

# Unveiling Civic Engagement: Exploring the Impact of Civic Education on Voter Turnout in Guyana's Local Government Elections

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## Abstract

*This research explores the impact of civic education on voter turnout in Guyana's Local Government Elections (LGEs), particularly in light of the prolonged 24-year gap between the 1994 and 2016 elections. Despite legal provisions requiring LGEs every three years, turnout has remained below 50%, indicating low civic engagement. Utilizing a mixed-methods, phenomenological approach, the study combines quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews with electoral stakeholders and content analysis of civic education materials. The findings reveal a significant correlation between civic knowledge and electoral participation. Key barriers include limited understanding of local governance, political interference, inadequate civic education outreach, and a general lack of trust in the process. Youths and men were less likely to vote, underscoring demographic disparities in engagement. The study recommends a holistic civic education strategy integrating school-based learning, targeted social media campaigns, and collaborative efforts among electoral bodies, government ministries, and civil society. The findings offer valuable insights for policy reforms at the Guyana Elections Commission and may inform strategic planning in similar electoral contexts across the region.*

**Keywords:** Civic Education, Electoral, Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs), Local Governance, Local Government Elections (LGEs), Voter Turnout.

## Introduction

In 2016, Local Government Elections were reintroduced in Guyana following a 20-year hiatus. However, it is notable that the first Local Government Elections was held on December 7, 1970, and the second election was held 24 years later, on August 8, 1994. A similar pattern repeated after the 1994 elections. It is therefore important to note that the Local Authorities (Elections) Act, Chapter 28:03 stipulates that Local government elections must be held every three (3) years and must confer to all legal provisions enacted in the Laws of Guyana.

Given the foregone, it was believed that this 24-year gap may have created a situation in which many eligible voters, especially young people, were not knowledgeable about the local government system, structure or electoral process and, ultimately, may not have

participated in the 2016, 2018 and 2023 Local Government Elections. Statistics have shown that the voters' turnout in the last three LGEs was below 50%, which can be classified as low.

Election reports produced by International Observers for General and Regional Elections over the years have cited the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) need to improve its Civic and Voter Education Strategy to encourage greater participation in elections. Although those references were specific to General Elections, where people are more inclined to participate, this observation can also be extended to Local Government Elections in Guyana. It must be acknowledged, however, that other factors might contribute to low voter turnout in Local Government Elections.

Existing evidence has shown that education and information are essential to ensuring active

participation in a democratic process since they contribute to developing a democratic political culture amongst participants. In fact, the Carter Center posited that “a well-informed electorate is essential to any electoral process; it enhances the quality of the election as well as the elected body, and as such, it’s an essential building block of a meaningful democracy [17]. Voter information, awareness, and education campaigns provide voters with the knowledge, skills, and values to meaningfully participate in the electoral process” (p. 61).

A Stabroek News article asserted that “the Electoral Assistance Bureau (EAB) wants voter education to be taught in schools, saying that Guyana is largely unprepared for elections because of the absence of a sustained civic education programme”. The article further noted that “the general absence of civic education makes the citizenry very vulnerable to manipulation by specific interests and provides fertile ground for many problems that have plagued elections” [15].

Similarly, the Carter Center reported that voter information and awareness activities in many regions were not very visible during the pre-election period, except for TV and radio ads” [17]. They recommended that in order to support high-quality educational projects in all of Guyana's regions and ensure the equitable involvement of an informed electorate, budgetary allotments for civic and voter education should be increased.

It is important to note that while the voting process was similar to General and Local Elections, the electoral system was different for the Local Government Elections. There were several legal provisions and technicalities to consider that might be challenging for voters to comprehend during a 'one-off' discussion. As such, a robust civic and voter education programme could serve as the bridge to close that gap and encourage greater participation in Local Government Elections.

Notably, while this research was conducted in Guyana, its findings could inform the

strategic planning of other Electoral Management Bodies (EMBs) in the region and even internationally. It is therefore hoped that the findings of this research could be considered for policy discussions and strategic administrative implementation, especially at the Guyana Elections Commission and the Ministry of Local Government.

This research encapsulates a multifaceted research problem aimed at understanding the dynamics of civic engagement, civic education, and voter turnout in Guyana's local government elections. As such, a comprehensive inquiry into the impact of civic education on voter turnout in Guyana's local government elections was conducted. The four main objectives of this research are listed below: -

1. To investigate the current level of civic engagement among the electorate in Guyana's local government elections.
2. To assess the effectiveness of existing civic education programs in Guyana in informing citizens about the local government system and electoral processes.
3. To analyze the relationship between levels of civic education and voter turnout in Guyana's local government elections.
4. To identify barriers and challenges that may hinder civic participation and voter turnout in Guyana.

## **Literature Review**

Democracy fundamentally hinges on the active participation of citizens, primarily exercised through electoral processes. As Lincoln aptly described, it is a government "of the people, by the people, and for the people" [13]. Despite extensive scholarly inquiry, the drivers of political participation, particularly voter turnout, remain only partially understood [10, 16]. Over the last three decades, research has increasingly concentrated on understanding the behavioural dynamics behind voter turnout, emphasizing the necessity of citizen

engagement in achieving effective governance [6, 21].

Active citizenship is commonly defined across three domains: political engagement, community involvement, and public expression [14]. Among the most consistently cited factors influencing political participation is education. Scholars have long debated education's role in shaping civic behaviours, with many studies affirming a positive association between education and voter turnout [23]. Citizenship education, in particular, is posited as a powerful instrument for cultivating informed and participatory citizens [3], although questions remain regarding the most effective pedagogical approaches.

Local elections, where the majority of governance decisions impacting daily life are made, suffer from significantly lower turnout compared to federal elections. The limited academic attention to voter participation at the municipal level, exacerbated by difficulties in accessing local electoral data [9]. Studies reveal low turnout, especially in small- and medium-sized municipalities, underlining the urgent need for deeper empirical investigation.

Research highlights civic education as a crucial intervention for increasing local electoral participation. Studies by [11, 1, 19] argue for education as a means to bridge the knowledge gap between citizens and government, empower communities, and foster a sense of accountability. Technological innovations and school-based civic education programs have shown promise in enhancing youth engagement, although evidence remains mixed.

While several scholars advocate for integrating civic education into curricula to address youth disengagement, findings remain inconclusive. Some research indicates limited effects of classroom instruction on turnout, suggesting that broader educational environments and soft skills may be more influential. Structural inequities, such as punitive school climates, also negatively impact

long-term civic engagement, especially among marginalized groups [24, 8, 2].

Additional studies present contradictory evidence on education's effect on participation. While some find strong associations, others report minimal or even negative outcomes depending on regional contexts [4, 22, 5]. The complexity of these findings underscores that while education especially civic education is associated with increased political engagement, it is neither a singular nor universally effective solution.

In conclusion, although civic education has demonstrated potential to improve voter turnout and democratic participation, particularly in local contexts, its impact remains varied and context dependent. This calls for continued research, nuanced policy development, and localized implementation strategies to maximize its effectiveness in strengthening democratic governance.

### **Hypotheses:**

**H<sub>1</sub>:** An effective civic education strategy will result in increased voter turnout at Local Government Elections.

**H<sub>2</sub>:** The lack of a comprehensive civic education strategy results in poor voter turnout at Local Government Elections.

**H<sub>3</sub>:** Civic education does not determine voter turnout at Local Government Elections.

These hypotheses form the basis for testing the impact of civic education on voter turnout in Guyana's local government elections. Through empirical research and analysis, the study aims to determine whether civic education initiatives have a significant influence on voter participation in the electoral process.

### **Materials and Methods**

This study employs a phenomenological research design to investigate the potential correlation between ineffective civic education and low voter turnout in Guyana's Local Government Elections (LGEs). The research

aims not only to explore the subjective experiences of stakeholders regarding civic education but also to recommend evidence-based strategies for enhancing citizen participation. Given the complexity and multidimensionality of the research problem, a mixed methods approach integrating both qualitative and quantitative methods have been adopted to ensure comprehensive data collection, triangulation, and analytic rigor.

## **Research Design**

The phenomenological paradigm underpins the study, seeking to understand the lived experiences and interpretations of civic education by key actors and the electorate. This design allowed the researcher to capture the nuanced meanings attached to civic participation. Qualitative methods, such as in-depth semi-structured interviews, and content analysis were employed to delve into stakeholder perspectives, while quantitative methods, including a nationwide structured survey, will quantify voters' knowledge, attitudes, and practices concerning LGEs.

### **Sample Population and Sampling Techniques**

The target population included:

1. Eligible voters from the 2016, 2018, and 2023 Official Lists of Voters (OLV);
2. Local Government practitioners

Probability sampling (specifically simple random sampling) was used to select a representative sample of 100-150 voters across Guyana for the quantitative survey.

Non-probability sampling (purposive and convenience sampling) was used for qualitative components, and twelve key local governance practitioners were interviewed.

This combined approach ensures inclusivity and diversity in stakeholder perspectives, while enhancing the generalizability and transferability of findings.

## **Data Collection Methods**

**Quantitative Survey:** A structured questionnaire was administered online via Survey Monkey.

Questions were primarily close-ended, incorporating Likert scales and multiple-choice formats. To ensure reliability and validity, the instrument was pre-tested with a sample of 20 individuals, with iterative modifications based on feedback. The data was exported to MS Excel for descriptive and inferential analysis.

**Qualitative Interviews:** Semi-structured interviews were conducted via Zoom with representatives from electoral bodies, government institutions, and civil society. An informed consent process preceded all interviews, while follow-up calls were made to finalize participation. Interviews were guided by a predetermined protocol while allowing flexibility for probing.

**Content Analysis:** A systematic review of civic education materials including brochures, audiovisual content, web content, and social media communications was undertaken. The analysis assessed the content's thematic structure, messaging strategies, target audience engagement, and overall effectiveness.

## **Data Analysis and Presentation**

Having completed data collection, the researcher compiled all the data in a coherent manner, using coding frames and sheets to record responses and identify emerging themes from the questionnaires, interviews, and content analysis. The findings were presented using descriptive statistics, tables, graphs, and charts. Survey Monkey's functionality allows for results to be viewed in various formats, including percentages, graphs, and charts, eliminating the need to develop a coding frame and sheet in MS Excel. However, raw data from Survey Monkey were exported to SPSS for statistical inference analysis, including mean, mode, median, standard deviation, correlations, etc. For the interviews and content analysis, findings were presented using emerging

themes. Thematic analysis was conducted, focusing on trends and comparisons related to research questions and objectives. This approach ensures discussion and analysis within the correct context, yielding desired outcomes, determining the accuracy of the hypothesis, its theoretical relevance, and how it supports or differs from previous studies cited in the literature review.

## **Results**

This section sought to explore the impact of civic education on voter turnout in Local Government Elections using both qualitative and quantitative research methods. This section presents a detailed analysis of these findings, exploring both the direct and indirect effects of civic education on local electoral engagement.

### **Qualitative Findings**

#### **Research Question 1: - What is the current level of civic engagement among the electorate participating in Guyana's local government elections?**

Civic engagement in Guyana's local government elections remains limited, despite recent improvements attributed to voter registration efforts by the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM). While GECOM facilitates voter registration, ID issuance, and address updates, public participation is still low due to limited understanding of the local governance system and a perception that local elections are less important than national ones.

After local elections resumed in 2016, GECOM launched public education initiatives, including community outreach, media campaigns, and consultations. These efforts aimed to inform voters and promote the benefits of participating in local elections. However, the initiatives often lack depth, and civic education is not continuous throughout the year.

Challenges such as political apathy, limited funding for elected council members, and the inactive status of governance support divisions further hinder engagement. Interviewees

emphasized the need for more targeted, grassroots civic education and greater involvement from the Ministry of Local Government and electoral candidates in educating the public. They also highlighted the importance of understanding social, cultural, and economic factors influencing voter behavior.

#### **Research Question 2: - How effective are the existing civic education programs in Guyana in informing citizens about the local government system and electoral processes?**

Interviews with ten experts in governance, elections, and communications revealed that Guyana lacks a consistent and effective civic and voter education strategy for local government elections. While the Guyana Elections Commission (GECOM) is said to prioritize civic education mainly through media outreach, efforts are often short-term, poorly targeted, and not sustained year-round. There has also been no permanent Civic and Voter Education Manager during 2023 Local Government Elections, leading to broad, macro-level messaging.

Interviewees emphasized the need for ongoing, audience-specific civic education using modern, relatable formats such as social media (especially Tok-tok), which allows for greater engagement and real-time feedback. Many noted that current strategies do not adequately reach grassroots audiences or explain the role and importance of local government.

Collaboration among GECOM, the Ministry of Local Government, the Ministry of Education, civil society, and political parties was seen as essential. While GECOM manages the electoral process, the Ministry of Local Government is expected to educate citizens about governance functions. However, neither the Local Government Commission nor other relevant agencies currently have a comprehensive civic education strategy.

Experts also stressed the importance of professional oversight, including skilled designers and media teams, to create and adapt educational content effectively. Without improvements, voter apathy is likely to persist due to limited awareness, distrust in local systems, and ineffective communication.

**Research Question 3: - What is the relationship between levels of civic education and voter turnout in Guyana's local government elections?**

The research explored the link between civic education and voter turnout in Guyana's local government elections. Interviewees confirmed a strong connection, noting that informed citizens are more likely to vote. However, many people skip local elections due to a lack of understanding about local government roles, with some elected officials also lacking clarity about their responsibilities.

Political interference and blurred lines between central and local government further confuse the public, reducing their motivation to participate. Interviewees stressed the need for continuous, targeted civic education not just in the lead-up to elections and called for better collaboration between GECOM, the Ministry of Local Government, and other stakeholders.

They emphasized that civic education should go beyond teaching how to vote and instead explain why voting matters and how local systems work. Messages should be tailored to specific regions and audience groups. Some recommended integrating civic education into school curricula by Grade 4 to build early awareness and long-term engagement.

Current strategies were criticized for being outdated, inconsistent, and poorly implemented. A 2018 strategy by the Ministry of Local Government, for example, focused on structures rather than meaningful voter outreach and was never presented to Parliament, limiting its impact. Interviewees concluded that more practical, audience-

specific, and sustained civic education is essential for increasing voter participation

**Question 4. What are the barriers and challenges that may hinder civic participation and voter turnout in Guyana's Local Government Elections?**

The interviews conducted in this study sought to examine the underlying causes of low voter turnout in local government elections in Guyana. One guiding question asked was: What factors do you believe are responsible for low voter turnout?" The qualitative responses revealed four primary thematic categories contributing to electoral disengagement: (a) lack of knowledge, (b) politicization, (c) lack of improvement, and (d) inadequate resources/subvention.

**1. Lack of Knowledge:**

Many voters and even elected officials lack understanding of local government roles and the importance of participating in elections. Civic education is irregular and often limited to the months before an election, leading to public disengagement.

**2. Politicization:**

Local elections are often influenced by national political and ethnic divisions. Political parties dominate the process, leading to public distrust. Interviewees suggested that independent, community-based groups should manage local governance instead. Central government interference further weakens local councils' authority and effectiveness.

**3. Lack of Improvement:**

Despite elections, citizens see little to no change in their communities. Poor infrastructure and inadequate services have left many disillusioned. Voters often feel their participation doesn't translate into tangible results, discouraging future engagement.

**4. Inadequate Resources:**

Councils face financial shortfalls due to delayed or insufficient subventions and low tax compliance. Many are unable to carry out basic functions, like garbage collection. The absence

of proper funding, staff, and infrastructure limits their performance and damages public confidence in local governance.

## **Quantitative Findings**

### **Objective 1: Assessing the Current Level of Civic Engagement among the Electorate in Guyana's Local Government Elections**

In the survey conducted, 67.8% of respondents indicated that they had participated in at least one Local Government Election between 1994 and 2023, while 32.3% reported never having voted. Analysis of voter participation across age cohorts revealed notable disparities, with the 18–27 age group exhibiting the lowest levels of electoral engagement. In contrast, individuals aged 28–37 demonstrated comparatively higher turnout rates, suggesting a demographic segment with more consistent participation. These findings underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance electoral engagement among younger voters.

Gender-disaggregated data further indicated that female respondents were more likely than their male counterparts to have voted in Local Government Elections, suggesting a higher degree of political participation and civic responsibility among women.

Perceptions of public awareness regarding Local Government Elections were mixed. While 47.3% of participants believed that the general public possessed a reasonable understanding of the electoral process, 33% viewed the public as inadequately informed. A smaller proportion—3.3% perceived awareness as high, 9.9% rated it as moderate, and 6.6% expressed uncertainty. These responses reflect persistent concerns about limited civic knowledge, highlighting the need for improved voter education initiatives to strengthen democratic participation.

### **Objective 2: Analyzing the Effectiveness of Civic Education Programs in Informing Citizens about the Local Government System and Electoral Processes**

The findings from the survey indicated that perceptions of civic education messaging related to local elections are mixed. A majority of respondents (55.6%) reported that civic education messages are unclear or confusing, while 44.4% found the information to be clear and understandable. This suggests a significant communication gap in the dissemination of electoral information.

Moreover, only 16.1% of participants believe that citizens receive adequate information regarding Local Government Elections, with just 1.1% strongly agreeing. In contrast, 49.5% of respondents felt that the information provided is insufficient, and 34.1% adopted a neutral stance—pointing to uncertainty or a lack of engagement with the content delivered. These findings underscore critical deficiencies in the effectiveness and reach of civic education initiatives.

Gender-based analysis reveals that female respondents were more likely than males to view civic education as “very important” for promoting civic responsibility and enhancing voter turnout. Specifically, 32 women emphasized the importance of civic education, compared to only seven men. This trend suggests a heightened awareness among women regarding the role of civic education in strengthening democratic participation at the local level.

### **Objective 3: Investigating the Relationship between Civic Education and Voter Turnout**

The statistical analyses conducted reinforce the link between civic awareness and electoral participation. A Chi-Square test revealed a statistically significant relationship between civic knowledge and voting behavior ( $\chi^2 = 14.133$ ,  $p = 0.007$ ), suggesting that individuals with greater civic understanding are more likely to participate in Local Government Elections.

Furthermore, regression analysis demonstrated a significant positive association between having voted and the perceived importance of civic education. With a coefficient of 0.565 ( $p = 0.015$ ), the results indicate that individuals who have participated in elections are more likely to recognize civic education as essential to fostering civic responsibility and encouraging electoral engagement.

Although a positive association was observed between voting history and the belief that civic education can help bridge political divides ( $B = 0.393$ ), this relationship did not reach statistical significance ( $p = 0.086$ ). As such, while the trend suggests a potential connection, the evidence remains inconclusive, warranting further investigation.

#### **Objective 4: Identifying the Barriers and Challenges Hindering Civic Participation and Voter Turnout**

The survey findings reveal that a substantial majority of respondents (83.3%) perceive the presence of barriers that hinder voter turnout in Local Government Elections, with only 16.7% denying the existence of such challenges. This widespread acknowledgment underscores the critical need to address factors that limit electoral participation.

Among the barriers identified, the most frequently cited were lack of interest (28.2%), unfamiliarity with candidates (26.9%), insufficient civic education initiatives (21.1%), and political intimidation (20.7%). Notably, only 3.1% of respondents reported being unaffected by any of these factors, reinforcing the need for targeted strategies to overcome both motivational and informational obstacles to participation.

In terms of recommendations to enhance civic and voter education, the majority of respondents (58.2%) advocated for a comprehensive, integrated approach. This includes the expanded use of social media platforms, the incorporation of civic education

into formal school curricula, the simplification of electoral messaging, and greater involvement of local government actors in outreach efforts. Additionally, 18.7% of participants expressed support for increased social media engagement alone, while 5.5% favored the use of simpler communication as a standalone measure. Collectively, these findings point to a clear public preference for multifaceted, inclusive strategies to improve civic awareness and foster higher voter turnout.

#### **Discussion**

The research objectives of this study were thoroughly examined and findings were deduced, which led to the emergence of several insights that shed light on areas for improvement in voter turnout at local government elections.

The findings highlight age disparity concerning one's civic engagement. The younger generation tends to participate less in local government elections than older citizens, which suggests that youths may be ignorant of civic education and local government since there was a 22 years hiatus after the 1994 Local Government Elections. The disparity identified indicates that young voters may not see the need to participate in local government elections, which suggests that better strategies should be implemented to ensure the participation of the younger generation in future elections. In addition, the gender-based disparity shows that females engage in local government elections more when compared to the male population. This indicates that civic education programs should utilize gender-sensitive approaches that cater to the different engagement levels of men and women with political processes.

The findings of this study highlight a compound association between civic education and voter turnout. It was deduced that the quality and effectiveness of civic education programs have a notable impact on voter turnout. This suggests that when citizens are adequately educated about their rights as voters,



the function of local government, and there is a robust civic education; they are likely to participate in local government elections. The study revealed a significant portion (55.6%) of the respondents feel that the messages of civic education are not transparent or concise, meaning the program lacks clarity and depth, which is a critical aspect in the local government election.

If the message is not tailored to cater to its target audience, then the civic education initiative cannot reach its full potential, and voters may be uninformed or confused about the process, leading to low voter participation. Additionally, 49.5% of the respondents and interviewees disagree that sufficient information on local government elections is provided, which suggests that the civic education program may not reach the Local Authority Areas. This indicates that stakeholders and civic society, responsible for civic education in Guyana should implement a more robust, inclusive communication strategy to educate citizens on voting procedures.

The statistical package for social science was the primary software used to assess the relationship between civic education and voter turnout. The Pearson Chi-Square and regression analysis revealed that civic knowledge and voter turnout are significantly associated. The findings show that citizens exposed to civic education are more likely to participate in local government elections. The results further examined respondents who voted in local government elections and who tended to view civic education as necessary. Both findings emphasize the importance of civic education in motivating Guyanese citizens to participate in the country's local electoral processes. This aligns with this study, which suggests that an effective civic education strategy will increase voter turnout.

Additionally, several barriers to voter turnout were identified. Both the respondents and the interviewees stated that the prevalent ones were lack of knowledge, politicization,

lack of improvement, unfamiliarity with their local representatives, lack of interest, and low civic education. The barriers identified by respondents suggest a multifaceted terrain of challenges that hinder citizens from participating in local government elections. Notably, the lack of interest (28.2%) and unfamiliarity with representatives (26.9%) are as concerning as they indicate that most citizens may lack sufficient understanding of the electoral representatives for local government and may not want to be engaged in any political process. These barriers emphasize a greater need for civic and voter education for local government elections. Further, low civic education (21.1%) also suggests a critical need for a more concise and holistic civic education program within Guyana. Addressing these barriers may help bridge the knowledge gap and promote higher participation in local government elections.

For this reason, respondents and interviewees made several suggestions to enhance civic education. The most recommended strategy for improving civic education is for those in authority to follow a comprehensive approach, which includes greater use of social media, the introduction of civic education in schools, tailored approach to capture the target audience, political parties should desist from interjecting themselves into the local governance of Local Authority Areas and allow the local government systems to function independently and effectively. This approach is holistic and allows the authorities to utilize platforms that are relevant for the young generation while at the same time building the foundation of knowledge for civic education by starting in the early development of the youths (schools).

## **Conclusion**

This study has contributed meaningfully to the understanding of the apparent association between civic education and voter turnout. As the research progressed, several areas emerged

as potential avenues for future inquiry. First, a study on the role of social media and digital platforms in influencing voter turnout in Guyana is recommended. Given the increasing integration of digital technology into political communication, examining its effect on electoral participation could yield valuable insights for policymakers and civic educators. Second, further research is warranted to evaluate the effectiveness of various civic education approaches in promoting voter engagement. A comparative analysis of formal civic education in schools, community-based programs, and digital initiatives may help identify which methods are most impactful in fostering civic participation. Lastly, this study's instrument included items related to perceived

barriers to voter participation. It is therefore recommended that future studies investigate these barriers across rural and urban contexts, as such an analysis could reveal geographic disparities in voter turnout and inform the development of more targeted, context-specific policy interventions.

## Conflict of Interest

The researcher declares that there were no conflicts of interest while conducting this research

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