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Title:

How Do Distanced and Online Election Campaigning Affect Political Freedoms?

Date:

2021

Citation:

Daly, T. G. (2021). How Do Distanced and Online Election Campaigning Affect Political Freedoms?. (1st), International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

Persistent Link:

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How Do Distanced and Online Election Campaigning Affect Political Freedoms?

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What does International IDEA do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work. International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

Where does International IDEA work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa and West Asia, Asia and the Pacific, Europe, and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

Tom Gerald Daly

1. Introduction

The need for physical distancing during the Covid-19 pandemic has required election candidates to develop innovative campaigning methods now that conventional campaigning, involving rallies, public meetings and fundraising events, is prohibited in some jurisdictions. Due to the physical and technological barriers imposed, distanced and online election campaigning could be seen as restrictive for both candidates and voters alike. This paper presents an overview of the key issues and discusses a selection of case studies to demonstrate that it is possible to successfully navigate these challenges and achieve good outcomes that support legitimate and democratic government. Positive outcomes are dependent on a range of factors, however, and in a number of states both the possibility of well-managed online campaigning and legitimate democratic outcomes are being undermined by intensifying political trends that militate against the supportive frameworks required for informed and free voting.

The aim here is not to provide a comprehensive analysis but to sketch an impressionistic picture of the recent experience of distanced and online election campaigning across Asia and the Pacific, and to elaborate a broad framework in pursuit of the key lessons to draw out from these recent experiences and the key questions that need answers. The paper begins by framing the relationship between elections and political freedoms, followed by the key challenges and a regional overview. It then discusses a number of case studies: success stories from South Korea and Mongolia, concerning trends in Singapore and Indonesia, and a hopeful insight from Australia.

2. The relationship between elections and political freedoms

Even at the best of times, running elections (and running in elections) is a mammoth undertaking. From the democratic and political importance of the task, to its logistical complexity, there is no such thing as an easy election. Elections are at the heart of how we define modern democracy but elections themselves do not equate to democracy. For a functioning democracy—and more specifically a legitimate electoral process—to exist there also has to be, at a minimum, adequate protection of core democratic rights such as the freedoms of speech, assembly and association.

There must also more broadly be respect for the rule of law, which can be simplified somewhat as: (a) an acceptance among the political classes that constraints on political power are not just acceptable, but desirable; (b) that the average individual knows where they stand and what will happen if they break the law; (c) that those with political power are equally subject to the law; and (d) that law is applied impartially and not used as a partisan tool

against opponents or critics. Where these conditions are not met, elections might be run with admirable efficiency or innovation but cannot ultimately be deemed to be fully free and fair.

Taken in this broader context, elections remain the core mechanism for reflecting the democratic promise of giving real power to the people and have totemic importance as the ultimate accountability mechanism for government. The opportunity to select alternative representatives—at any level of government—is a key feature that separates genuine democracies from undemocratic regimes that seek to present a democratic facade. As a result, the political atmosphere becomes highly charged during electoral campaigns, errors have higher stakes and outcomes are subject to even more intense scrutiny and contestation than usual. Putting a foot wrong—for a campaigner or an electoral regulator—can lead to serious sanctions in either a court of law or the court of public opinion.

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

3. Key issues

A survey of recent policy and academic analysis finds concerns about distanced and online campaigning, and identifies a suite of interrelated and often mutually reinforcing challenges:¹

- Physical constraints: The physical constraints placed on campaigners in reaching the public due to restrictions such as physical distancing have precluded, or at least limited, usual campaigning activities such as rallies, public meetings, debates and in-person leafleting.
- Campaigners' technological skills: Disparities in knowledge of and access to online technologies among campaigns and the public.
- Regulators' technology skills: Disparities in knowledge of and access to online technologies among electoral regulators in different states, and within states.
- Public disengagement: Concerns about public disengagement from the process, which in some cases may entail an intensification of existing trends.
- Degraded information landscape: The dramatic impact of the pandemic on the media landscape in many states, especially local media, and the resulting 'deliberation deserts'.
- Misinformation: The increasing prevalence of online misinformation during the pandemic, or 'infodemic' ([Reppell et al. 2020](#)), and how this complicates the task for campaigners of reaching voters, and for electoral regulators and governments of ensuring that people vote on an informed basis.
- State censorship: The excessive actions taken by some governments and officials to curb misinformation about the pandemic, which have in practice simply expanded existing powers to silence critics and curb scrutiny.
- Turnout: The potential for reduced turnout, which could affect the perceived legitimacy of elections.

4. Regional overview

It is commonplace to emphasize the diversity of the Asia and the Pacific region when conducting any regional overview. It features some of the biggest and smallest states in the world, as well as wide disparities in levels of income, development and state capacity. All this has implications for both pandemic response and electoral preparedness. This diversity is becoming even more pronounced due to the pandemic, which has hit countries in a highly uneven way.

Some of the states facing elections in 2020, for example South Korea in April ([Spinelli 2020a](#)) and New Zealand in October, had brought the virus under control at the time the elections were due to take place. Others, such as New Caledonia, had only registered a small number of cases ([BBC News 2020](#)). Many other states were forced to postpone elections due to the virus.

1. Other constraints, such as legal considerations ([Ellena et al. 2020](#)) in delaying or adapting elections or the added cost ([Asplund, James and Clark 2020](#)) of running elections due to additional constraints, are not considered here.

Sri Lanka's 25 April elections, for instance, were postponed twice before they were finally held on 5 August.

The region as a whole seems to some extent to have bucked the global trend towards lower turnouts in the elections held during the pandemic ([Bicu and Wolf 2020](#)). Despite having to make much greater use of distanced and online campaigning, statistics from International IDEA indicate that turnout was higher in some states than in their previous elections, including in South Korea, Singapore and Mongolia which are discussed below. Turnout was only slightly lower in other states, such as Tajikistan's October election and the March local elections in the Australian state of Queensland, but significantly lower in Taiwan's Kaohsiung mayoral by-election in August ([Bicu and Wolf 2020](#)).

It is important to note that there is a world of difference between the challenges faced by campaigners in different states. For instance, a single by-election in Taiwan, National Assembly elections in a medium-sized state of some 50 million people in South Korea and local elections across a large and highly populous state of some 270 million people in Indonesia present different degrees of complexity due to the number of candidates, the wider pandemic context and varying levels of official capacity. Nonetheless, as more states undergo the rigours of reorganizing elections due to the pandemic, a growing body of lessons learned and choices made are available on which candidates and regulators can draw.

5. Turning lemons into lemonade: The South Korean success story

South Korea faced a serious challenge early in 2020. As one of the first states to organize national elections during the pandemic, it had little guidance to draw on. The state has been recognized internationally not only for its success in organizing full, free and fair national elections for the 300-seat National Assembly on 15 April 2020, but also for its considerable innovation and increased turnout: 66 per cent of eligible voters cast a ballot, achieving the highest electoral turnout since 1992 ([Spinelli 2020b](#)).

It is possible to identify six main features of South Korea's approach to its elections ([Spinelli 2020b](#)):

1. Building trust: the National Election Commission (NEC) issued an early statement reassuring the public that it would take measures to ensure safe voting.
2. Ensuring transparency: the NEC communicated through a variety of traditional and online means throughout the campaign period.
3. Clear rules on what was not permitted by campaigns: all in-person campaigning activities were prohibited.
4. Innovation by campaigners: candidates shifted to digital and online technology, primarily by sharing video messages on social media platforms, using text messages and smartphone apps, and even embracing augmented reality technology in some cases.
5. Early voting: permissive eligibility rules covering a quarter of the population had the double advantage of allowing more people to vote while taking pressure off in-person polling stations.
6. Clear and effective safety measures for in-person voting: the NEC issued a Code of Conduct for Voters, which provided detailed instructions and outlined actions, safeguards and precautions.

When drawing lessons from this success story, it is important to emphasize that at the time the elections were held, the state had successfully flattened its incidence curve, primarily through contact tracing ([Lee 2020](#)). South Korea also benefited from its starting position of high-quality democratic governance, high state capacity, public servants adept at using technology and extremely high levels of Internet access among the population ([Roser, Ritchie and Ortiz-Ospina 2015](#)) by both regional and global standards (95 per cent).

6. An understudied case: Mongolia

Mongolia's parliamentary elections ([Koenig 2020](#)) on 24 June, which were followed by a State Assembly by-election ([Aman 2020](#)) in Pahalang on 4 July, took place under fewer constraints than the South Korean elections three months before. The state's virus suppression strategies had

been very successful—there were only 315 cases and zero deaths as of November 2020 ([World Health Organization 2021](#))²—so campaign rallies were permitted, although those attending were required to sit two metres apart. There were 670 candidates, including 208 independents ([Batdorj and Dierkes 2020](#)). The incumbent prime minister, Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh, whose Mongolian People's Party won a landslide victory with 44.9 per cent of the vote, campaigned in-person throughout wearing a protective face shield ([Dalaibuyan and Dierkes 2020](#)).

That said, restrictions that mirrored the trend in South Korea meant that campaigners made greater use of online campaigning tools, including social media 'influencers' ([Koenig 2020](#)). Election day reports suggest that social media was 'abuzz' with voters indicating that they had just voted. Active use of social media presented an opportunity for new and established candidates to connect with voters on a 'more level playing field' ([Batdorj and Dierkes 2020](#)). Internet access is still low (22.3 per cent), however, which means that it probably played a much more limited role than in South Korea, or that its role was perhaps limited to metropolitan areas ([Roser, Ritchie and Ortiz-Ospina 2015](#)). Nonetheless, at 73.6 per cent, voter turnout was high, which suggests that the Mongolian case warrants further study.

7. Misinformation and censorship in Singapore and Indonesia

Some governments, such as that of South Korea, have been careful to preserve maximum democratic functioning while effectively suppressing the virus. In other states, however, the approach to elections and increasing curbs on political freedoms is viewed as part of a wider pattern of repression, which has intensified during the pandemic.

Singapore's parliamentary elections on 10 July were notable for banning in-person rallies, the embrace of online rallies, and innovations such as special polling times for the elderly ([Aman 2020](#)). However, the pandemic and the election period have been accompanied by a clampdown on criticism. The government has used an existing law, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), to remove critical views about the country's Covid-19 response ([Pen International 2020](#)). Similarly, the [International Federation of Journalists \(2020\)](#) has reported concerns raised by media organizations in Indonesia about a range of digital attacks in response to critical coverage of the government's pandemic response. Some news websites have been tagged with digital graffiti (e.g. the word 'hoax' on one homepage) and critical articles have been removed. This raised concerns about the context in which the 9 December local elections were to be held, which were amplified by concerns about widespread vote-buying by incumbents using the social assistance funds earmarked for the pandemic ([Sukmajati 2020](#)).

8. Ending on a hopeful note: the surprise of local elections in Victoria

Beyond some of the better known success stories in the region, probably much less observed was the unexpected effect of the pandemic on the local council elections that took place in October across Victoria—Australia's second most populous state, with a population of 6.7 million. Just before the elections, the Melbourne School of Government published a policy brief by the head of the Victorian Local Governance Association, the leading civil society organization supporting local government, which laid out a range of concerns, including that the constraints placed on candidates due to lockdown conditions would favour incumbents and negatively affect women and minority representation ([Arndt 2020](#)). To the surprise of many, however, the context of these elections and the somewhat flatter playing field led to an unprecedented diversity of candidates, including candidates from among younger demographics, minorities and women—and some candidates from across multiple categories ([Yussuf 2020](#)).

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In putting together these short reflections, in addition to the works cited, I have drawn on the leading work by a range of organizations, including International IDEA, the Asia Network for Free

2. At the time of writing, 21 January 2021, there were 1,536 cases and 1 death. *Source:* World Health Organization, WHO Coronavirus (Covid-19) Dashboard, <<https://covid19.who.int>>, accessed 21 January 2021.

Elections (ANFREL), the Asian Democracy Network and Democracy Reporting International (DRI), among others. I have also drawn on four existing projects that I either lead or co-lead: the Covid-DEM project, which was launched in April 2020, that aims to chart the impact of the pandemic on democracies worldwide; two further projects at the Melbourne School of Government, Election Watch which provides expert analysis of elections across Australia, the Asia-Pacific region and beyond, and Governing During Crises, which focuses on the challenges of governing in the face of different types of crisis—including holding elections; and the Constitution Transformation Network (CTN) at the University of Melbourne, which in 2020 also focused on the serious challenges of holding free and fair elections during the pandemic.

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