How your vote is kept secret

Elections Dept explains the system and reason for serial number on ballot slip

By LYNN LEE

THE Elections Department is saying it again — your vote is secret.

The assurance comes after some Singaporeans raised perennial concerns over the serial number on their ballot paper when they voted last Saturday.

Others were also troubled by accounts from MPs-elect on how they can gauge which areas within their constituency supported them.

But as the Elections Department made clear yesterday, the polling and vote-counting procedures in the recent and past elections do safeguard the identity of individual voters.

For a start, it explained how the polling system works.

Constituencies are carved up into several polling districts. There is one polling station per district.

Each station handles around 2,000 to 4,000 voters. Each voter is assigned to a specific polling lane with a ballot box at the end of it.

In each lane, a voter’s name and registration number are called out as he receives the ballot slip. This allows the polling agents sent there by the contesting parties to confirm that he is on the list of eligible voters.

The department also made clear why a voter’s registration number is written on the counterfoil of the ballot paper. This deters vote fraud and impersonation.

In letters to The Straits Times Forum page, six readers asked about the serial numbers on the ballot paper and the registration number on the counterfoil. Two of them said their relatives did not vote for the opposition because of the serial numbers.

In replying, the department’s spokesman explained that the serial numbers were used to ensure that the final number of ballots cast is equivalent to the number of ballot papers issued. This prevents any incidence of ballot boxes being “stuffed” with counterfeit ballot slips.

This is how the counting procedure goes: At 8pm, when polling ends, each ballot box, which can contain around 1,000 votes, is sealed. Usually, ballots from four to six districts are counted in one centre.

There, counting tables will be set up. At each table, ballots from all the boxes used at each polling station are mixed up, then sorted by party, before being counted. No one except counting officials can touch the slips.

Which begs the question: How do parties gauge what kind of support they get in a constituency?

The answer: It all boils down to how observant the polling agent is. At each centre, he can tell if the districts represented there are giving his party more, or less votes.

This is how the PAP knew in the 2001 General Election, for example, that over half of voters from Sennett Estate within opposition-held Potong Pasir were supportive of it and decided to give it upgrading.

After votes are counted, the ballots at each table are put back into one box together with the counterfoils. The boxes are then sealed and stored in a vault in the High Court. Only a High Court judge can order the boxes to be opened.

After six months, the parties are invited to witness the journey of the boxes to the Tuas incinerator.

Workers’ Party candidate Chia Ti Li, whose team of five lost the fight for East Coast GRC, affirmed the Elections Department’s explanation: “As someone who’s observed the process, I’m 100 per cent confident that no one can tell for sure how a person has voted.”

To boost public confidence, Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan suggested that all votes from a constituency be counted in one centre.

Currently, votes for each constituency are counted at different centres, which then fax their tallies to the principal counting centre for the constituency and the Elections Department.

Dr Tan also urged officials to continue to address “nagging concerns and untruths” that Singaporeans may have over voting, as it was “part and parcel of protecting the integrity of the electoral process”.

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