

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Inquiry on the future conduct of elections operating during times of emergency situations

18 November 2020, p. 19 of Proof Committee Hansard

- 1. Senator CAROL BROWN:** For both commissioners: essentially, this inquiry's about holding elections during a crisis, which your organisations have done, and they did a fantastic job. Did you require any legislative or regulatory changes to your role to enable you to put in measures to ensure that the election was conducted in safety?

REPLY

No. Due to COVID-19 parliament was not sitting in the months leading up to the election so it was not possible to seek amendments to the *Electoral Act 2004* prior to the election. However, the commission found there was enough flexibility in the Act to cope with the impact of the pandemic. For example amendments to the Act in 2015 removed eligibility criteria for postal and early voting. This allowed the commission to further extend and promote these voting options to limit queuing at election day voting centres which was the core direction from the Department of Health to ensure electors abided with social distancing requirements.

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Questions for the Northern Territory Electoral Commission

- 1. How did the pandemic impact on education and awareness raising activities that may otherwise have been undertaken in the lead up to the election?**

NTEC REPLY

The biggest impact OF COVID-19 on our education and awareness raising activities was on our delivery of a remote enrolment and awareness program. This was scheduled to begin mid-April but due to restricted access of only essential services to remote communities under the Commonwealth biosecurity legislation, it was delayed by over two months and did not start until late June when the restrictions were lifted. This loss of time meant the shorter resulting program focussed only on larger remote communities and could not have the wider reach that was planned.

This pre-election remote enrolment program was particularly important for the Territory as the AEC no longer operates an ongoing remote enrolment field program in the NT. There are issues with under-enrolment and accuracy of the electoral roll in the NT and this is particularly significant for Aboriginal voters in remote areas.

During the two months that the biosecurity zones were in place in remote areas, NTEC staff still managed to visit communities that were outside the biosecurity zones and town camps in urban areas to conduct enrolment and awareness programs for Aboriginal voters.

Another impact of COVID-19 was on our school based education programs. Over twenty existing bookings were cancelled for the period between March – June, which is often a busy time for our education officer. It was not until late June that schools started to participate in our electoral education programs again. In addition, a popular Darwin based civics education event for senior students called Democracy Dash was cancelled (scheduled for June) and plans to run an inaugural Democracy Dash in Katherine (mid-May) were also shelved.

- 2. Your submission notes the impacts of Covid on postal voting, and the difficulty of introducing any electronic voting options given lack of access in communities. Given those limitations, what suggestions do you have to maximise voter participation during an emergency?**

NTEC REPLY

Postal and early voting options were heavily promoted by the NTEC as a way to avoid queues on election day due to social distancing and other COVID safe measures in place, and Territory voters responded. While the NT does have declining postal services, which were further impacted by the pandemic, the number of postal votes issued increased by close to 40% compared to the 2016 election.

NT voters have steadily shown their preference for early voting since the eligibility criteria was removed for the 2016 election, and in 2020 over half the votes issued in the election were at early voting centres.

	2012	2016	2020
Early votes issued	13,268	36,260	56,460
% of total votes	13.9%	36.2%	53.3%

Extra early voting centres were added, and the opening hours were extended, in particular to include the middle weekend of the two week early voting period with most opening for both Saturday and Sunday. These additional early voting centres were all located in Darwin, while the early voting

centres in regional towns (Alice Springs, Katherine, Nhulunbuy and Tennant Creek) are standard practice, with only the opening hours extended due to COVID considerations.

So while postal and early voting options do not assist in voter turnout in remote communities, they are certainly important to maximise voter participation in urban and regional centres. The additional locations and extended voting hours were accompanied by a strong communications campaign to advise voters of these options.

Maximising turnout in remote communities in an ongoing challenge in the Northern Territory even without a pandemic to consider. As already discussed, COVID had a significant impact on our remote enrolment and awareness program, in the lead up to the election. However once the biosecurity zones were lifted in June, the delivery of voting services was still able to take place in remote communities with little hindrance and our remote voting scheduled looked much the same as it did in previous elections. The impact to the delivery of voting services was more in the COVID safe measures that had to be put in place (social distancing, extra cleaning and hygiene etc.) and the follow on effects of the closure of remote communities as discussed below.

3. Your submission highlights the different access arrangements across the Territory and the need to ensure that some communities are not disadvantaged by restrictions imposed because of Covid. Has there been any analysis of whether First Nations communities' votes were steady, given the reduced number of polling places?

NTEC REPLY

Overall, the voter turnout for the 2020 Territory Election was 74.9%, slightly higher than the 74% turnout in 2016. The voter turnout for the seven remote divisions was 62.1%, improved from 2016 and on par with previous years:

Division	2008	2012	2016	2020
Arafura	60.8%	58.1%	49.2%	52.1%
Arnhem	-	51.9%	57.8%	58.1%
Barkly	65.1%	64.9%	63.1%	63.2%
Daly	73.9%	73.5%	71.0%	73.5%
Namatjira**	-	59.8%	58.3%	66.1%
Nhulunbuy/Mulka*	59.8%	62.7%	58.7%	68.4%
Stuart/Gwoja*	52.8%	62.9%	55.4%	52.8%
Average	62.5%	62.0%	59.1%	62.1%

* division renamed in the 2019 redistribution

** This Central Australian division had some rural and urban areas of Alice Springs added to it in the 2015 redistribution and further urban areas added in 2019

While our remote voting schedule had slightly less stops than it did in 2016 this was more due to the lack of voters in some of the very small communities (which were therefore cut from the schedule) than because of COVID reasons. The way COVID did have its impact on turnout was that many Aboriginal voters were not in their communities because they were attending cultural activities that had been delayed due to COVID-19. Most of these had to be postponed when communities were closed under the biosecurity restrictions. Once these closures were lifted, there were large movements of people across remote areas to attend funerals, sorry business and other cultural activities. Feedback from our remote teams was that there was just was not many people in remote communities when they visited, but those that were there generally did vote.

The movement of people for cultural reasons is always a factor for lower turnout in remote areas (particularly as our elections are held in August, the dry season), but never to the extent that was seen this year due to the pandemic, remote community closures, and the follow on effects of these.