

ELECTORAL BOUNDARY REDISTRICTING: The What Is at 2004/2005 BELIZE

Electoral Boundary Redistricting and Boundary Delimitation are terminologies used interchangeably for the process of fixing, drawing, altering and increasing electoral boundaries. It is also conducted to decrease substantial differences in the population ratio between electoral divisions. Boundary redistricting is also commonly associated with majority electoral systems as ours. Success at the polls in our First Past the Post Electoral System (FPP) relies on garnering a majority number of single member constituencies. While the former that of increasing the number of constituencies has been conducted multiple times in Belize, it was not until 2004/2005 that any attempt was made to decrease substantial differences in the population sizes between constituencies.

Boundary redistricting has been conducted from very early on in our post adult suffrage electoral history. The increase in the number of electoral divisions overtime resulted in adjustments to the boundaries of constituencies. In 1954 the number of electoral divisions increased from six to nine. In 1961 the increase was by 100% to 18, then by 10 in 1984 to 28; and by one in 1993 to 29. The last boundary redistricting exercise conducted in 2004/2005, set a precedent for Belize for two reasons. Firstly, this exercise was the first endeavour at narrowing the gap in electoral population between electoral divisions. Secondly, guiding principles, a total of seven, were proposed to efficiently and effectively conduct this exercise with full transparency.

A new Electoral List compiled after the Re-registration exercise in 1998, demonstrated a difference in population ratio of 3.5 to 1, between the largest and smallest electoral divisions countrywide. A statistical analysis of the Electoral Roll demonstrated that by September 2003, the gap had widened to 4.4 to 1. The analysis further revealed that the population of ten of the 29 electoral divisions had grown by 25% or more. Five of these Electoral Divisions were in the Belize District namely, Lake Independence, Queen's Square, Belize Rural South, Pickstock and Port Loyola, in descending order. Of the remaining five, one was the Orange Walk South Division, and all four Electoral Divisions in the Cayo District. Furthermore, the population of the 1998 registered electors in the largest division Cayo South, was three and one-half times greater than that of the smallest, which was Pickstock. By September 2003, Cayo South was nearly five times larger than Pickstock. The constituencies of the Belize District showed the most substantive changes, with Lake Independence the largest, being three times larger than Pickstock, the smallest.

The 2004/2005 guiding principles aforementioned that were adopted to determine the general improvement of the constituencies, including the narrowing of the wide population gaps, were the following:

1. Setting a tolerance limit of 15% in adjusting populations for each constituency

2. Utilized geographic and physical features such as roads, rivers, crests of hills, park and/or estate boundaries as the prevalent features to define the limits of electoral boundaries and polling areas
3. Maintained electoral divisions within district administrative boundaries
4. Kept adjustments to a minimum—transferred adjoining polling area or part of from the division with excess to the division with deficiency
5. The number of constituencies in the Cayo District increased by 2 divisions to 6
6. All boundaries were contiguous and where and/or utilized natural boundaries, physical features, and geographic referencing
7. The inclusion of complete communities within polling areas for the same division

As a result, the wide gap between constituency population was decreased substantially from a ratio of 4.4: 1 to 1.7: 1, nationally. In the Belize District, the gap was narrowed from a ratio of 3.1: 1 to 1.3: 1. Communities or villages and properties which were split into separate constituencies, were now in the same constituencies. Polling areas and in essence were defined by natural boundaries and physical features—things that will not change in time, such as a lamp post. District administrative boundaries were regarded, empowering communities to remain in constituencies within the respective district. Lastly, the total number of constituencies increased from 29 to 31 as per number 5 above.

However, within the first year after this redistricting exercise, wide differences in population size of electoral divisions were already obvious. This was first observed after the second transfer of electors' exercise provided for by the law each July and August. Change of residence oftentimes result in a transfer to another electoral division, though may not be a physical change of the actual residence of the elector. It is common knowledge that there are persons who change divisions, not due to actual physical residence, but to vote for a favoured politician. This is easily done in a face-to-face society where the law primarily depends on the confirmation of the chief occupant of the residence. Suggestions to avoid such is to provide for revisions of sections of the Representation of the People Act (ROPA) Chpt. 9, to effectively strengthen transfers and characterize or define residence; and or conduct redistricting exercises on a regular basis, as is done in other CARICOM countries.