

# APSU political science professor compares elections in U.S. and Belize



Dr. Young leaves early to vote on Election Day in Belize.

CLARKSVILLE, Tenn. – A little before 7 a.m. on Election Day, Dr. Harold Young grabbed his keys and face mask and headed to the local polling station. It was a beautiful, clear morning, with a tropical breeze ruffling campaign banners hanging along the streets. Belize City is usually quiet at that hour, giving early risers a chance to organize their thoughts, but as Young strolled past tropical flora and chain-link fences, he noticed a growing crowd forming around the block.

“The people of Belize are very politically engaged,” Young, an Austin Peay State University associate professor of political science, said. “On Election Day, voter turnout was close to 80 percent.”

A week earlier, on Nov. 3, voters in the U.S. had elected Joe Biden as the country’s 46<sup>th</sup> president, though some still refused to acknowledge his victory. In Belize, the citizens were also deciding who would lead their country – the incumbent United Democratic Party or the People’s United Party. As he slowly made his way toward the polling station, Young’s professional interest in political science had him comparing the two countries’ national elections.

“In Belize, there also was a lot of emotion involved,” he said. “There was only one actual physical incident, which occurred in a rural area where the ruling party did a mini-motorcade through a village and it was deemed provocative. So, there was catcalling, one person jumped off the motorcade and there was a fight. Across the country, however, most just engaged in spirited discussions and flag waving.”

But aside from that small incident, the Belize elections progressed smoothly, without much drama. The main obstacle in Belize, Young said, was casting a ballot during a pandemic and severe flooding in the west of the country.

## **Voting in Belize**

## **Elections in Belize**

Young grew up in the Caribbean, attending primary and high school in Belize and earning his law degree from the University of the West Indies/Norman Manley School of Law in Jamaica. At the age of 47, after successful careers as a lawyer and, later, a public health professional, he decided to earn his doctorate in political science from Georgia State University.

In 2016, Young joined Austin Peay's Department of Political Science and Public Management. During the COVID-19 pandemic, he taught many of his classes from his family home in Belize City. That's why he was in the country on election day.

The polls opened at 7 a.m. that morning, and after about two hours of waiting in line, Young found himself as the next voter.

"When you get to the head of the line, they spritz you," he said. "You're sanitized, and then they do it again when you get to the desk with the paper ballots."

In Belize, votes are still cast with paper ballots; there are no machines. Voters stick their fingers in indelible ink and then mark an "X" beside the candidate they wish to vote for.

"Your name is announced to everyone in the room for the poll watchers," he said. "And then you go into a little screened area and mark your 'X.'"

After marking his choice, Young folded his ballot twice and placed it in a mahogany box with a padlock on the front. Once the polls closed, the boxes at that polling station would be taken into a locked room with election workers and political observers. They'd unseal the boxes, divide ballots among the candidates and begin the vote counting. This was repeated in polling stations around the country.

### **A faster transition**



Young and the Honorable John Briceño, Belize's new prime minister.

After voting, Young left the polling station around 8:40 a.m. and drove to a nearby TV station. He spent the next three hours on air providing commentary, as a political science professor, on the day's election. After lunch, he went home and was interviewed through Zoom for another television station.

"And then everything kind of chilled," he said. "In the evening, the polls closed at 6 p.m. By 9:30 p.m., it was clear that the ruling party had been swept out of office by a landslide."

What happened over the next few hours and days might seem strange to U.S. residents.

"I think by 10 p.m., the leader of the losing party gave a wonderful concession speech. An excellent concession speech," Young said. "The leader of the new ruling party gave an acceptance speech. The following morning the Honorable John Briceño was sworn in as only the fifth prime minister since independence in 1981. By Friday, the cabinet was announced, and by Monday, they were in office. That week, our duly elected legislators were all sworn in."

Young said comparing the two elections falls into the "apples and oranges" dilemma – Belize is a small country, and the U.S. is a world superpower. But the country's size didn't stop the new ruling government from condemning the insurrection that took place at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6.

On Jan. 7, the Belize Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Foreign Trade and Immigration issued a stern press release condemning "the brazen attempt to interrupt the constitutional order in the United States of America."

The release went on to say, "The (Belize) Government calls on the authorities to ensure a peaceful and lawful transition of power as constitutionally mandated and which reflects the will of the people freely expressed in free and fair elections."