

Establishing the Elections Office

1946 Singapore was established as a separate crown colony. The Legislative Council Election Ordinance was passed to provide for limited elections. For the first time in its history, the people of Singapore would go to the polls to elect 6 of the 13 Unofficial Members of the Legislative Council. An Elections Drafting Committee was constituted to make recommendations for a registration system for voters and draw up the constituencies for the election to be held in March 1948.

1947 In preparation for these elections, the Elections Office (currently the Elections Department) was established under the Colonial Secretary's Office. Senior Malayan Civil Service officer Mr Gerald Hawkins (left) was appointed Supervisor of Elections, and Mr M Ponnudurai (right) was appointed the Assistant Supervisor.



Hawkins publicly declared that the Elections Department was "non-partisan and completely colourless and was only concerned with ensuring that every eligible voter had an equal chance to vote. It was completely without party affiliations of any kind and the ballot would be secret, as in any democratic country." (The Straits Times, 14 October 1947)

From 1948 to 1951, Mrs ASM Hawkins (wife of Gerald Hawkins) became Supervisor of Elections.

Singapore goes to the Polls - The First Election

1948 Only British subjects who had lived in Singapore for at least one year were allowed to contest and vote in the 1948 Legislative Council election. Voter registration was voluntary and out of the potential electorate of 200,000, only 22,395 registered.

The Electoral Roll was opened for inspection at the offices of the Supervisor of Elections, Secretary for Economic Affairs, the Colonial Secretariat, the Rural Board and all post offices.

On Polling Day, only 14,126 went to the polls. All 4 constituencies comprising 6 seats were contested.

The first by-election was held on 16 October in Rural West constituency as the seat was vacated when Legislative Councillor SC Goho passed away in July.



Preparation for the destruction of ballot papers at Bras Basah, 1955.

Municipal Commission Elections

1949 In April, the Elections Department organised the first Municipal Commission Election. A second election was held in December.

Did you know?

The **Legislative Council** was responsible for enacting laws in Singapore. Its election candidacy and voting eligibilities were privy to "British subjects". The Legislative Council was replaced by the **Legislative Assembly**, with the majority of legislators elected by popular ballot rather than appointed by colonial authorities.

The **Municipal Commission** came into being in 1887 and oversaw local urban affairs in Singapore. The Municipal Commission elections were abolished in 1913 but were reintroduced in 1949 as part of the move to expand local political participation in preparation for self-governance. The Municipal Commission was renamed the **City Council** in 1951 when Singapore attained city status.

Second Legislative Council Election

1951 Singapore's second Legislative Council election was held in March, with 22 candidates vying for 9 seats. Once again, voter registration and turnout were low. Only 52% of the 48,155 eligible voters cast their ballots. In the run-up to the election, the Elections Department conducted an extensive check on the Voters' Lists, engaging about 100 temporary staff to go house-to-house to check on voters' eligibility. However, this did little to encourage more people to vote.



Voters lining up during the second Legislative Council election, 1951.

Efforts to Increase Voter Turnout

1952 The Elections Department redoubled its efforts to increase the number of registered voters from 46,944 to 100,000. Letters were sent to voters who were registered for City or Legislative Council elections. Despite these efforts, 4 out of 5 potential voters did not respond. Only about 15,000 election registration forms were returned. In 1952, the total number of registered voters stood at 71,942.

Rendel Constitution recommends Automatic Registration

1954 Governor Sir John Nicoll appointed a Constitutional Commission under Sir George Rendel to study how Singapore's Constitution could be reformed to move the Colony towards self-government. One of its recommendations was to institute a system of automatic registration of voters. This proposal was accepted and from 1954, voters were automatically registered. This immediately raised the number of voters from about 76,000 to 300,299 in 1955. The practice of automatic registration continues till today with the Elections Department ensuring that Registers of Electors (known previously as Electoral Roll) are kept up to date.

The First Legislative Assembly Election

1955 The Rendel Commission also recommended that the old Legislative Council be reconstituted as a mainly elected assembly of 32 Members of which 25 were to be elected. Mr George G Thomson, who was appointed Supervisor of Elections, stated that these elections – the most massive ever – would cost about \$1 million to conduct. Some 1,500 persons were trained to conduct elections.

Even though voter registration was automatic, voting was not compulsory. Only 156,324 of the 300,299 eligible voters actually cast their ballots.



Legislative Assembly election hearing showing information on polling day, 1955.



Polling station staff setting off to run their duties, 1955.

Members of the public checking the Electoral Roll at the General Post Office, 1954.



Introduction of Compulsory Voting

1959 As Singapore edged towards independence, a series of constitutional talks held between 1956 and 1958 led to most internal affairs being placed in the hands of the local elected representatives. In 1959, the legislation was amended to make voting compulsory. As a result, voter turnout hit a remarkable 92.9% with 527,919 of 586,098 voters turning up to vote. Compulsory voting, coupled with constant efforts to make it convenient for voters to exercise their voting rights, have contributed to high voter turnout till today.

Public education posters used at the Legislative Assembly Election, 1959.



Did you know?

As part of the Singapore Constitution Exposition, a mock election was staged at Kallang on 3 Feb 1959 to teach the public the proper way of using a polling booth. This was part of the Elections Department's educational and outreach programme.



Conducting the National Referendum



The public studying the three options of merger during the National Referendum, 1962.

1962 The Elections Department was placed under the charge of the Deputy Prime Minister's Office. That year, the Department was to conduct the first-ever and only national referendum in Singapore's history on 1 September. The objective of the Referendum was to determine the terms upon which Singapore would enter the Federation of Malaysia.

There were 345 polling stations and 1 counting centre at the Singapore Badminton Hall. This centralised vote-counting arrangement resulted in a massive traffic jam and the last ballot box arrived at the Badminton Hall only around midnight. Counting went on through the night, with many officers working almost 36 hours. It was only around 11 am the next day that counting was completed and the result could be announced.



Queuing up to cast a vote during the National Referendum, 1962.



Casting of vote during the National Referendum, 1962.



Election officers with ballot boxes arriving at Singapore Badminton Hall which was the designated counting centre for the National Referendum, 1962.



Counting of ballot papers at the Singapore Badminton Hall for the National Referendum, 1962.



Police officers checking the documents of voters at the entrance of polling station during Legislative Assembly Election 1963.

Legislative Assembly Elections 1963

1963 The only Legislative Assembly Election conducted while Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaysia was held barely a few days after merger. The Elections Department swung into action once more when snap elections were called on 21 September. This election put tremendous strain on the Elections Department as it was called with the absolute minimum notice – 9 days.

Post-Independence By-Elections

1966 & 1967 The resignation of Barisan Sosialis Members of Parliament (MPs) resulted in the conduct of 12 by-elections for Bukit Merah (January 1966); Choa Chu Kang, Crawford and Paya Lebar (March 1966); Bukit Timah, Joo Chiat and Jurong (November 1966); Bukit Panjang, Havelock, Jalan Kayu, Tampines and Thomson (March 1967).



Election officials pouring out votes from ballot boxes at a counting centre, 1963.

Did you know?

In October 1976, a big crowd showed up at the Elections Department at City Hall after a rumour circulated that eligible voters whose names did not appear on the Registers of Electors would be fined. The Elections Department assured everyone that there was absolutely no truth in the rumours.

Use of Void Deck Polling Stations for Voter-centricity

1980 The Elections Department announced that for the first time the use of void decks in Housing Development Board (HDB) estates would be used as polling stations. This move brought polling stations closer to the electorate and made it even more convenient for them to vote.



Election officials could be seen verifying voter's identity before issuing a ballot paper at the void, 1984. Voters marking their ballot papers at a polling station situated at HDB void deck, 1984.

Introduction of Group Representation Constituencies

1988 The 1988 General Election was the first in which Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) were introduced. There were 13 three-member GRCs out of the total of 81 seats in Parliament. The Elections Department acted as the Secretariat for the newly-formed Malay Community and Indian and Other Minority Communities Committees that determined if the minority candidate belonged to the community he declared himself to belong to.



A "G" was used as this ballot paper thoroughly before counting, 1988.

Namibian Elections Monitoring Mission

1989 In October, responding to a last-minute request by the United Nations, Singapore despatched a 20-member team to Namibia to assist in monitoring its first post-independence elections. The team was led by Head of Elections Department, Mr Robin Chan, who spent about a month in Namibia. Police Superintendent, Mr Lee Kok Leong, was also appointed Chief Electoral Officer.

Did you know!

- ELD under various agencies over the years
- 1945 to 1955 : Colonial Secretary's Office
 - 1955 to 1959 : Chief Secretary's Office
 - 1959 to 1962 : Ministry of Home Affairs
 - 1962 to 1968 : Deputy Prime Minister's Office
 - 1968 to present : Prime Minister's Office

Establishment of Elected Presidency Scheme

1991 The Constitution was amended to provide for a President, elected by the people. The President has two important roles – first, as a symbol and unifier of a diverse and multi-racial Singapore; and second, as a custodian of our nation's past reserves and the integrity of our public service.

1993 When President Wee Kim Wee's term ended in August, the Elections Department prepared itself for its first-ever Presidential Election. As part of the Presidential election process, the Elections Department served as Secretariat to the Presidential Elections Committee that issues the Certificate of Eligibility, which is required for a person to stand for election as a Presidential candidate. Polling Day was set for 28 August and former Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong was elected President. This was the largest turnout for an election since the 1963 General Election as all voters nation-wide were required to vote.



Candidates for the 1993 Presidential Election, Mr Chua Kim Wee (left) and Mr Ong Teng Cheong (right).



Elections Department Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

2011 The Elections Department was kept very busy this year as the 11th General Election and the 4th Presidential Election were held in the same year and barely four months apart.

Public education posters used during General Election and Presidential Election, 2011.

2015 For the first time since Independence, this General Election witnessed a full contest of all electoral divisions. 2,307,746 people cast their votes for this election.

First Reserved Presidential Election

2017 This Presidential Election was an election reserved for candidates belonging to the Malay community. After the Constitution was amended to provide for 'reserved elections' following the Report of the Constitutional Commission of 2016, the Elections Department worked out the intricacies of the scheme within a tight time frame and operationalised it, including proposing amendments to the Presidential Elections Act.



National Centre for Presidential Elections located at the People's Association, 2017.

In addition to serving as Secretariat to the Presidential Elections Committee, the Elections Department also serve as Secretariat to the Community Committee that issues the Community Certificate. On 13 September 2017, Madam Halimah Yacob was elected President, the first Malay President since 1970.

ELD Offices Through The Years

Fullerton Building
1947 - 1950 : 4th Floor
1950 - 1952 : 5th Floor
Today's Fullerton Hotel



1947

Singapore Improvement Trust Building
Manaroo Street (expunged)



1952

Fullerton Building
Today's Fullerton Hotel



1953

Fort Canning Building
Building has been demolished



1957

Empress Place Building
Today's Asian Civilisations Museum



1962

Halifax Road



1965

City Hall
Today's National Gallery of Singapore



1970

Treasury Building
Today's Temasek Tower



1987

Prinsep Link



1994

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IMPROVING ELECTORAL PROCESSES OVER THE YEARS



VOTER REGISTRATION



Voters registering to be included in the Electoral Roll at an Electoral Registration Centre, 1950.

Moreover, eligible voters are required to register themselves to vote in an election. Coupled with the lack of voter awareness and education, voter registration was low. The English-educated public tended to be more politically conscious of what was going on and were more likely to register as voters. This situation continued into the second Legislative Council election of 1951 which saw only 52% of the 48,155 eligible voters cast their ballots. This was despite concerted efforts by the Elections Department.



Members of the public checking the Electoral Roll at the General Post Office, 1954.



Legislative Assembly Election poll card for Tampeng Subdivisions, 1958.

In the case of Municipal Commission elections, only property owners were eligible to vote and this effectively disqualified many women even though they were British subjects. The property requirements for voting in the Municipal Commission Elections were dropped in 1950.

Poor voter registration and turnout were mitigated with the recommendation to introduce automatic registration in 1954.

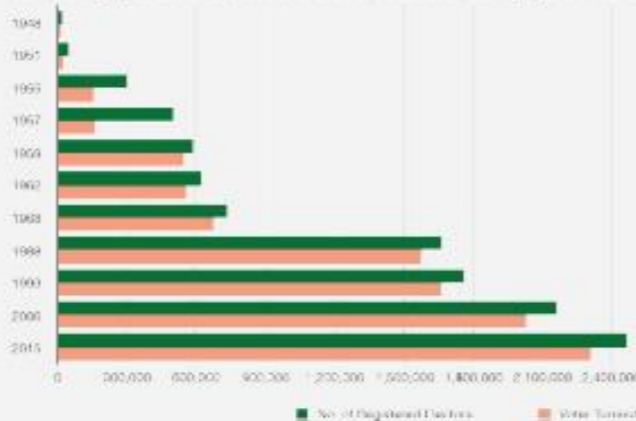
Did you know?

To increase voter turnout in the early years, the Elections Department held several mock elections, appealed to more people to register, kept their office open until midnight for voter registration, contacted people who had been struck off from the Electoral Roll for failing to vote at a previous election so that their names could be restored, for both Legislative and Municipal Council elections.

With automatic registration, the Elections Department currently obtains its list of electors from the National Registry which is responsible

for issuing the National Registration Identity Card. The Elections Department ensures that the voters are placed in the correct Registers of Electors which are organised by electoral divisions depending on their place of residence. In the past, this required print-outs of registers to be physically inspected at designated locations such as community centres. Today Singaporeans can check their particulars and voting status online through the Elections Department's eServices at their convenience. The long queues of yesterday are now a relic of the past.

No. of Registered Electors & Voter Turnout Through the Years



NOMINATION

The process of an election begins with the issuance of the Writ of Election. The Writ will specify the Nomination Day and the place of Nomination.

On Nomination Day, candidates are required to present their nomination papers and relevant certificates i.e. Certificate of Eligibility, community certificate and Political Donation Certificate.

If only one candidate or one group of candidates stands nominated at 12 noon of the Nomination Day, that candidate or group of candidates will be declared elected. If more than one candidate or group of candidates stands nominated at 12 noon of the Nomination Day, the election will be contested.

Candidates will also pay an election deposit which must be made before the close of nominations at 12 noon. For the convenience of candidates, the Elections Department deploys Commissioners for Oaths and Accountant-General Department cashiers. It also provides computer terminals for checking Registers of Electors at the Nomination Place.

Since 1963, Nomination Centres have been decentralised to make the process of nomination more efficient.



Candidates waiting to file their Nomination Papers at a Nomination Place for General Election, 2011.

Did you know?

The Elections Department has been providing the artwork for the voting symbols of independent candidates since 1948. Independent candidates can also submit their own symbols for the Returning Officer to approve for use in campaigning.



Members of the public looking at Nomination Papers of candidates displayed on the notice board outside the Nomination Place for General Election, 1988.



Approved symbols for the 1952 Legislative Assembly Election. The symbols are published in the Government Gazette for public information.

Example of a ballot paper used during the mock election, 1950. (Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore)

POLLING



Voter casting her vote during the Legislative Assembly Election, 1957.

To ensure that no unauthorised ballot papers are cast, the Elections Department has, from its earliest days, ensured that security features are in place. For example, serial numbers are printed on individual ballot papers. The serial numbers allow the Elections Department to keep track of all ballot papers issued.

However, the serial numbers on the ballot papers have also led voters to worry that the Government can track their votes to them. This concern is unwarranted as all counted

ballot papers are placed in the depository boxes which are sealed after counting and announcement of results.

These sealed depository boxes are then brought under police escort to the vault at the Supreme Court where they would be kept for six months before being incinerated. In the meantime, only a High Court Judge can order the depository boxes to be opened when there is an Election Petition.



Sealed ballot boxes at the end of the Legislative Assembly Election, 1962.

Over the years, the Elections Department has introduced a number of improvements to the ballot boxes and ballot papers. During the 1997 General Election, new lightweight cardboard ballot boxes were introduced in place of the old wooden and metal boxes which allowed for easy storage and transportation.



Papers offered in the polling station to remind voters to mark their ballot paper with a 'V' and to drop their ballot papers into the ballot box, 2012.

Candidates' photographs are now printed on ballot papers for easier identification by voters. Ballot papers now have darkened backgrounds to provide clearer boxes for voters to mark their choice. Any marks made outside these boxes are considered invalid, and this facilitates adjudication of votes in cases where the voter's choice is unclear.

With voter-centricity in mind and to make voting an easy and pleasant experience, the Elections Department has, with each election, increased

the number of polling stations, using schools and even HDB void decks and pavilions, to bring polling stations closer to voters and reduce queues. This has also been necessary due to growing population.

In the 2015 General Election, the Elections Department set up 832 polling stations throughout Singapore.



Voters marking their ballot papers at a polling station during General Election, 2006.

Overseas voting has been made available since 2006. Singaporeans living abroad can now vote at overseas polling stations in Canberra, London, Tokyo, San Francisco, Washington DC, New York, Beijing, Hong Kong, Shanghai and Dubai.



Voter holding a stencil which was introduced to assist visually impaired voters with the marking of ballot paper.

POLLING

Integrity in polling depends on two safeguards. First, the assurance that only legitimate votes are counted and no unauthorised ballot papers are included in the count; and second, voting secrecy.

There is a secure chain of custody of the marked ballot papers dropped into the ballot boxes. This begins from the point that the ballot boxes are sealed at the polling stations through their delivery to the counting centres, followed by storage for 6 months in the Supreme Court vault and finally to their destruction. All election officials, candidates and agents involved in the electoral process are under oath to keep voters' choice secret even if they happen to be able to see how the voter had voted.



Voters queuing up to vote at the Legislative Assembly Election, 1957.

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COUNTING



Sealed ballot boxes arriving at a counting centre for General Election, 1988.

At the close of poll, Presiding Officers at the various polling stations seal the ballot boxes in the presence of candidates and their polling agents. Candidates may also place their own seals on the ballot boxes. The ballot boxes are then transported under police escort to the designated counting centre. The process of vote counting is decentralised for efficiency. In the 2015 General Election, the Elections Department set up 163 counting centres throughout Singapore.

Since the 2015 General Election, candidates or their polling agents are allowed to board the buses transporting the marked ballot papers to the counting centres. They are able to witness the safe custody of ballot boxes being transported between electoral premises.

At the counting centre, candidates and their counting agents may inspect all the ballot boxes again to ascertain that all ballot boxes are accounted for, that no extra ballot boxes are present and that the seals on all the ballot boxes are intact and have not been tampered with. The seals are then broken and the ballot boxes opened. The ballot papers are poured out, mixed, sorted and counted.

Computers were deployed for the first time in the 1991 General Election to aid in the tabulation of election results.



Election officials pouring out ballot papers at counting centre for Legislative Assembly Election, 1983.



Assistant Returning Officer overseeing the counting process at his counting table during the General Election, 2011.



Returning Officer (1996 - 2011) Mr. Tan Seng Han, announcing the election result for Presidential Election, 1999.

Since the 2015 General Election, the Elections Department released sample counts to give an early indication of the possible outcome on Counting Night, and helped to prevent speculation and misinformation from unofficial sources while counting was underway.

After the election results are announced by the Returning Officer, the ballot papers and other official documents are placed in depository boxes and sealed. This procedure is witnessed by the candidates and their polling agents. They are also invited to affix their seals on the depository boxes. The boxes are then brought under police escort to the Supreme Court where they would be kept for six months before being destroyed.

DESTRUCTION OF MARKED BALLOT PAPERS

After the election results have been announced, the ballot papers are placed in depository boxes, sealed and then transported under police escort to the Supreme Court where they would remain sealed for the next six months. During this time, the boxes may only be re-opened by a court order, and this will only be issued if the Court is satisfied that a vote has been fraudulently cast and the result of the election might, as a consequence, be affected.

At the end of six months, the Returning Officer will retrieve the sealed depository boxes from the Supreme Court and transport them to the incineration plant to be destroyed. This process is witnessed by candidates and their election agents.

With the use of cardboard depository boxes, voting secrecy is enhanced since there is no need to remove the ballot papers from the boxes before burning them. Now, the ballot papers are burned along with the sealed depository boxes.



Candidates witnessing the unsealing of the sealed ballot boxes, which were sealed in the Supreme Court vault for 6 months, before the destruction of ballot papers, 1992.



Sealed depository boxes being loaded onto a lorry after being taken out of the Supreme Court vault at St. Andrew's Road for transportation to the incineration plant for destruction, 2011.



Preparations to destroy the ballot papers in the incinerator at Englewood Park, 1993.



Ballot papers and mixed documents used during the 1993 Presidential Election arriving at Tuas Refuse Incineration Plant.

Sealed depository box containing ballot papers from the 2016 Bukit Merah SMC Election being sealed into the incinerator, 2016.



READINESS PREPARATION BETWEEN ELECTIONS



Public education poster reminding Singaporeans to inspect the Registers of Electors and for overseas Singaporeans to apply to register as an overseas elector, 2004.



Public education poster reminding overseas Singaporeans to apply to register as an overseas elector, 2010.



Public education poster depicting the process for eRegistration which will be implemented at future elections, 2017.

One myth about the Elections Department is that it lies dormant between elections. Nothing can be further from the truth. The Elections Department works constantly to ensure that Registers of Electors are updated. At the same time, the Elections Department is responsible for the appointment and training of election officials, planning for electoral premises and efficient management of logistics to ensure operational readiness when elections are called.

The Elections Department, which used to operate on the basis that it should be ready 'just in time' for an election, has since adopted the maxim that it should be ready 'all the time'. In the past, election officials were trained just when elections were round the corner. Now, they receive elections training throughout the year. The Department also set up the Group Assistant Returning Officer (GARO) Contingent system for effective command and control of election operations. Senior public officers are appointed as GAROs to oversee polling and counting operations in constituencies under their charge.

Did you know?
In 2010 and in anticipation of the surge in public enquiries, work started for an interactive voice response system to handle election-related queries from the public for the presidential and general elections. This is part and parcel of the Elections Department's ongoing work to maintain its readiness for the conduct of elections.



Workers inspecting polling booths and election equipment after an election to ensure functionality.

The Elections Department also undertakes reviews of the electoral processes after each major election, together with its partner agencies to find ways to improve the system and processes, including proposing legislative changes. One innovation that the Elections Department will implement at future elections is eRegistration of voters. Instead of requiring an election official to manually search for and strike off the voter's name in the hard-copy Registers of Electors, voters only need to scan their NRIC electronically to register, thereby shortening the waiting time for voters and reducing election manpower at the polling stations.

