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Governing
During
Crises

Policy Brief No. 10

Elections During Crisis

Global Lessons from the Asia-Pacific

17 March 2021 | Tom Gerald Daly

Produced in collaboration with Election Watch

and COVID-DEM

Summary

Key Points

This Policy Brief makes the following key points:

- (a) During 2020 states the world over learned just how challenging it can be to organise full, free, and fair elections in the middle of a pandemic. For many states facing important elections during 2021 (e.g. Japan, the UK, Israel) these challenges remain a pressing concern.
- (b) The pandemic has spurred electoral innovations and reform worldwide. While reforms in some states garner global attention – such as attempts at wholesale reforms in the US (e.g. early voting) – greater attention should be paid to the Asia-Pacific as a region.
- (c) A range of positive lessons can be drawn from the conduct of elections in South Korea, New Zealand, Mongolia, and Australia concerning safety measures, effective communication, use of digital technology, advance voting, and postal voting. Innovations across the Asia-Pacific region provide lessons for the world, not only on effectively running elections during a public health emergency, but also pointing to the future of election campaigns, in which early and remote voting becomes more common and online campaigning becomes more central.
- (d) Experiences elsewhere raise issues to watch out for in forthcoming elections in states and territories undergoing serious ‘pandemic backsliding’ in the protection of political freedoms. Analysis of Singapore and Indonesia indicates a rise in censorship under the pretext of addressing misinformation concerning COVID-19, and (in Indonesia) concerns about ‘vote-buying’ through crisis relief funds. In Hong Kong the electoral and political system has been drastically reshaped in advance of the September elections.

Recommendations

This Policy Brief makes the following recommendations:

- (a) **Mapping good practice from the Asia-Pacific:** Recent positive experiences and innovations in Asia-Pacific states on running elections during a crisis should be systematically mapped as a globally relevant emerging body of good practice during and beyond the crisis.
- (b) **Understanding Covid-era electoral manipulation:** The manner in which the pandemic has provided cover for negative practices undermining full, free and fair elections, should also be systematically analysed on a regional basis, including the abuse of ‘fake news’ laws and vote-buying through crisis fund allocation.
- (c) **Identifying digital technology’s uses and limits:** While governments and campaigners in states such as South Korea employed digital technology effectively, not all states have high rates of internet access and knowledge of tech among campaigners, officials, and citizens. Indonesia’s rushed adoption of an untested digital system to assist with vote counting in local elections, raising concerns about the vote count’s accuracy, also counsels caution.
- (d) **Regional cooperation:** Australia should consider how best to collaborate with democratic regional partners such as New Zealand and South Korea to map and support good practice.

Elections During Crisis

Global Lessons from the Asia-Pacific

1. Introduction

During 2020 states the world over learned just how challenging it can be to organise full, free, and fair elections in the middle of a pandemic. For many states facing important elections during 2021 (e.g. Japan, the UK, Israel) these challenges remain a pressing concern.

For instance, with the UK facing elections on 6 May (devolved government elections in Wales and Scotland's, and local elections in England), a [recent poll](#) showed that one in six voters would feel unsafe voting in person. Yet, the [British government has insisted](#) that democracy "should not be cancelled because of COVID". In other states, the political context raises even greater concerns regarding the potential for the pandemic context to undermine any prospect of fair elections – especially where '[pandemic backsliding](#)' on political freedoms is underway.

This Policy Brief provides an overview of lessons from the Asia-Pacific region, which highlight innovations and emerging good practice, as well as growing issues of concern.

2. 2021 Elections

So far, elections held in 2021 in democratic states have included Georgia's two pivotal US Senate runoff elections (5 January; handing control of the Senate to the Democrats), Portugal's presidential

elections (24 January), parliamentary elections in Micronesia (2 March), and state elections in Western Australia (13 March). Forthcoming elections in liberal democracies worldwide include: elections for the House of Representatives in the Netherlands (17 March); Germany's state and federal elections (March-September); the UK's elections (May); Canada's provincial elections (March, April and October); and Chile's general election (November).

Across the Asia-Pacific, key elections to be held in a variety of political systems include: Samoa's general election (April); Hong Kong's Legislative Council elections (September); a general election in Japan (October); and [possibly Malaysia](#).

All of these states face differing Covid rates and constraints. In some states, the stakes are also unusually high: as discussed below, Hong Kong's electoral and political system has been drastically reshaped in advance of the September polls. The Scottish vote raises the prospect of a [second independence referendum](#), generating a potential constitutional crisis, or even break-up of the UK.

3. Elections and Political Freedoms

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election. While elections do not *equal* democracy, they are at the heart of how we define modern democracy. Yet, for a functioning democracy and a legitimate electoral process to exist there also must be, at minimum, adequate protection of core democratic rights such as the freedoms of speech, assembly, and association.

There also has to be, more broadly, respect for the rule of law, which we can simplify somewhat as: an acceptance among the government and political classes that constraints on political power are not merely acceptable but desirable; that state power is not exercised arbitrarily; that the politically powerful are equally subject to the law; and that law is applied impartially and not used as a partisan tool against opponents or critics. Where these criteria are not met, elections might be run with admirable efficiency or innovation (e.g. in Singapore, below), but cannot be fully free and fair.

Taken in this broader context, elections evidently have totemic importance as the central mechanism for holding government accountable and for reflecting democratic choice. The meaningful possibility to select alternative representatives, at any level of government, is a central feature that marks genuine democracies from undemocratic regimes — especially those that strive to present a democratic façade.

With the arrival of a global pandemic, suddenly what was already an enormously challenging exercise has taken on multiple layers of added complexity, with serious potential implications for the conduct and legitimacy of elections, and for political freedoms more broadly.

4. Key Issues

From a survey of [recent policy and academic analysis](#), key obstacles presented by the Covid context include the following:

- **Physical constraints:** Physical constraints placed on campaigners in reaching the public, due to restrictions (e.g. physical distancing), which have precluded or limited the usual campaigning activities such as rallies, public meetings, debates, and in-person leafletting.
- **Campaigners' technology skills:** Disparities in campaigners' and the public's knowledge of, and access to, online technologies.
- **Regulators' technology skills:** Disparities in knowledge of, and access to, online technologies among electoral regulators in different states, and within states.
- **Public disengagement:** Concerns regarding public disengagement from the process — which may entail the intensification of a pre-existing trend of disengagement.
- **Degraded information landscape:** Covid's [dramatic impact on the media landscape](#) in many states, especially local media, and the resulting 'deliberation deserts'.
- **Misinformation:** The increasing prevalence of online misinformation during the Covid crisis — the '[infodemic](#)'. This complicates the task of reaching voters (for campaigners) and ensuring the public vote on an informed basis (for electoral regulators and government).
- **State censorship:** The excessive actions taken by some governments and officials to curb misinformation about the pandemic, which in practice has simply expanded their powers to silence critics and curb scrutiny.
- **Structural changes:** Some governments have postponed elections, ostensibly due to Covid, while pursuing structural changes to the electoral and political systems to undermine the opposition before elections take place.
- **Turnout:** The potential for low turnout, affecting the public legitimacy of elections.
- **Additional constraints:** Other constraints, such as [legal considerations](#) in delaying or adapting elections, or the [added cost](#) of running elections during the pandemic, are not considered here, but further underline the significant challenges to be met.

5. Regional Overview

When drawing lessons from the Asia-Pacific region it is vital to emphasise its diversity: the region features some of the biggest and smallest states in the world, and wide disparities in income levels, development, and state capacity.

This diversity has become more pronounced due to COVID-19. Some states have burnished their democratic reputations: for instance, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Mongolia are highly rated as ‘free’ democracies in [Freedom House’s latest report](#) (broadly backed up by [other reports](#)) – Mongolia now scoring higher than the USA. Others have suffered serious pandemic backsliding: India has been demoted to ‘partly free’; Hong Kong has continued its [downward slide](#) in freedom rankings.

Some states facing elections in 2020 had brought the virus under control before elections began, (e.g. [South Korea](#) in April, [New Zealand](#) in October), or had only registered a small number of cases (e.g. [New Caledonia](#) in October). Many states had to postpone elections due to the virus: for instance, Sri Lanka’s 25 April elections were postponed twice, and finally held on 5 August.

During 2020 the region seemed to have bucked, to some extent, the [global trend](#) toward lower turnout in elections held during the pandemic. Despite having to make much greater use of distant and online campaigning, [statistics](#) indicate that turnout was higher in some states than in previous elections, including in South Korea (April), Singapore (July), and Mongolia (June). Turnout was slightly lower in other states (e.g. Australia; Queensland), or significantly lower, as seen in Taiwan’s *Kaohsiung* mayoral by-election in August.

Campaigners in different states faced varying levels of challenge. Consider the different degrees of complexity due to the numbers of candidates and voters, broader Covid context, and official capacity in: a single by-election (Taiwan); a general

election in a small state of 5m (New Zealand); National Assembly elections in a state of 50m (South Korea); and local elections across a large and populous state of some 270m ([Indonesia](#)).

These different experiences mean that a growing body of lessons learned regarding campaigning and electoral management are available on which candidates and regulators can draw.

6. Success Stories: South Korea, New Zealand & Australia

A range of positive lessons can be drawn from the conduct of elections in South Korea, New Zealand, and Australia.

South Korea faced a serious challenge in early 2020, as one of the first states to organize national elections during the pandemic, and with little international guidance to draw on. The state has been recognised globally for its success in organizing full, free and fair national elections [on 15 April 2020](#) for the 300-seat National Assembly, as well as its considerable innovations and high turnout: 66 per cent, the highest electoral turnout since 1992. We can identify [6 main features](#) of the South Korean approach:

- **Building trust:** the National Election Commission (NEC) issued an early statement reassuring the public it would take measures to ensure safe voting.
- **Ensuring transparency:** the NEC communicated by a variety of traditional and online means throughout the campaign period.
- **Clear rules for campaigners:** all in-person campaign activities were prohibited.
- **Campaigner innovations:** candidates shifted to online technology, primarily by sharing video messages on social media platforms, using smartphone apps and text messages,

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and even embracing augmented reality technology in some cases.

- **Early voting:** permissive eligibility rules, covering one-quarter of the population, allowed more people to vote while taking pressure off in-person polling stations.
- **Clear and effective safety measures for in-person voting:** the NEC issued a Code of Conduct for Voters, with detailed instructions and outlining safeguards and precautions.

South Korea benefited from multiple advantages at the time the elections were held: the State had successfully flattened the curve primarily through contact tracing; had a starting position of high-quality democratic governance; high state capacity, public servants adept with technology; and extremely high internet access among the population by global standards (95%).

New Zealand, where elections were rescheduled from 19 September to 17 October, also managed to run successful elections despite the pandemic:

- **Expanded early voting:** Record numbers of voters voted early: 70 per cent (almost 2m people). According to statistics gathered by International IDEA, early voting increased by 37.2 per cent compared to the 2017 election (1.24m ballots) and by 63.7 per cent (0.7m ballots) compared to the 2014 election.
- **Greater inclusion:** Enhanced advance voting encouraged significant numbers of less engaged voters to cast their ballot, including voters from younger demographics, the Māori community, the homeless individuals and prisoners serving sentences of less than three years (whose right to vote had recently been reinstated). Overall, turnout was 82.5 per cent; higher than 2017's 79.8 per cent.

Similarly, early figures from the state elections in Western Australia, which concluded on 13 March 2021, featured a dramatic increase in early voting (162% compared to past elections). Postal voting increased by 96%.

7. An Understudied Case: Mongolia

Mongolia's parliamentary elections took place on 24 June 2020 (followed by a State Assembly by-election in Pahang on 4 July), under fewer constraints than the Korean elections in April.

As the state's virus suppression strategies had been successful (with zero cases and zero deaths during June and July 2020), campaign rallies were permitted, although those attending were required to sit two metres apart. 670 candidates in total ran, including 208 independents. The incumbent prime minister – whose Mongolian People's Party (MPP) won a landslide victory with 44.9% of the vote – campaigned in person, wearing a protective face shield.

That said, due to the restrictions, and mirroring the trend in South Korea, campaigners made greater use of online campaigning tools, including through social media "influencers". Election day reports suggest social media was "abuzz" as voters indicated they had just voted, and that active use of social media presented an opportunity for a more level playing field for new and established candidates to connect with voters.

That said, internet access is low (22.3%), which suggests that this played a much more limited role than in South Korea, or perhaps is limited to metropolitan areas. Voter turnout was high, at 73.6 per cent. Overall, the Mongolian case warrants further study.

8. Misinformation and Censorship in Singapore and Indonesia

While some governments in the region, such as the South Korean government, have been careful to preserve maximal democratic functioning while effectively suppress the virus, in other states the approach to elections and increasing curbs on

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Singapore's parliamentary elections on 10 July 2020 were noted for banning in-person rallies, the embrace of online rallies, and innovations such as special polling times for the elderly. However, the election period also saw a clampdown on criticism: the government has employed an existing law aimed at combatting disinformation to remove critical views about the country's COVID-19 response: the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA).

Similarly, media organisations in Indonesia have raised concerns about a range of digital attacks focused on critical coverage of the government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, with some news websites being tagged with digital graffiti (e.g. the word 'hoax'), and critical articles being removed. Concerns have also been raised about the 9 December local elections, including a last-minute decision to use untested digital technology for vote counting, and reports of widespread vote-buying by incumbents through crisis funds.

These experiences raise issues to watch out for forthcoming elections in states undergoing serious 'pandemic backsliding' on political freedoms.

9. Wholesale Restructuring in Hong Kong

Other territories face a more systematic plan to hollow out and reshape both the electoral system and political system. In Hong Kong, postponement of the 6 September 2020 elections by a year (to 5 September 2021) raised serious concerns when announced in July 2020. Coming a day after 12 pro-democracy candidates were disqualified from running, it was described as 'an assault on fundamental freedoms' by Hong Kong Watch.

Nine months later, on 11 March 2021 the Chinese government ended the annual session of its National People's Congress with a last-minute addition to the meeting agenda: a "decision on improving the electoral system of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region." The plan entails:

- expanding the election committee, which votes on Hong Kong's chief executive, from 1,200 to 1,500 members;
- effectively precluding opposition candidates from nomination; and

- expanding Hong Kong's Legislative Council (LegCo) from 70 to 90 members.

The plan marks a move from removing opposition pro-democracy politicians from office to actively preventing them from running for office, thereby dramatically circumscribing democratic choice.

10. Conclusion

One of the most striking aspects of the pandemic is how it has spurred electoral innovations and reform worldwide. While reforms in some states garner global attention – such as attempts at wholesale reforms in the US including early voting and no-excuse absentee balloting, among other measures – greater attention should also be paid to states across the Asia-Pacific.

On the positive side, innovations across the Asia-Pacific region provide lessons for the world, not only on effectively running elections during a public health emergency, but also pointing to the future of election campaigns, in which early and remote voting becomes more common and online campaigning more central.

On the negative side, the global trend of a rollback in political freedoms is being played out across the region. Election monitors, and democracy watchers more broadly, would do well to heed accounts of how governments have used the pandemic as a pretext in multiple states to undermine free political competition and a level playing field, and the open information environment necessary to the organisation of legitimate elections that meaningfully and accurately reflect voters' preferences. Mapping these developments will help in designing counter-strategies.

Innovations in a range of states across the Asia-Pacific provide lessons not only for effectively running elections during a public health emergency, but also point to the future of election campaigns.

Launching Election Watch for 2021

Running since 2013, the Election Watch project at the University of Melbourne's School of Government draws on the expertise of academics, analysts and democratic stakeholders to provide independent expert analysis that cuts through the spin, focuses on facts, and empowers voters.

For 2021 we will focus on three main areas of content:

- elections in Australia, including Western Australia's recent state elections;
- key elections in the Asia-Pacific, including in Samoa, Hong Kong and Japan; and
- key elections outside the region, including the pivotal Scottish government elections in May.

Website: <https://electionwatch.unimelb.edu.au/>

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This Policy Brief series aims to distil academic research into policy analysis and clear recommendations, drawing on the cutting-edge research taking place at the School of Government and the University of Melbourne more broadly, as well as the School of Government's extensive global networks. Selected briefs will be produced in collaboration with the COVID-DEM project (www.democratic-decay.org), which examines how the pandemic is affecting democracy in Australia and worldwide.



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