

How Bahá'í Voters Should Vote

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Abstract:

Two widespread misconceptions among Bahá'ís are that, according to Shoghi Effendi, (a) Bahá'í voters should not discuss how they should vote prior to Bahá'í elections and (b) the only relevant criteria for voting are the qualifications of the individuals voted for. Shoghi Effendi in fact suggests that Bahá'í voters should discuss the criteria for voting, but without reference to particular individuals. Moreover, he provides four different types of criteria that voters should consider: criteria concerning (1) the qualifications of individual Assembly members, (2) the collective makeup of the Assembly as a whole, (3) changes in the individual Assembly members over time, and (4) changes in the collective makeup of the Assembly over time.

Because the Bahá'í Faith has no clergy, the collective affairs of the Bahá'í community at the local and national levels are governed by annually elected, nine-member Local or National Spiritual Assemblies.¹ If the Bahá'í Faith is distinct from most other religions in that it lacks clergy, its electoral system is distinct from most other democratic elections in that it is conducted entirely without nominations, parties, or competitive campaigns—in accordance with the values and norms articulated in the writings of Shoghi Effendi.² The ban on nominations, parties, and

¹ In some countries, there also exist annually elected Regional Councils at the sub-national level; the Bahá'í community is governed at the international level by the Universal House of Justice, elected every five years.

² The distinct values underlying the Bahá'í model of governance emphasize respect for the freedom, equality, and nobility of the individual person, the unity and solidarity of persons, and the justice and fairness of institutions (see Arash Abizadeh, “Democratic Elections without Campaigns? Normative Foundations of National Bahá'í Elections,” *World Order* 37.1 (2005): 7–49). The constitutional basis for Bahá'í governing bodies was laid in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá (see Udo Schaefer, “Introduction to Bahá'í Law: Doctrinal Foundations, Principles and Structures,” *Journal of Law and Religion* 18.2 [2002–2003]: 307–73), but most of the institutional details were gradually worked out in the 1920s and 1930s by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada in consultation with Shoghi Effendi (see Loni Bramson-Lerche, “Some Aspects of the Development of the Bahá'í Administrative Order in America, 1922–1936,” in *Studies in Bábí and Bahá'í History: Volume One*, ed. Moojan Momen [Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1982] 255–300). The institutional rules are today formalized in the by-laws of the world's National Assemblies and in the constitution of the Universal House of Justice (see “A Model Declaration of Trust and By-Laws for a National Spiritual Assembly,” in *The Bahá'í World: An International Record*, vol. 15: 1968–73, comp. The Universal House of Justice

campaigns is enforced by formal institutional rules as well as by informal social norms against campaigning: Bahá'í voters are typically averse to voting for anyone they perceive to be intentionally campaigning for Bahá'í office.

Perhaps as a result of this norm against campaigning, however, there exists a widespread misconception in the Bahá'í community that, according to Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'ís should not discuss how they ought to vote before Bahá'í elections. In fact, Shoghi Effendi has said almost precisely the opposite: that Bahá'ís *should* discuss how they ought to vote but that, in doing so, they should not refer to specific individuals. He says:

I feel that *reference to personalities* before the election would give rise to misunderstanding and differences. What the friends should do is to get thoroughly acquainted with one another, to *exchange views*, to mix freely and *discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications* for such a membership *without reference* or application, however indirect, *to particular individuals*. We should refrain from influencing the opinion of others, of canvassing for *any particular individual*.³

There is thus a crucial distinction between (i) the ideal *criteria* or “qualifications” that one should bear in mind when voting and (ii) the *application* of these criteria to the “particular individuals” who may fulfill them.

[Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976] 653–60; and The Universal House of Justice, *The Constitution of the Universal House of Justice* [Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1972]).

³ Shoghi Effendi, letter to a Local Spiritual Assembly, May 14, 1927, in *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by The Universal House of Justice 1963–1990*, vol. 1 (Maryborough, Victoria, Australia: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991) no. 709, emphasis added.

The ban on campaigning concerns discussion of the latter: the *application* of these criteria to particular individuals. This ban, as well as the fact that elections are conducted by secret ballot, is in part designed to allow voters freely to determine for whom they wish to vote, without external influence. (In local elections, these voters comprise all local adult Bahá'ís in good standing; in national elections, they comprise delegates who, in turn, are elected by the country's adult Bahá'ís. Because of the ban on nominations, the set of candidates effectively comprises all adult Bahá'ís in good standing in the locality or country. Each voter fills their ballot with the names of nine different candidates; the nine persons receiving a plurality of votes are elected to office.)

But the ban on campaigning does not directly concern discussion of the *criteria* themselves. Not only does Shoghi Effendi say that Bahá'í voters should discuss the “requirements and qualifications” they ought to consider when voting, he specifies what many of these criteria are. The first type of criteria he mentions concerns the ideal qualifications of an *individual* elected as a member of a Spiritual Assembly. Many of these criteria are well-known to Bahá'í voters, but a second widespread misconception is that this first type of criteria, concerning the qualifications of individuals, is all that there is. There are, in fact, four distinct types of criteria that Shoghi Effendi suggests Bahá'í voters should consider when voting: (1) criteria concerning the qualifications of *individual* Assembly members, (2) criteria concerning the *collective* makeup of the Assembly as a whole, (3) criteria concerning *changes in the individual members* of the Assembly, and (4) criteria concerning *changes in the collective makeup* of the Assembly over time. Rather than simply studying criteria of the first type before Bahá'í elections, a thorough preparation would require Bahá'í voters to study all four types of criteria and, moreover, to consult together in order to better understand what these criteria might

mean within the context of their own electoral unit.⁴

1. Criteria Concerning Individual Members in a Single Election

According to Shoghi Effendi, individual representatives elected to Bahá'í office ought to possess the “qualities of unquestioned loyalty, of selfless devotion, of a well-trained mind, of recognized ability and mature experience” and be “faithful, sincere, experienced, capable and competent.”⁵ This first set of criteria is the most straightforward and most widely known in the Bahá'í community: It specifies the qualities that the *individuals* who hold office ought ideally to possess.

2. Criteria Concerning the Collective Makeup in a Single Election

But the purpose of Bahá'í elections is not simply to elect *individuals* to office; it is to elect a collective body. The quality of an elected Assembly will depend not just on the separate qualifications of each individual representative but also on the way that the qualities, skills, knowledge, experience, and so on of these individuals *combine* to complement each other as a whole. For example, imagine that the nine individual members of an Assembly are all loyal,

⁴ This short article draws on material from Abizadeh, “Democratic Elections without Campaigns?” Voting outcomes result from a combination of two distinct features of elections: the institutionalized voting rules and the way voters vote within those institutions. The previous article focused on the first feature, examining the ideal criteria for Assembly membership in order to justify and evaluate the institutionalized voting rules of Bahá'í elections. This short article focuses on the second feature, examining the ideal criteria in order to suggest what Bahá'í voters should take into consideration when voting.

⁵ Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages 1922–1932*, 1974 ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 1988 printing) 87–88; and Shoghi Effendi, letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran, July 1, 1943, in *Compilation of Compilations* vol. 1, no. 716.

selfless, intellectually well-trained, and so on. But imagine that all of them have exactly the same life experiences and come from exactly the same background. This lack of diversity may diminish the quality of the Assembly even though all the individuals who make up the Assembly are, considered individually, fully qualified. The second type of criteria thus specifies the qualities that the *collective* Assembly ought to have as a whole, independent of the qualifications of the individuals considered separately. As a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi puts it: “it is not the individuals on an Assembly which is important, but the Assembly as an institution.”⁶

Shoghi Effendi specifically mentions three such collective criteria: *diversity*, *representativeness*, and *minority presence* in the collective membership of the Assembly. It is clear that Bahá’í voters should pay attention to diversity in the combination of individuals for whom they vote. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá extols diversity as contributing “to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole” and states that “when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest.”⁷ Shoghi Effendi, referring to

⁶ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to a Bahá’í, July 7, 1949, in *The Compilation of Compilations: Prepared by The Universal House of Justice 1963–1990*, vol. 2 (Maryborough, Victoria, Australia: Bahá’í Publications Australia, 1991) no. 1450.

⁷ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Committee at the Bahá’í World Centre and Marzieh Gail, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1966, 2004 printing) no. 225.24–25. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states that “differences are of two kinds. One is the cause of annihilation and is like the antipathy existing among warring nations and conflicting tribes who seek each other’s destruction, uprooting one another’s families, depriving one another of rest and comfort and unleashing carnage. The other kind which is a

this passage, concludes that the “watchword” of the Bahá’í system of governance is “unity in diversity.”⁸ A 1934 letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of India, Burma, and Pakistan interprets this to mean that a diverse membership is desirable on a Bahá’í Assembly:

The differences of language and of social and intellectual background do, undoubtedly, render the work somewhat difficult to carry out and may temporarily check the efficient and smooth working of the national administrative machinery of the Faith. They, nevertheless, impart to the deliberations of the National Assembly a universality which they would be otherwise lacking, and give to its members a breadth of view which is their duty to cultivate and foster. *It is not uniformity which we should seek in the formation of any national or local assembly.* For the bedrock of the Baha’i administrative order is the principle of

token of diversity is the essence of perfection and the cause of the appearance of the bestowals of the Most Glorious Lord. . . .

. . . when that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the Word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embellisheth the world of humanity. This diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. . . .

. . . when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest.” (*Selections from the Writings of `Abdu’l-Bahá* 225.23–25.

⁸ Shoghi Effendi, letter to the Bahá’ís throughout the West, March 21, 1930, in *The World Order of Bahá’u’lláh: Selected Letters*, new ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1991) 42.

unity in diversity, which has been so strongly and so repeatedly emphasized in the writings of the Cause.⁹

One type of diversity that a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi singles out for special mention concerns age distribution. In a 1946 letter, Shoghi Effendi's secretary reports that "He was also pleased to see that these changes [in membership] involved more younger people being on the National Spiritual Assembly."¹⁰ Although the letter specifically refers to younger members, this reference presumably occurs against the background of a tendency, in the community in question, to elect older members, so that one can infer from this context that what concerned Shoghi Effendi more generally was age diversity.¹¹

That Bahá'í voters should consider requirements concerning the collectivity is also clear from Shoghi Effendi's comment that "The Assembly should be *representative* of the choicest

⁹ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of India, Burma, and Pakistan, January 2, 1934, in *Dawn of a New Day* (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust of India, 1970) 47-48, emphasis added. Also in *Compilations of Compilations*, vol. 2, no. 1440.

¹⁰ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, May 21, 1946, in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2, no. 1449.

¹¹ This appears to be the Universal House of Justice's understanding of the matter. See their 25 March 2007 letter to the Bahá'ís of the world, which recommends that "From among the pool of those whom the elector believes to be qualified to serve, selection should be made with due consideration given to such other factors as age distribution, diversity, and gender." See also the letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, July 6, 1944, in *Messages to Canada*, 2nd ed. (Thornhill, ON: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1999) 80-81: "the body of the believers...should be encouraged to think more, not only about the qualifications of members of their elected bodies, but also about such things as you mention, the law of averages, the age and indisposition of some of the members, etc."

and *most varied* and capable elements in every Bahá'í community.”¹² This comment not only reiterates the requirement of diversity but also provides a second criterion concerning the collective nature of Assembly membership: An Assembly ought to be *representative* of the particular community whose Assembly it is, in the sense of reflecting its makeup.¹³ Shoghi Effendi reiterates this when he says that Bahá'í elections must serve to “reinforce the representative character of Bahá'í institutions.”¹⁴ This suggests that, when Bahá'ís consider the “requirements and qualifications” of membership, they ought in particular to consider the composition of their own community, and perhaps consult about what would make their Assembly representative of it in this sense. For example, in some communities, a large proportion of the population are students, working class, single mothers, or speakers of a particular language, etc.; voters here may well be advised to consider these facts when determining what would make their Assembly more representative of their community.¹⁵

¹² Shoghi Effendi, letter to an individual, August 11, 1933, in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, no. 712, emphasis added.

¹³ Of course one sense in which an Assembly “represents” the community that elects it is that it legitimately speaks and acts on behalf of the community, in its name. (Shoghi Effendi frequently uses the term in this sense as well, particularly when “representative” is a noun.) But here, we encounter a second meaning of the term, according to which an elected body is representative of its electors insofar as its makeup somehow *reflects* the community’s makeup (and not just in the sense that it legitimately acts on the community’s behalf).

¹⁴ Shoghi Effendi, letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of India, Burma, and Pakistan, May 8, 1947, in *Dawn of a New Day* 125.

¹⁵ One reader asks whether a Bahá'í Assembly’s membership ought to reflect the makeup of the Bahá'í population or of society at large in the area of its jurisdiction. I have not found any textual basis

However, the point of this kind of representativeness in the Baha'i model is not, as it might be in other models of governance, that individuals from the same group are supposed to act as partisan *advocates* speaking or acting within an Assembly on behalf of a particular constituency or cross-section of the community. They are not; the Baha'i model of governance is premised on the idea that the Assembly must be a unified body collectively speaking and acting on behalf of the entire community as a whole. Rather, the point is that it may be easier for an Assembly that reflects the makeup of its own community to be more sensitive to, and more aware of, the particular needs of the community it serves, and that such an Assembly may encourage a greater sense of ownership and integration in all segments of the community.

The third criterion that Shoghi Effendi provides, which is obviously related to the first two, encourages Bahá'ís to seek the presence of minority groups in the collective membership of the Assembly. Shoghi Effendi refers to

the duty of every Bahá'í community so to arrange its affairs that in cases where individuals belonging to the divers minority elements within it are already qualified and fulfill the necessary requirements, Bahá'í representative institutions, be they Assemblies, conventions, conferences, or committees, may have represented on them as many of these divers elements, racial or otherwise, as

for decisively favouring one interpretation rather than the other. On the one hand, an Assembly comprises the elected representatives of the Bahá'í community in particular, suggesting that its membership ought to reflect primarily the makeup of the Bahá'í community. On the other hand, the duties of an Assembly, as adumbrated by Shoghi Effendi, extend beyond the Bahá'í community to serving the community at large. Perhaps the quoted passage referring to being representative of the most varied elements “in every Baha'i community” offers tentative support in favour of the first interpretation.

possible.¹⁶

The qualifying clause (“in cases where”) indicates that the *collective* exhortation to ensure the presence of minorities comes into play only if it is also possible to ensure the qualifications of individuals considered separately. In other words, the criterion of minority presence is subordinate to ensuring that the individuals are loyal, selfless, intellectually well-trained, and so on. Again, the reason for minority presence is not, as it might be in other models, to fulfill a desire for partisan advocacy. Rather, like the institutional rule in Bahá’í elections according to which ties are broken in favour of social minorities, the motivation here is integration: “to stimulate and encourage” the minority group “and afford it an opportunity to further the interests of the community” at large.¹⁷

All three of these criteria show why it is important for Bahá’í voters to consider not just the qualifications of individuals considered separately but also the qualities concerning the Assembly’s membership taken as a collective whole. One must carefully distinguish these two types of criteria: being a member of a minority group or being young is obviously not a criterion for determining whether any particular *individual* is qualified to be a representative; these criteria

¹⁶ Shoghi Effendi, *The Advent of Divine Justice*, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990, 2003 printing) 36. Note again the use of “represent” in the two different senses of the term in this passage. Baha’i institutions are “representative” in the sense that they speak and act on someone else’s (i.e. the community’s) behalf; but the divers elements “represented on them” are represented not in the sense that the individuals in question speak on behalf of or advocate for those elements, but in the sense that their presence in the community at large is *reflected* in the Assembly (or other body).

¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *Advent of Divine Justice* 35.

concern the *collective* nature of an Assembly as a whole, not the individual members' qualifications. And the issue here is not, of course, institutional rules imposed on voters: Each voter is free to vote his or her conscience. The issue is what kinds of criteria each voter should ideally consider when voting.

3. Criteria Concerning Individual Members over Time

So far we have examined criteria suggesting what Bahá'í voters should consider when focusing on a *single* election, in isolation from other elections before it. These are all “static” criteria. But Shoghi Effendi also mentions requirements that Bahá'í voters should consider about how the membership of an Assembly ought to change *over time* from one election to another. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, for example, mentions two such requirements: Bahá'í voters (a) should consider how to *replace* individual representatives who have performed badly or unethically in office and (b) ought to try to *improve* the quality of the individuals serving on the Assembly over time:

The elections, especially when annual, give the community a good opportunity to *remedy any defect* or imperfection from which the Assembly may suffer as a result of the actions of its members. Thus a safe method has been established whereby the quality of membership in Bahá'í Assemblies can be *continually raised and improved*.¹⁸

¹⁸ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to two individuals, in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2, no. 1364, emphasis added. As the editors of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* have pointed out to me, because of the collective and confidential nature of the consultative decision-making process within Bahá'í assemblies (neither individual opinions nor individual votes within Assemblies are recorded), Bahá'í voters will often be unaware of the actions of a particular Assembly member; indeed, sometimes,

Consider the second point (b), about improving the quality of membership in Bahá'í Assemblies. For elections to help serve this function, two conditions must be met: Voters must appreciate the relevant qualifications or criteria for membership, and they must become aware of qualified individuals who meet these criteria, but who may not yet have served on the Assembly. Thus, given Shoghi Effendi's exhortation that Bahá'ís should "discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications" of Assembly membership, one potential topic for consultation might be the kinds of qualities that could improve the quality of an Assembly, given the specific circumstances of the community at this point. For example, imagine that a particular Assembly's financial accounts have been in complete disarray for a number of years. Under these circumstances voters may wish to consider what specific kind of "well-trained mind" the new Assembly needs to improve the quality of its membership—for example, a person who not only meets the more spiritual qualifications but is also trained in keeping accounts. If voters are to consult about such criteria, they would need to do so, of course, only if it is possible to do so "without reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals." In many circumstances, particularly in small communities, this may not be possible. Moreover, since in Bahá'í elections there can be no discussion of particular individuals, some other way must be found—such as active participation in the community's affairs

particularly in very small communities, a change in Assembly membership may not even be feasible. As such, the change in membership via annual elections mentioned in this letter is not the only mechanism available in the Bahá'í system of governance for remedying "defects" or "imperfections" in an Assembly. Two other mechanisms are worth mentioning: Counsellors and Auxiliary Board Members (individuals appointed to serve the Bahá'í community in a consultative capacity) are available to encourage and assist an Assembly to confront and learn from any existing imperfections; and individual Bahá'ís have the right to appeal any particular Assembly decision to a jurisdiction's higher representative authority (whether a National Assembly in the local case, or the Universal House of Justice in the national case).

throughout the year¹⁹—for becoming aware of who actually meets the relevant qualifications.

4. Criteria Concerning the Collective Makeup over Time

We have already seen that the quality of an Assembly is not just dependent on the qualifications of the individuals who comprise it. It is also dependent on how those individuals' qualities complement each other collectively. Voters should thus consider not only how the *individual* membership of an Assembly ought to change over time but also how the *collective* composition of an Assembly ought to change over time.

Consequently, when the letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi mentions that “the quality of membership in Bahá’í Assemblies” ought to be “continually raised and improved,” this refers to the collective nature of the Assembly as well, which ought to be improved over time. Beyond *improvement*, a number of letters written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi mention a second criteria that

¹⁹ See the letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to [Adelbert] Mühlischlegel, [a member of the NSA of the Bahá’ís of Germany and Austria], February 4, 1935, in *The Light of Divine Guidance: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith to the Bahá’ís of Germany and Austria*, vol. 1 (Hofheim-Langenhain: Bahá’í-Verlag, [1982]) 68. The letter states that it is incumbent upon each person “to become an active and well-informed member of the Bahá’í community in which he lives. To be able to make a wise choice at the election time, it is necessary for him to be in close and continued contact with all local activities . . . and to fully and whole-heartedly participate in the affairs of the local as well as national committees and assemblies in his country. It is only in this way that a believer can develop a true social consciousness and acquire a true sense of responsibility in matters affecting the interests of the Cause. Bahá’í community life thus makes it a duty for every loyal and faithful believer to become an intelligent, well-informed and responsible elector, and also gives him the opportunity of raising himself to such a station.” See also Shoghi Effendi, letter to a Local Spiritual Assembly, May 14, 1927, in *Compilation of Compilations* vol. 1, no. 709.

voters should consider concerning changes to the collective membership of an Assembly from one election to another: that there be some *turnover*, for the sake of change itself, in the membership of the Assembly from year to year. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi reports, for example, that

He was very happy to see that changes had been made in the membership of the National Spiritual Assembly this year, *not from any reasons of personality, but because change itself is good* and brings a fresh outlook into the discussions of any Assembly.²⁰

The italicized text makes it quite clear that this falls under the fourth type of criteria, not the third: It is not improvement in the qualifications of particular individuals that is at stake; what is at stake is the collective nature of the Assembly as a whole over time.

Another letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, however, points to an important qualification to this criterion of turnover: Voters should not sacrifice the “static” quality of Assembly membership for the sake of turnover. In other words, the requirement of turnover is subordinate to the first and second types of criteria:

There is no objection in principle to an Assembly being re-elected, whether in toto or in part, provided the members are considered to be well qualified for that post. It is individual merit that counts. Novelty or the mere act of renewal of elections are purely *secondary considerations*. Changes in Assembly membership should

²⁰ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, May 21, 1946, in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 2, no. 1449, emphasis added.

be welcome so far as they do not prejudice the *quality of such membership*.²¹

5. Conclusion

The Bahá'í ideal that all forms of prejudice be eliminated applies directly to the question of how Bahá'í voters should vote: Shoghi Effendi says that “it is incumbent upon” Bahá'í voters to act

²¹ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, in *The Sanctity and Nature of Bahá'í Elections*, no. 16, emphasis added. Another letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual suggests that turnover should not be achieved by institutional rules that force it on voters by restricting their freedom to vote for whomever their conscience moves them to vote for—such as by imposing term limits on Assembly members: “Shoghi Effendi has never said that the members of the National Assembly *have to* be renewed partially every year. The important thing is that they should be properly elected. It would be nice if there should be new members elected, for new blood always adds to the energy of the group and will keep up their spirit. But this depends entirely upon the will of the delegates as represented in the result of their voting” (in *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*, comp. Helen Hornby, 6th ed. (New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1999) no. 63, emphasis added). However, another letter written on his behalf suggests that (at least part of) the reason for rejecting term limits, at the time of writing, was that it would be “premature” to undertake such a “radical” alteration in the early stages of development of Bahá'í institutions: “Regarding your questions concerning the advisability of changing the basis of the National Assembly’s election and confining it to the body of delegates or of limiting the term of office: He feels that as any such changes are of a radical nature and should therefore also apply to the National Spiritual Assemblies of other countries they are inadvisable and premature, both for this reason and because of their very nature.” Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, July 6, 1944, in *Messages to Canada* 80. This is not a matter with which voters themselves need to be concerned when voting; it is about what kind of institutional rules are appropriate for Bahá'í elections.

“without the least trace of passion or prejudice, and irrespective of any material considerations.”²²

But, of course, the actual world we live in is never perfect: There is always a difference between how things ideally should be and how they are. No matter how much Bahá'ís strive to live up to their ideals, there will always be more work to be done. This is true about Bahá'í elections as much as it is about anything else: There will always be a difference between how Bahá'í voters ideally should vote and how Bahá'í voters in fact do vote. This is why it is important that the ideal criteria for voting in Bahá'í elections be studied and discussed by Bahá'í voters. The fact that Bahá'í electoral rules forbid campaigning has led many to conclude—erroneously, I believe—that there should be no discussion before a Bahá'í election of how voters should vote. On the contrary, Shoghi Effendi requires that Bahá'í voters “should . . . exchange views, . . . mix freely and discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications” of Assembly membership. The ban on campaigning means that this discussion must not refer to particular individuals. But voters should still study and discuss the criteria for voting in more general terms because it is in part through study and discussion that they will come better to realize their ideals.

In particular communities Bahá'í voters may, for example, in all sincerity vote for individuals whom they deem most qualified for membership, and yet over an extended period of time fail to elect any women, younger representatives, members of minorities, new members, or an Assembly that is representative of the diversity of the community. On the one hand, these outcomes are the legitimate result of the process of Bahá'í voting and are to be respected as the voice of the community. As a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi states: “Once Assembly elections are over, the results should be conscientiously and unquestionably accepted by the

²² Shoghi Effendi, letter to the delegates and visitors to the Bahá'í Convention, Green Acre, Maine, USA, in *Bahá'í Administration* 88.

entire body of the believers, not necessarily because they represent the voice of truth or the will of Bahá'u'lláh, but for the supreme purpose of maintaining unity and harmony in the Community.”²³

On the other hand, it is important that Bahá'í voters reflect carefully about their own voting choices and strive to the best of their ability to realize their ideals and to act “without the least trace of passion or prejudice.” Perhaps, without realizing it, voters in a particular community unreflectively equate “mature experience” with *advanced in age*, or a “well-trained mind” with *articulate, manly speaker*. Discussing these issues in the spirit of learning will help Bahá'í voters be more reflective about the way they vote, by bringing to light prejudices or assumptions they may hold without realizing it. What is crucial for such discussion is to ensure that it not make any “reference or application, however indirect, to particular individuals”; otherwise, such a reference would undermine the spirit of Bahá'í elections. As Shoghi Effendi has put it,

Beware, beware lest the foul odour of parties and . . . pernicious methods, such as intrigues, party politics and propaganda—practices which are abhorrent even in name—should ever reach the Bahá'í community, exert any influence whatsoever upon the friends, and thus bring all spirituality to naught. The friends should, through their devotion, love, loyalty and altruism, abolish these evil practices, not

²³ Letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, July 20, 1939, in *Lights of Guidance* no. 46. Shoghi Effendi emphasizes this point even more strongly when he refers to the “often-repeated assurances that every Assembly elected in that rarefied atmosphere of selflessness and detachment is, in truth, appointed of God” (letter to the Bahá'ís in America, February 23, 1924, in *Bahá'í Administration* 65).

imitate them.²⁴

Shoghi Effendi's injunction that Bahá'í voters "discuss among themselves the requirements and qualifications" of Assembly membership should be observed while simultaneously heeding his exhortation that such discussion not become a means for intrigue or indirect campaigning.

It is common practice to read, before Bahá'í elections, passages from Shoghi Effendi that touch on the qualifications of *individuals* for membership in an Assembly. One conclusion to be drawn from the texts examined in this discussion of how Bahá'í voters should vote is that Bahá'í communities should consider reading passages concerning the other three types of criteria as well. A second conclusion is that, in addition to reading these passages, Bahá'í communities may wish to provide their members an opportunity to consult about the significance of these criteria for their electoral unit. "The heaven of divine wisdom," Bahá'u'lláh writes, "is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding."²⁵ Yet such a period of consultation would need to be clearly separated institutionally from the time of voting itself, to provide the contemplative "atmosphere of a silent and prayerful election" that Shoghi Effendi envisioned for Bahá'ís engaged in the act of voting itself.²⁶ Having studied the guidance available in the Bahá'í writings, and having gained further

²⁴ Shoghi Effendi, letter to the Central Spiritual Assembly of Iran, January 30, 1923, translated from the Persian, in *Compilation of Compilations*, vol. 1, no. 705.

²⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh et. al (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 168.

²⁶ Shoghi Effendi, letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and

insight from consultation, each individual voter must ultimately consult his or her own conscience in deciding for whom to vote.

Table 1: Summary of Criteria Bahá'í Voters Should Take into Consideration

1. Qualifications of Individual Assembly Members

a. unquestioned loyalty, selfless devotion, well-trained mind, recognized ability, mature experience, faithful, sincere, experienced, capable, competent

2. Collective Makeup of Assembly

a. Diversity of membership (including age diversity)

b. Representativeness of membership

c. Minority presence (subordinate to criterion 1)

3. Changes in Individual Assembly Members over Time

a. Replace unqualified representatives (remedy defects and imperfections)

b. Improve quality of individual membership

4. Changes in Collective Makeup of Assembly over Time

a. Improve quality of collective makeup

b. Turn-over (subordinate to criteria 1 and 2)