



Published on *Freedom House* (<https://freedomhouse.org>)

[Home](#) > St. Vincent and Grenadines

St. Vincent and Grenadines

Country:

St. Vincent and Grenadines

Year:

2018

Freedom Status:

Free

Political Rights:

1

Civil Liberties:

1

Aggregate Score:

90

Freedom Rating:

1.0

Overview:

St. Vincent and the Grenadines is a democracy that holds regular elections, though it has been under the political leadership of the Unity Labour Party (ULP) since 2001, and aspects of the most recent legislative polls are being disputed in court by the opposition. Civil liberties are generally upheld, though journalists and peaceful protesters have experienced police harassment during times of political tension.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

POLITICAL RIGHTS: 36 / 40 (-1)

A. ELECTORAL PROCESS: 11 / 12

A1. Was the current head of government or other chief national authority elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The prime minister, usually the leader of the largest party in parliament, is head of government. They are normally appointed after legislative elections by the governor general, who represents the British monarch as head of state. The prime minister and governor general have historically been installed according to the country's laws. Ralph

Gonsalves retained his position as prime minister following the victory of the incumbent Unity Labour Party (ULP) in the 2015 legislative elections.

A2. Were the current national legislative representatives elected through free and fair elections? 4 / 4

The constitution provides for the direct election of 15 representatives to the unicameral House of Assembly. In addition, the governor general appoints 6 senators to the chamber: 4 selected on the advice of the prime minister and 2 on the advice of the opposition leader. All serve five-year terms.

The 2015 legislative elections saw a narrow victory by the incumbent, social democratic ULP, which took 8 seats in the House of Assembly; the opposition New Democratic Party (NDP) took the remaining 7. International and domestic election observers deemed the polls generally competitive and credible. However, the Organization of American States (OAS) observer mission expressed concerns about partiality of the presiding officer at the final vote count in the constituency of Central Leeward. According to its observation report, the returning officer there continually refused requests for information or access from representatives of the NDP, while responding to requests from representatives of the ULP.

The NDP mounted several mass protests alleging electoral irregularities in the polls, and initiated two legal complaints regarding the conduct of polling in Central Leeward and North Windward. In July 2017, the High Court ruled that the petitions be allowed to proceed, and both cases were open at year's end.

A3. Are the electoral laws and framework fair, and are they implemented impartially by the relevant election management bodies? 3 / 4

Electoral laws are generally fair and impartially implemented. While efforts to clean up voter lists were initiated in 2013, the 2015 OAS election monitoring mission noted in its final report that authorities should continue this effort. The mission also called for better standardization of voting procedures across voting sites.

B. POLITICAL PLURALISM AND PARTICIPATION: 15 / 16 (-1)

B1. Do the people have the right to organize in different political parties or other competitive political groupings of their choice, and is the system free of undue obstacles to the rise and fall of these competing parties or groupings? 4 / 4

Political parties can organize freely. While there have been a number of small political parties in the country, since 1998 only the ULP and NDP have won seats in parliament. The effects of the country's "first-past-the-post" electoral system has entrenched two-party politics. The dominance of the ULP in government since 2001 has been the source of some public frustration, though it does not appear to have affected voter turnout significantly.

B2. Is there a realistic opportunity for the opposition to increase its support or gain power through elections? 4 / 4

While there has not been a change of the party in power since 2001, opposition parties and candidates face no systemic restrictions, and there are realistic opportunities for opposition parties to increase their support or gain power through elections.

B3. Are the people's political choices free from domination by the military, foreign powers, religious hierarchies, economic oligarchies, or any other powerful group that is not democratically accountable? 4 / 4

Candidates and voters are generally able to express their political choices without interference from actors not democratically accountable. However, in 2015, the OAS raised concerns about the lack of transparency of party and election campaign financing, and thus the potential for unidentified actors to influence politics.

B4. Do various segments of the population (including ethnic, religious, gender, LGBT, and other relevant groups) have full political rights and electoral opportunities? 3 / 4 (-1)

Women are underrepresented in the legislature and in politics generally. No women were elected to the House of Assembly in 2015, when only 6 of the 43 candidates were women. There are currently three women senators in parliament, who were appointed. In its report on the 2015 elections, the OAS noted that there was a "pervasive reluctance" on the part of women who were potential candidates to take part in harsh political campaigns.

The LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) community is marginalized, and this impacts the ability of LGBT people to engage fully in political processes.

Score Change: The score declined from 4 to 3 due to the significant underrepresentation of women in politics.

C. FUNCTIONING OF GOVERNMENT: 10 / 10

C1. Do the freely elected head of government and national legislative representatives determine the policies of the government? 4 / 4

The prime minister, cabinet, and national legislative representatives freely determine the policies of the government. However, in 2014, the NDP announced that it was suspending all cooperation with the Gonsalves government until the next general elections. Following the disputed elections in 2015, the NDP boycotted the parliament for two weeks.

C2. Are safeguards against official corruption strong and effective? 3 / 4

No independent body investigates government corruption, and government officials have indicated that they do not see a need to establish one. Nevertheless, reports of political handouts and other forms petty corruption continue. Separately, in 2017, authorities rejected an assessment of the country in a US State Department report as a major hub for money laundering. The document, the *2017 International Narcotics Control Strategy Report*, also noted that in 2016 only one money laundering prosecution had been launched, and that the year had seen no convictions.

C3. Does the government operate with openness and transparency? 3 / 4

The government of St. Vincent and the Grenadines generally operates with openness and transparency. However, freedom of information legislation that was passed in 2003 has yet to be fully implemented, and there is no active legislation requiring government officials to disclose assets, incomes, or gifts.

CIVIL LIBERTIES: 54 / 60

D. FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND BELIEF: 15 / 16

D1. Are there free and independent media? 3 / 4

The constitution guarantees freedom of speech and of the press, and these guarantees are usually upheld in practice. However, some journalists reported harassment and physical abuse by police as they covered the 2015 election campaign. Additionally, in 2016, lawmakers approved a new Cybercrime Act that broadened the definition and scope of defamation to include online publications; violation of its provisions can carry a fine of as much as EC\$500,000 (US\$186,000) and up to seven years' imprisonment. Journalists in St. Vincent and abroad strongly criticized the legislation, saying its provisions were worryingly vague and that it could be invoked to curb independent reporting.

D2. Are individuals free to practice and express their religious faith or nonbelief in public and private? 4 / 4

Freedom of religion is constitutionally protected and respected in practice.

D3. Is there academic freedom, and is the educational system free from extensive political indoctrination? 4 / 4

Academic freedom is generally upheld.

D4. Are individuals free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of surveillance or retribution? 4 / 4

Individuals are free to express their personal views on political or other sensitive topics without fear of retribution or surveillance.

E. ASSOCIATIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL RIGHTS: 12 / 12

E1. Is there freedom of assembly? 4 / 4

Freedom of assembly is constitutionally protected and generally upheld in practice. However, there were reports of police using excessive force to disperse peaceful protests during the 2015 election period.

E2. Is there freedom for nongovernmental organizations, particularly those that are engaged in human rights—and governance-related work? 4 / 4

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) operate without restriction.

E3. Is there freedom for trade unions and similar professional or labor organizations? 4 / 4

Labor unions are active and permitted to strike and engage in collective bargaining. Antiunion discrimination is prohibited.

F. RULE OF LAW: 13 / 16**F1. Is there an independent judiciary? 3 / 4**

The government generally respects judicial independence, but judicial effectiveness is hampered by a lack of resources. The highest court is the Eastern Caribbean Supreme Court, which includes a court of appeals and a high court. The country recognizes the original jurisdiction of the Caribbean Court of Justice, but the Privy Council in London remains the final court of appeal.

F2. Does due process prevail in civil and criminal matters? 3 / 4

Detainees and defendants are guaranteed a range of legal rights, which are mostly respected in practice. However, there is a significant case backlog, caused in large part by personnel shortages in local courts. According to the US State Department, about 20 people have been held in pretrial detention for longer than two years, with many of these cases involving delays in obtaining psychiatric evaluations of the defendant.

F3. Is there protection from the illegitimate use of physical force and freedom from war and insurgencies? 4 / 4

Crowded prison conditions have improved after the long-awaited transfer of prisoners to a new correctional facility in 2012. However, in 2017, juvenile offenders continued to be held in adult prisons.

F4. Do laws, policies, and practices guarantee equal treatment of various segments of the population? 3 / 4

Legal and societal discrimination against LGBT people persists. Same-sex sexual conduct is illegal, and some such conduct between men is punishable with imprisonment of up to 10 years. These laws, however, are rarely enforced.

G. PERSONAL AUTONOMY AND INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS: 14 / 16**G1. Do individuals enjoy freedom of movement, including the ability to change their place of residence, employment, or education? 4 / 4**

Individuals in St. Vincent and the Grenadines generally enjoy freedom of movement, and may freely choose their place of residence, employment, and education.

G2. Are individuals able to exercise the right to own property and establish private businesses without undue interference from state or non-state actors? 4 / 4

Individuals are free to own property and establish and conduct business. The government has actively encouraged both national and foreign investors to do business in the country.

G3. Do individuals enjoy personal social freedoms, including choice of marriage partner and size of family, protection from domestic violence, and control over appearance? 3 / 4

The Domestic Violence Act of 2015, which went into effect in 2016 and provides for protective orders, offers some tools and resources to victims of domestic violence. However, domestic violence, and violence against women, remains a problem. Rape, including spousal rape, is against the law, and the government generally enforces the law when victims come forward.

G4. Do individuals enjoy equality of opportunity and freedom from economic exploitation? 3 / 4

Safety and other protections for workers are typically upheld. The Prevention of Trafficking in Persons Act of 2011 criminalizes forced labor, but the government is not sufficiently proactive in its response, according to the US State Department's *Trafficking in Persons Report*.

Source URL: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/st-vincent-and-grenadines>