

A day at the elections

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History is made every day. On Tuesday 8 November, it was made with thumbprints and inky fingernails.

After the national elections a month before returned no clear presidential winner, Liberians went back to the polls to choose between two – rather than 22 – candidates. George Weah and Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, often referred to by their first names, represent about as diverse a choice as any democratic process can offer.

Montserrado County, home of the capital Monrovia, contains 35% of the nation's voters. A thousand polling places punctuate the area and occupy buildings of all shapes and sizes, from large churches to one-room schools, from a local police station to the YMCA headquarters. At several sites on Tuesday, voters and officials compared the day's run-off elections to previous polls.

“People were not as fully educated as in this one,” said Steven Miller, a Presiding Officer in densely populated West Point, referring to the elections in 1997. “And during the first round [in October], you had a whole lot of ballot papers to deal with – the president, the senate, and the representatives . . . This one is faster and easier.”

The voting process proved remarkably efficient. At each polling station, electoral officers checked and hole-punched the identification cards of registered voters. After collecting a ballot paper, the voter proceeded to a cardboard screen, one of over 14,000 in place throughout the country, to cast their vote. The voter then deposited their paper in the ballot box and had the nail of their forefinger stained with ink, indelible for 30 days. Not only a mark of participation, the inky fingernails deterred people from attempting to vote more than once.



Liberia's National Elections Commission (NEC) worked hard to make the election day as inclusive as possible. A little more than half the population can read and write, so each ballot paper bore the candidates' photographs next to their names. In addition, the NEC distributed more than 170,000 pens and almost 35,000 thumbprint pads to allow all voters to make their mark. Disability also proved no barrier. At Matilda Newport High School in the center of Monrovia, official Lysander Weah helped 64-year-old Spencer Smith to vote despite his blindness. Mary George, aged 30, followed Spencer to complete the voting process unaided from her wheelchair.

Monrovia's citizens voiced enthusiastic support for both presidential candidates. In Clara Town, where George Weah grew up, Elijah David observed proceedings on behalf of Weah's Congress for Democratic Change. "Liberia today needs a president that has contacts – a superstar . . . A man who wants to build this country," he explained to an international observer. "If George Weah wins this election, you will want to stay in Liberia and not go home!"

A man in Duala Market on Bushrod Island preferred the credentials of Weah's rival. "We love George Weah for soccer, but to be the president of Liberia, no," he said. "We don't need a leader-ruler, we need a servant-leader." He believes that Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf represents the best chance of lasting peace for Liberia. "You've got to know you're an instrument in the hands of God . . . If you get out of the hand of God, the whole thing is going to come into chaos again."



The international community, well aware that free and fair elections are vital for lasting peace within Liberia as well as throughout the West African region, sent 369 observers to monitor the elections. When a troop of Nigerian UN peacekeepers visited St Mary's Catholic School, their commander briefly spoke with those waiting in line. He asked them to encourage their families and friends to vote. "When you have finished, tell them to come and vote – say it is very important for us."

After decades of war and political instability, Liberians are ready for change. They are ready for a new chapter in their nation's history, written one day at a time. – *Claire Boot.*

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