

## **Bahá'í Elections**

By Susan Gammage <sup>1</sup>

The Bahá'í electoral system is unique.

When called upon to vote in a Bahá'í election, believers should be aware that they are carrying out a sacred task unique to this Dispensation. (Universal House of Justice Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World, 25 March 2007, on Bahá'í Elections)

It has several distinctive features:

- It is carried out by secret ballot
- There are no nominations or electioneering
- They encourage universal participation
- Every adult Bahá'í is eligible for election to local and national administrative bodies responsible for decision in the conduct of Bahá'í affairs.

The Bahá'í electoral system, operating by secret ballot, with no nominations or electioneering, encourages universal participation: every adult Bahá'í is eligible for election to local and national administrative bodies responsible for decision in the conduct of Bahá'í affairs. (Bahá'í International Community, 1993 Apr 05, Equality of Men & Women A New Reality)

Whether we're voting for delegates at the Unit Convention; members of Assemblies or Regional Baha'i Councils – the principles and requirements are the same.

In regard to your question about qualification of delegates and Assembly members: the qualifications which he outlines are really applicable to anyone we elect to a Bahá'í office, whatever its nature. But these are only an indication, they do not mean people who don't fulfill them cannot be elected to office. We must aim as high as we can. (Shoghi Effendi, The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community, p. 207)

The following ideas are taken from two letters of the House of Justice:

- 15 March 2007 to the Baha'is of the World on the topic of elections. ([https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20070325\\_001/1#126035670](https://www.bahai.org/library/authoritative-texts/the-universal-house-of-justice/messages/20070325_001/1#126035670))
- 16 May 2013, to the delegates gathered at the Baha'i National Conventions. (<https://uc-cc.bahai.ca/en/guidance/message-2013-05-16/>)

### **Preparing for the Election:**

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In Canada the erosion of trust and collaboration between the individual and the elected institutions at the municipal, Provincial and Federal levels of governance is becoming more noticeable in 2023.

Contributing to the widening distrust of so vital a process are:

- the influence on the outcome from vested interests having access to lavish funds
- the restrictions on freedom of choice inherent in the party system
- the distortion in public perception of the candidates by the bias expressed in the media.

All of this results in:

- apathy, alienation, and disillusionment
- a growing sense of despair of the unlikelihood that the most capable citizens will emerge to deal with the manifold problems of a defective social order.

The electoral system given to us by Bahá'u'lláh is without precedent in human history and Bahá'ís everywhere are giving greater attention to strengthening the process by which we elect our local and national assemblies and Baha'i Councils.

In order to do this we must become active and well-informed members of the Baha'í community in which we live.

To be able to make a wise choice at the election time, it is necessary for us to:

- be in close and continued contact with all local activities (both teaching and administrative)
- fully and whole-heartedly participate in the affairs of the local as well as national committees and assemblies
- get thoroughly acquainted with one another
- exchange views
- mix freely
- discuss the requirements and qualifications for such a membership without reference however indirect, to particular individuals.

Then, after careful thought over an extended period of time, we need to create a list of names of those who have the necessary qualities of:

- unquestioned loyalty
- selfless devotion
- a well-trained mind
- recognized ability
- mature experience

From among the pool of those we believe to be qualified to serve, we then give due consideration to such other factors as:

- age distribution
- diversity
- gender

Finally, we should strive to purge ourselves from every trace of:

- worldly tendencies
- personal ambitions
- promotion of individuals, or partisanship

And then we approach this duty

- in a prayerful attitude
- seeking divine guidance and confirmation

Then, turning completely to God, we participate in the elections with

- a purity of motive
- a freedom of spirit
- a sanctity of heart

When we wholeheartedly embrace the Bahá'í electoral process in this way, we will witness a greater contrast between the emerging institutions of the Bahá'í Administrative Order and the decaying social order around us.

Personally, I find that thrilling!

### **Election Day:**

Sometimes there are circumstances beyond our control which make it impossible for an election to take place at the prescribed time and place. In those cases, the National Spiritual Assembly will make decide how to proceed.

However, there may be cases when conditions beyond the control of the local believers exist, such as, as you have said, the Bahá'ís had left the community because of flooding, or extremely inclement weather conditions made it impossible to hold the election. In such cases which, by their very nature, should be rare, the National Spiritual Assembly may use its discretion in recognizing the Local Spiritual Assembly, considering it a group, or decide to hold the election of such Local Spiritual Assemblies at a later date when the friends have returned to their communities. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 14, #50)

### **Voting methods:**

Although it is always preferable to vote in person sometimes that is not always possible. In such cases each National Spiritual Assembly will make alternative arrangements for its community.

For example Canada used voting by telephone in a 2013 by-election to fill a vacancy in the National Spiritual Assembly membership. This was arranged in such a manner as to ensure voting confidentiality.

In 2023 Canada introduced the method of on-line voting through a secure membership portal for Canadian believers.

Another common method is to either mail your ballot or have another person deliver your sealed ballot to the place where the election is taking place.

### **Voting:**

When we vote, we must vote for the 9 people who are best suited to serve. Even if we have a low opinion of all those who are eligible, it is still our duty to vote for those nine from among them who, in our estimation, best meet the standards for service on a Spiritual Assembly. Those who do not wish to vote for nine, may achieve his end by purposely including the names of those who are ineligible, but this would be a betrayal of the trust placed in him as a Bahá'í voter.

It is a basic principle of elections for Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies that each voter must vote for the nine people who, in his or her opinion, are best suited to serve. He may have a low opinion of all those who are eligible, but his duty is to vote for those nine from among them who, in his estimation, best meet the standards for service on a Spiritual Assembly. This is how it is possible to vote for exactly nine names. Since the membership of an Assembly is nine, it would give rise to a number of statistical anomalies if voters were permitted to record votes for fewer or more than nine names. In any one election there are not usually any cases where a voter accidentally makes a mistake and includes a name of an ineligible person, so the statistical effect is slight, and there is no need to invalidate his whole ballot. As you point out, a believer who does not wish to vote for nine, may achieve his end by purposely including the names of those who are ineligible, but this would be a betrayal of the trust placed in him as a Bahá'í voter. One cannot control such actions, but like any action contrary to the spirit of the Faith, they are detrimental and should be strongly discouraged. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 21, #68)

When elected to serve, we must carry out this sacred responsibility. It is possible, though, to suggest we not be elected as an officer:

We have also been asked to point out that although it is the obligation of a Bahá'í to serve on an Assembly, either Local or National, when elected, on several occasions the beloved Guardian pointed out that before the election of officers, if

any member had a good reason in his own opinion why he should not be elected to one of the offices of the Assembly, he was free to suggest that he should not be so elected. (Universal House of Justice, Lights of Guidance, p. 27, #97)