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Running Local Elections During the COVID-19 Crisis: Queensland, Australia

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Running Local Elections During the COVID-19 Crisis: Queensland, Australia

Ferran Martinez i Coma

On 26 March 2020, the border between the Australian states of Queensland and New South Wales was closed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was the first time the border had been closed since the flu outbreak of 1919. On 28 March, local elections were held for 77 city councils and two state by-elections (Bundamba and Currumbin).

Queensland's local elections are an important case study for the COVID-19 period because they were held at a time when very few countries' elections went ahead, most having been postponed (International IDEA n.d.). It was the height of the pandemic in the state with 625 reported cases declared at the time, 70 of which were declared on the very same day as the election (second only to the peak of 78 cases declared four days earlier). The elections were also a learning opportunity for Queensland's state elections in October 2020—where participation is compulsory—and for the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). The rest of the country observed developments in anticipation of other elections in 2020: while New South Wales has decided to postpone its local elections for 12 months until September 2021, state legislative elections are scheduled in the Northern Territory on 22 August 2020 and in the Australian Capital Territory on 17 October 2020.

This case study is structured into four sections. The first outlines contextual information on local elections in Queensland and the implications of the pandemic. The second section details the measures that were implemented during these elections. The third presents how the vote counting unfolded and briefly addresses turnout in a compulsory voting setting. The fourth section concludes by reflecting on which measures may be retained for Queensland's forthcoming October state election.

1. Context: should the elections be held?

Australia is a federal system where national elections are held within a maximum period of three years. While the AEC organizes federal elections, states have their own independent electoral commissions. The Electoral Commission of Queensland (ECQ) conducts state and local elections in the state every three and four years, respectively. Councils in Queensland are classified as 'divided' or 'undivided'. There are 17 divided councils (such as Brisbane) where citizens vote to elect a councillor to represent their division, and where local elections rely on optional preferential voting: voters have the choice to vote for one, some, or all candidates on the ballot by ranking them. In undivided councils, citizens elect the councillors for their council area through the first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting system.

Queensland is a very geographically large and sparsely populated state. It is three times the land area of France and has a population of just 5.1 million, with around 3.3 million eligible voters. The population density is only three inhabitants per square kilometre. This explains why, out of the 77 Queensland's local government bodies, 16 mainly rely on postal ballot elections and three rely on a mix of postal and in-person voting, where electors receive the necessary materials to participate by postal vote. As mentioned, Queensland contains two kinds of councils and two voting systems corresponding to each. In March 2020 there were 1,100 polling stations across the state.

With more than 1.2 million residents and about 780,000 voters, Brisbane has the biggest council and attracts most of the political attention as this is where the main political parties formally contest the election by including the party names on the ballot papers. Other political parties do so in a handful of locations. For example, the Greens and the Motorists Party run candidates for Mayor in Ipswich and in Logan, respectively. Brisbane voters were given one ballot to elect Lord Mayor and a second to elect a Councillor for their ward. The average Brisbane ward encompasses around 30,000 voters.

The election period started on 22 February 2020. COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) only a few weeks later, on 11 March. The ECQ decided to go ahead with the election despite several voices calling for postponement (Queensland Parliament 2020a). Eventually, the ECQ considered advice from the state's Chief Health Officer and, based on the medical and legal advice at the time (Zillman 2020), decided to proceed with the election. In a public document issued on 18 March, the ECQ stated that 'there is nothing to suggest that participating in the elections poses any greater risk than any other recommended daily activity' (Electoral Commission Queensland 2020a: 1) and therefore elections went ahead.

In retrospect, that assessment was right: there were no spikes in the rise in COVID-19 cases in the weeks following the elections. However, some concerns were expressed (see, e.g., Queensland Parliament 2020a). In evidence to the Queensland Parliament, the ECQ provided two reasons for its decision. The first argument was one of principle: that elections are facilitators of an essential service, as they provide continuity of democratic representation. The second was that, acknowledging the need for confidence in a healthy environment both for voters and polling officials at the polling stations, additional crowd management and hygiene measures were being taken (Queensland Parliament 2020b).

2. Risk mitigation measures

Given the geography of Queensland, as well as compulsory voting, Australian electoral commissions at both the federal and state levels have traditionally made voting convenient by making several methods available. Accordingly, the use of early voting or postal voting, already established before the COVID-19 pandemic, increased in this election. The ECQ's original forecasting of the distribution of voting methods was: 60 per cent in-person voting on election day; 30 per cent early voting; and 10 per cent postal voting. These estimates were then revised in the light of COVID-19, to: 40 per cent, 40–50 per cent and 10–20 per cent, respectively. By election day, voter turnout figures showed that there had been a massive postal and pre-poll vote, with more than half of the electorate having already voted. In short, the pandemic had prompted a significant shift in the voting method patterns of the Queensland public, described below.

Postal voting: not as smooth as usual

On 13 March, the Australian Government issued restrictions which banned mass gatherings of over 500 persons. This restriction was announced three days prior to the application deadline and triggered a surge in applications. Citizens and candidates asked the ECQ to

extend the deadline for postal vote applications (Stone 2020) but the law did not allow the ECQ to do so. It received around 150,000 applications in these last few days of the application period alone (of 570,000 in total), exerting considerable pressure on the system. A total of 470,000 of these postal votes were exercised, as compared to 320,000 returned in 2016. Even so, in these elections, numerous applicants reported they had not received their postal ballots.

Early voting: extended hours

Early voting facilities were available from 16 March until the day before the election, 27 March. The ECQ communicated this through its website. A diverse range of media outlets, from local newspapers to radio and television networks, also disseminated voter information. It was recommended to avoid peak voting hours, normally during lunch time or at the end of the day.

Early voting centres usually open from 09:00 to 17:00 during the first week of early voting, and from 09:00 to 18:00 during the second week. For the first time, the ECQ decided to extend voting hours from 09:00 to 21:00 on Wednesdays and Thursdays, in both weeks. Also for the first time, citizens could vote early on a Saturday, on 21 March from 09:00 to 17:00.

Queenslanders heavily relied on early voting. About 1.2 million people voted during this period, compared to 500,000 in 2016.

Safe environment on election day

Electronic and physical copies of hygiene guidelines were distributed and made available to early voting centres and polling stations. Public health measures implemented at polling stations and the early voting centres included the provision of hand sanitiser; additional cleaning to regularly disinfect hard surfaces; and implementing a 1.5 metre distancing rule where possible (handshakes were avoided) but masks were not required (WHO updated its guidelines on the use of masks on 5 June—see WHO 2020; World Economic Forum 2020). Polling officials monitored the number of people attending a given polling station at a time. Approximately 4,000 additional staff were employed to assist with security, access for the elderly and other members of the public at high risk, queue control—voters waited to enter the polling stations, where necessary—and other physical distancing measures, bringing the total workforce to 10,000.

Vote issuing tables and polling booths were positioned to maximize distance between individuals. Steps were also taken to make the voting procedure faster, such as voters bringing their own pens or pencils and Voter Information Card to be marked off the roll more quickly. When voters did not bring pencils, those made available were used in rotation and cleaned. Changes were also felt at the community level: in many polling places around Australia (normally schools), citizens partake of ‘sausage sizzles’ after having voted; that tradition had to be suspended.

Finally, one change that could potentially have impacted voting behaviour itself was the ECQ’s advising candidates not to distribute election materials or how-to-vote cards at polling stations (see Queensland Government 2020). Although this may seem a minor change (and in the event, parties and candidates all complied in equal measure), in some electorally close wards where strategic voting makes sense, indications given to voters on how to fill the ballot can be critically important. The impact of COVID-19 was ultimately seen in the drop in voters’ presence at the polling stations. Around 750,000 people voted on election day, as compared with 1.6 million people in 2016.

Telephone voting and mobile polling

Queensland usually offers telephone voting under certain conditions. Telephone voting is an unusual voting arrangement which works in two phases. First, the citizen needs to call a number to obtain a unique identifier. Then, the citizen calls another number and quotes the identifier. There are two people at the end of the line ensuring the details—district of residence, and the voter's preferred candidate—are correct. As such, it is a resource-intensive process involving two workers for each voter. The process is independently audited in every single election.

Telephone voting was available to citizens who met certain criteria: that they were physically impaired; in an advanced stage of pregnancy; not mobile; or in quarantine, or self-isolating on the advice of their medical practitioner. Citizens who met the criteria had to register, and then to vote before 18:00 on election day. In preparation for election day, the ECQ initially increased resources by employing 16 people to provide the service and accommodate an expected 5,000 telephone voters. In the event, 160 staff were assigned to telephone voting and they took 37,000 votes (from 47,000 that registered). This compares to just 500 votes made by telephone in 2016.

Such a surge in telephone voting can be partially explained by the cancellation of the mobile polling service. In some regional areas, the ECQ usually provided mobile polling in designated institutions such as hospitals and nursing homes. The health advice was for polling staff not to go into such facilities and, consequently, telephone voting was offered as an alternative.

3. Vote count and results

On election night the preliminary, unofficial, count starts. In regular circumstances party monitors are present. COVID-19 limited this, however. As mentioned above, there were 1,100 polling stations across the state. The ECQ could not assess the safety of monitoring in each of these locations. Relying on the exceptional powers that the ECQ was provided, the attendance of monitors in the polling places was therefore limited. This involved applying a consistent plan that guaranteed the safety of the monitors and the ECQ's own polling officials, and was in line with social distancing requirements. For example, on 29 March, when the official count began, monitoring was limited to one monitor per candidate.

The main challenge of the count, though, was not the pandemic but the management of automated data. The Parliament Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee issued a report noting that 'issues with inconsistent format presentation of contest data on election night delayed the count data loading process and consequently the timeliness of reporting results' (Legal Affairs and Community Safety Committee 2020: 16).

The problem, briefly, was that a new election management system (EMS) had just been established. Staff conducting the manual counts recorded the results in Smartsheet software for reporting through to the ECQ. Then, an automated process would load the data to an ECQ development website to be published after review by ECQ staff. The initial plan was that the new EMS would fully automate the process after several successful loads of data. However, issues with data formatting delayed the data loading process. In short, there was a failure in the results feed on election night which delayed the publication of results. The public expected a faster count. By 23:00 on 28 March most results were published but this was late as compared to previous years. Polls had closed at 18:00.

Although the intervening five hours of the preliminary counting spurred criticism of the ECQ, the official count was finalized in fully three weeks. Given the record number of postal votes, social distancing requirements, counting (and recounting) of over five million ballots

in more than 550 contests, along with the fact it took two and a half weeks in 2016, the counting process was not significantly longer than in previous elections.

Results

Turnout in local elections is normally lower than in state and federal elections. This is due to several reasons. First, as turnout rates show, although local decision-making affects their daily lives, voters in Australia (as elsewhere) generally perceive local elections to be less important than the other contests. Second, excluding Brisbane, the fact that political parties do not formally contest the elections lowers the visibility of such contests. Third, in some Australian states such as South Australia, turnout is not compulsory as in Queensland.

Overall, turnout in Queensland's March 2020 local government elections was 77 per cent, compared to the 83 per cent in 2016 (Queensland Parliament 2020b). This figure is the overall average of the 77 concurrent local electoral events and there were considerable variations between councils. Since turnout is compulsory, when a citizen does not vote the respective electoral authorities can issue a fine of AUD 133 (around 95 USD). Given that many citizens who abstained did so on health grounds and given the proximity of the state October election, whether fines will be applied is still an open question.

4. What's next?

COVID-19 has introduced a high degree of uncertainty into our lives. Elections are no exception. In Queensland, elections are planned two years in advance but, in days, the pandemic transformed the process from the organizers' perspective. Simultaneously, the public adapted speedily to the new reality as the increases in early voting and postal voting attest.

In its *Strategic Plan 2019–2023*, the ECQ stated four objectives: (1) the delivery of fair and transparent elections; (2) to increase electoral awareness and participation; (3) the continual improvement in electoral services; and (4) obtaining a balanced representation across electoral boundaries (see Electoral Commission Queensland n.d.). While objectives three and four have been unaffected by the pandemic, the first two objectives have not been achieved to their full potential, as several stakeholders noted during the parliamentary inquiry (Queensland Parliament 2020b).

A possible interpretation is that such criticisms are a positive sign, reflecting high standards concerning how elections are run in Queensland. Regarding delivery, the main complaints were due to the delay in reporting results described above. However, this delay was produced not by the pandemic but precisely by one of the risks already pointed out in the Strategic Plan: the delivery of two major electoral events during 2020 while simultaneously implementing a major business improvement within tight timeframes, raising issues of process alignment. Participation was slightly lower than in 2016 but, given the circumstances, it is a respectable figure. Overall, the process was smooth although with a bump. As of early July, the 77 local governments have been formed and are governing.

Queenslanders are voting for state elections in October 2020. Future developments, by definition, are uncertain. However, it is fair to anticipate that certain measures and behaviours that were adopted will continue if the pandemic risks persist. From the organizational perspective, early voting provisions such as the extension of hours will be implemented. Furthermore, it is expected that the IT problem will not be repeated. Among voters, the use of postal voting and early voting will very likely be higher than the contest of 2017. Political parties, we may expect, will accordingly make changes in their campaigning methods.

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