
A Canadian Electoral Observer in Haiti

by Louis Massicotte

On December 16, 1990 the people of Haiti went to the polls to cast their ballot in presidential, legislative and local elections. The Organization of American States, in order to assure a free election, coordinated the work of some 150 observers from 21 countries including ten Canadians. One Canadian observer provides us with an account of his experience.

We arrived in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on December 11 and after a trip of some 5 and a half hours reached Port-de-Paix a small town in the north-western part of the Island. At the local hotel, hastily renovated for the occasion, we were welcomed by the co-ordinator for the District, Michelle Picard, Assistant Returning Officer for the provincial riding of Berthier, Quebec, who had been there for several days.

The OAS's "Little Blue People"

The real adventure was of course election day itself, Sunday, December 16. Up since 4:00 a.m., we jumped into our all-terrain vehicles. For the occasion we were wearing the blue caps and T-shirts that identified us plainly as OAS observers, and we carried cards accrediting us as such. My team-mate was a Canadian who had been recruited locally, Fernand Hachette. His knowledge of the country, his humour and his calm proved invaluable.

In the early hours of the dawn we drove up and down the muddy streets of Port-de-Paix looking for registration and polling stations so that we could check on the state of the preparations. Our first stop was the Lycée Tertullien Guilbault. It was 5:40 a.m., and still pitch black, but the officials were at their posts, setting out the cardboard ballot boxes provided by Canada. There were four, each one corresponding to a particular level of the election and identified by a different colour: blue (for the

Presidential election), black (for the Senate), yellow (for the Chamber of Deputies) and brown (for the municipality). In rural areas there was a fifth ballot box, identified by a red tag, intended for votes for members of the *Conseils d'administration des sections communales* (CASECs, or administrative councils for each commune).

At 6:00 o'clock, the ballots finally arrived. At the insistence of our co-ordinator we went to the headquarters of the District to collect ballots for delivery to other stations: I can still see us, scores of ballots for the Presidential election under the arm, a bit flabbergasted by the absolute faith the Haitian electoral authorities were showing by entrusting us with these precious documents which were of course duly delivered.

It was easy to locate the polling stations, because from 6:00 a.m. on there would be up to 50 people standing in line at the door, holding their voter's cards in their hands. Soldiers guarded the stations without interfering: The army was playing by the rules, a crucial factor that made all the difference to the operation's success.

Disorganization was apparent in some of the polling stations. In one there was no table, so the booth had to be put on the floor. I have a vivid memory of one voter, crouched down to mark her ballots, doing her best to keep them hidden from curious glances. Often the coloured stickers that were supposed to indicate which ballot box was for which election had not been delivered. Election officials improvised by writing the appropriate designation on each box, or in the cases of better-equipped stations, by colouring the boxes by hand. In one station (it was the only one like this that we saw all day), the deputy returning officer was visibly out of his depth and people were craning over the sides of

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The group of OAS observers at Port-de-Paix. From left to right: Aristide (Haitian driver), José Maria Gomez (Brazil), Richard Briggs (USA), Fernand Hachette (Canada), Michelle Picard (regional co-ordinator), Horace Chang and Ethyle Mullings (Jamaica), Marilia Pacheco (Brazil). Another Haitian driver is sitting in the foreground.

the booth, though no one was overtly intimidating the voters. This incident did make me pessimistic for a moment about the secrecy of the process.

A Model Polling Station

My impression changed completely when we arrived at Digas. This tiny rural locality is reached by a narrow, rocky road six kilometres long, cut up the mountainside by a bulldozer. We had been up there the day before on a reconnaissance visit. Its very remoteness made us apprehensive but there in the middle of nowhere everything was being done by the book. In the small room where the registration and polling station had been set up, the two booths had been installed at one end, on tables, away from the prying eyes of well-meaning neighbours. Armed with a cane, a door-keeper regulated the flow of voters who presented their cards and then had the procedure explained to them. Carefully folded, the

ballots were dropped by an official into the appropriate ballot box (going into the wrong box could mean cancellation of the ballot). The deputy returning officer, an old man whose natural authority clearly contributed to the dignity of the operations, answered all our questions courteously. The villagers watched the whole process – for them such a rarity – with fascination.

Visits to about ten rural and urban polling stations in the commune of Bassin-Bleu, south of Port-de-Paix, revealed comparable scenes. Everywhere the observers were made welcome, and no one seemed irritated that the voting had to be interrupted for the five minutes it took us to ask local officials dozens of standard questions on how the electoral process had been conducted so far. Undoubtedly the Haitians understood instinctively that our presence was helping to guarantee the honesty and credibility of the voting.

"Charlie two nine, Delta one five zero"

We went back to Digas to be present at the counting of the ballots, which began just before 6:00 p.m. It was again pitch black out, and the counting was done by the light of an oil lamp (and also of flashlights helpfully held at arm's length by the observers). At 7:05, the votes in the Presidential election had been counted: Father Aristide had won 68% of the votes (a proportion that was quite close to what he was to receive nationally). As agreed, I left the station to communicate the results immediately by radio to my co-ordinator for the District. Every observer team in the country was doing the same, which enabled the OAS central co-ordination unit to have an estimate of the overall result. The dialogue was in code – "Car 8D to Base No. 8: Bravo, five; Charlie, two nine; Delta, one five zero" – and only those with the key knew that "Delta" meant Father Aristide, and "Charlie" his main rival, Marc Bazin.

When I got back to the station, the votes for members of the Chamber of Deputies had been counted. Counting the Senate vote was more complicated, because at that level voters could cast three votes. Around 9:00 o'clock we moved on to the CASEC vote, where counting was much quicker, as there was only one slate (dispensing with an actual vote because a candidate is unopposed is not provided for in Haitian electoral law). We bade our hosts goodbye not without a certain relief: the whole operation had taken three and a half hours standing in a room two meters by four, into which were packed no fewer than twelve people. By law the doors and windows had to be kept shut!

Given the Circumstances, An Honest Election

Observing an election held in the Haitian context is a considerable challenge. You have to familiarize yourself in advance with the appropriate legislation and with the

country you will be covering. We had been warned that anything could happen. Living conditions are by no means luxurious, and you need to be open-minded enough to work with people who come from very different countries. The pace of the work was sometimes hectic but the experience was immensely enriching.

Those who take the mechanisms of democracy for granted because they are so used to them rediscovered some fundamental truths. In Haiti as in many other developing countries, an election is much more than a ritual every four years. It is a struggle for improved conditions, a key to economic and social development.

The voters took the process very seriously, and the discipline and calm with which the whole operation was carried out were sometimes truly moving. The day after the election, the observers were treated to spontaneous demonstrations of gratitude by the local people, who shouted, "Thank you, thank you, to the observers!"

I leave to others to pass judgement on the elections that brought Father Jean-Bertrand Aristide to the Haitian Presidency. What I was able to observe in my corner of the country leads me to conclude that it was an honest election. Any shortcomings were attributable to difficulties of communication and the inexperience of the people involved, not to fraud. For those who were on the spot and could see how huge the obstacles were, those shortcomings do not taint the final result at all. The sheer size of the new President's majority should dispel any uncertainty as to the popular will.▲