and voter turnout at 90.14% was the highest recorded to date. Yet, the first Municipal election held about six months later in Belize City saw the voter turnout plummet to 57.35%, when people sat out the election.

What is high or even low voter participation? Do outcomes of Parliamentary elections influence participation and possibly the outcomes of Municipal elections? I will be talking up the data trends in the past, but will focus more on the immediate outcomes of the last four consecutive Municipal elections of 2009, 2012, 2015 and 2018. The country's average voter turnout for the periods mentioned are: 57.2%, 67.5% 59.4%, 57.25%. The highest at 67.5% was at 2012 when there was a double election as abovementioned. Voter turnout is consistently highest for all four periods in Orange Walk, Benque Viejo Del Carmen and Corozal. The lowest consistently being Belize City and Dangriga. The largest metropolis Belize City shows the lowest voter turnout throughout, including a minority voted City Council in 2009 with 42.1% of voter turnout. Voter turnout increased to 53.1% in 2012 during the double election but decreased again to below 50% at 48.3% in 2015. Coming out of a wide margin of win in 2008, the UDP garnered all municipalities in the 2009 Municipal elections, with the exception of Orange Walk Town which was split 3 PUPs and 4 UDPs, including the mayorship. However, the 2009 Municipal election voter turnout saw the lowest, especially coming after a hotly contested Parliamentary election in 2008. Again, voters sat out the election.

The recent trends demonstrate a winner takes all mode—in double elections the winner of the Parliamentary takes the next Municipal election, invariably with far lower voter turnouts for reasons given above, among others. There are a few exceptions. Orange Walk Town has maintained among

the highest in voter turnout and has voted for full PUP councils with the exception of 2009. Is it the Party or the persona in the party? That will be seen in 2021 as there has been a change in leadership candidacy. In 2012, the PUP increased their hold on municipalities to three, adding Dangriga and Punta Gorda Towns and in 2018 garnered Belize City and Corozal Town. Please note that the period 2008 to 2020 was a very unusual time in Belize's political history that requires its own separate analysis. During this period, several elections were called—at 2012, a snap Parliamentary was called to be included with the Municipal election. The snap Parliamentary election was called less than three months after a new leader was installed in the PUP. So, the Leader of the Opposition barely felt the bottom of his leadership chair when he was hustled into an election. Then, there were two by-elections, one in Cayo North in January of 2015 and in Dangriga in July of 2015. The UDP won both by-elections. Then, another snap Parliamentary election was called this time in November of 2015. So during this period, two snap Parliamentary elections and two by-elections were called, and which kept the UDP alive in power until the Voters' wrath in 2020. To reiterate in 2015, there were three elections, a very costly venture financially for the administration and the people of Belize. As I said earlier, this needs to be analyzed in its own space.

What will happen in the March 2021 Municipals to take place tomorrow? My proposal is not the outcome of a scientific poll, an exercise I introduced to Belize in 1993 via Glessima Research and Services. I am following the trend outlined above. Voter turnout will continue to be low for the 2021 Municipals. As per the culture, voters will sit it out. The high and low voter turnout will remain the same municipalities mentioned above. I expect a higher turnout for Corozal Town for the very reason that a Parliamentary election will be held in Corozal Bay after the untimely passing of Hon Dido Vega. I expect heavy politicking, which may increase voter participation in Dangriga due to the standing of the incumbent Mayor. While the voter grumbling has started, it is far from a rumble, so I expect that the PUP stands to garner a majority of the municipal seats, as per the trend outlined above.

Itara la!