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Managing Elections under Covid-19 Pandemic Conditions: The Case of Ghana

Case study, 27 April 2021

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This case study is part of a collaborative project between the Electoral Management Network <http://www.electoralmanagement.com> and International IDEA, edited by Toby S. James (University of East Anglia), Alistair Clark (Newcastle University) and Erik Asplund (International IDEA).

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Managing Elections under Covid-19 Pandemic Conditions: The case of Ghana

Fortune Agbele and Ghadafi Saibu

Introduction

Elections in Ghana, as in other third-wave democracies on the African continent, are deemed critical because they can contribute to either improvement or reversal—even total breakdown—in a country’s democracy. Threats to democratic governance include delays, suspension or total cancellation of the electoral process: decisions that may be forced on election management bodies (EMBs) once unforeseen events have caused systems to malfunction (James and Alihodzic 2020). The outbreak of Covid-19 was one such unforeseen event, becoming a global pandemic and coinciding with at least 88 general elections to date (International IDEA 2020). An April 2020 report by ECONEC (Economic Community of West African States, Network of Electoral Commissions) noted that the outbreak presented potential challenges to the conduct and management of upcoming elections within the sub-region (ECONEC 2020). Ghana is often seen as a beacon of democracy in Africa (Gyimah-Boadi 2009) having held seven general elections and overseen three peaceful transitions of power from an incumbent to an opposition political party. The 7 December 2020 general elections, held amid Covid-19, were the country’s eighth cycle since 1992.

Altogether, twelve candidates contested the 2020 presidential elections. The list of candidates included the incumbent president and a former president as the main contenders. Eleven were proposed by political parties, and one stood as an independent candidate. The 2020 elections also included contests for 275 parliamentary seats. In all, 914 parliamentary candidates stood (African Union 2020). The presidential election produced very close results. For the New Patriotic Party (NPP) the incumbent president polled 51.3 per cent of the valid votes, while for the National Democratic Congress (NDC) the former president obtained 47.4 per cent. In terms of the parliamentary contest, 137 seats were declared for the incumbent NPP, signifying a net loss of 18.9 per cent on their previous 167 seats. The main opposition party won 137 seats, a net gain from their previous 106 seats of 29.6 per cent. Even though the outbreak of Covid-19 posed some initial delays to voter registration, and the need to adhere to safety protocols throughout the entire electoral process, Ghana’s 2020 elections took place as planned.

1. Pre-Covid-19 challenges

Before the Covid-19 outbreak, the Electoral Commission (EC) of Ghana was already struggling with numerous issues with the potential to taint its credibility and trust among electoral stakeholders. Key among these was the appointment of a new leadership team including a new chairperson and deputies, and the subsequent decision by the newly appointed leadership to compile a new voters' register. Following an alternation of power in the 2016 elections, President Nana Akufo-Addo removed the then chair of the EC and her two deputies on 28 June 2018, and subsequently appointed a new chair and new deputies on 19 July 2018 (BBC News Pidgin 2018). However, because the dismissed chairperson had been appointed by the former president (John Mahama) who lost the election, the appointment of the new chair was by and large not accepted by the main opposition party, the NDC. This heralded the beginning of mistrust and credibility issues that were yet to swamp the public image of the Commission. Though largely ensuing from the main opposition NDC, the mistrust was also felt among a large cross-section of Ghanaians (see Graphic Online 2020a; Abdulai and Sackeyfio 2021) and further deepened when the new chairperson announced the EC's plans to compile a completely new voters' register ahead of the 2020 presidential and parliamentary elections (Lartey 2019). The new register was to be a biometric voter management system (BVMS) which would, among other things, have a facial recognition feature to help address verification challenges that often occur during elections (Annoh 2020). The EC argued that the purpose of the new voters' register was to deal with credibility issues concerning bloating of the existing register, including the presence of non-Ghanaians in it (Myjoyonline 2020a). The opposition NDC did not accept this, claiming that the decision confirmed their initial position that the president had made his new leadership appointments with a view to manipulating the EC for the 2020 elections (see Abdulai and Sackeyfio 2021; FAAPA 2020).

The decision to compile a completely new voters' register by the EC was subsequently challenged at the Supreme Court by the NDC, and one private citizen, Mark Takyi-Banson, with support from a coalition of civil society organisations (IMANI 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). The NDC demanded the inclusion of existing voter ID cards as part of the EC's registration procedures, while Mr Takyi-Banson argued for the inclusion of birth certificates and existing voter ID cards (Ziaba 2020). The EC had sought a criterion that would allow individuals to prove their citizenship either by presenting a passport or national identification card (Ghana Card), or by presenting two voters registered under the new voter card as guarantors of citizenship. The Supreme Court dismissed the case, giving the EC the green light to compile the new voters' register. According to the Court, unless there was clear evidence of an unconstitutional act by the EC, it could not order the Commission to change its approach. The court stressed that the EC was exercising its discretion in the discharge of its constitutional mandate and 'should be deemed as authorized to be acting within the law and the regulations therein and cannot be faulted even if it is considered that there is a more efficient model or method available' [for cleaning the register] (Arhinful 2020a).

2. Compiling a fresh voter register during a pandemic

Following the clearance by the Supreme Court to compile the new voters' register, the EC scheduled the work to begin on 18 April 2020. However, this was interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic in several ways. The Government of Ghana on 30 March 2020 imposed an initial lockdown in potentially high-risk cities including the capital, Accra, and Kumasi, restricting any forms of social and public gathering. This immediately sparked debates within the media and among political observers about two main issues: first, the practicality of

compiling a new voters' register, and second, the practicality of holding a general election amid Covid-19 (Asante 2020). Uncertainties over the nature of the pandemic and the effectiveness of measures to contain the spread of the virus meant no one was sure for how long the lockdown would be needed.

At the heart of the debate was potential legal and constitutional deadlock over the available options in the event of not being able to hold the election. Some analysts suggested possible constitutional remedies should there be a need to postpone. Key among these was the option of the president declaring a state of emergency. This would allow him to extend his term of office (Nyinevi 2020). Second, parliament could extend its terms and that of the president using article 298 of the Constitution which speaks to the residual power of parliament (namely: 'where on any matter, whether arising out of this Constitution or otherwise, there is no provision, express or by necessary implication of this Constitution which deals with the matter, that has arisen, Parliament shall...provide for that matter to be dealt with') (Ghana 1996). A third constitutional option was that the Chief Justice could act until conditions were right for the election to be held (Nyinevi 2020). However, there was a consensus among many civil society groups and political observers that the election should be held, while ensuring that citizens in exercising their mandate did not endanger their health and lives.

The EC's first major decision that the pandemic forced was an indefinite suspension of the intended start date (18 April 2020) for compiling the new voter register. This appeared to be necessary because the registration process required that people physically attend designated registration centres. However, the suspension compounded existing concerns—which critics had already raised—regarding in particular the EC's ability to compile a new voter register in time for the presidential and parliamentary elections in December (Asante 2020). Aside from a possible delay due to the legal injunctions being sought by the main opposition party, the registration process also appeared vulnerable to a halt in the global supply chain of digital machinery (due to Covid-19 lockdowns in most other countries). This meant that vendors of the new Biometric Verification Machines were most unlikely to fulfil requirements in a timely manner (Aikins 2020). Advocates of using the existing register and conducting only limited additional registrations argued that it would save on costs of acquiring not only the new BVMS itself, but also personal protective equipment (PPE) and other items such as sanitiser, soap and water needed for registering citizens in a Covid-safe manner. As noted by one civil society organization, the cost of using existing infrastructure was estimated to be at most USD 35 million, compared to the USD 185 million estimated for acquiring a new register (IMANI 2020d).

Furthermore, as described earlier, there were concerns over the proposal to use the Ghana Card and the passport as the primary sources of identification. Despite the lockdown in Accra, the National Identification Authority (NIA) was still conducting a mass registration in the Eastern Region. Though there was no lockdown in that region, the gathering of many people to register for the Ghana Card drew a backlash from the populace, mainly because there was no ban on internal travel, which meant that Covid-19 infections could spread to that region. The backlash resulted in a temporary halt in the registration process for the Ghana Card. Subsequently, this created an expectation that the EC would postpone its plans to compile a new register, since people would need the Ghana Card to register for the new voters' card (and waiting for the NIA to complete its exercise would delay the election timelines). However, having extended the first lockdown until 19 April 2020 (as mentioned, the original start date for compiling the new register was 18 April), the Government of Ghana lifted this the next day and subsequently the EC—despite all the criticism raised by both civil society organizations and the major opposition NDC—announced that the new registration process would take place from 30 June to 6 August 2020.

In response to public health concerns, the EC provided assurances that registration would be conducted under strict adherence to safety protocols provided by the Ghana Health

Service and the Ministry of Health (Electoral Commission 2020a). In line with the proposals from these institutions, the Commission developed and outlined the safety regimens to be observed. One of these was that registration centres would be set up in open and outdoor spaces, as has always been the practice. Other requirements included wearing of face masks, temperature measurements, mandatory hand washing before entering registration centres, observation of physical distancing, provision of sanitization equipment, and further isolation of persons with temperatures above 37.8 degrees Celsius (Electoral Commission 2020b). At this point, one could argue that despite the risk of causing infections, the voter registration process could serve as a potential learning opportunity for the EMB as this was the first time it had undertaken an aspect of the electoral process during a global pandemic. Lessons and experiences gathered from the exercise could inform the EC of what to expect should the December election take place.

Pre-electoral period: failure of mitigation measures

Voter registration took place according to the revised schedule. Though most of the safety measures listed above were observed, there was large-scale non-adherence to physical distancing at most registration centres. The widespread disregard of this crucial rule drew criticisms from most observers, who described the registration as a Covid-19 spreading exercise (ModernGhana 2020). Data reported by the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) further shows that there were instances of non-observance and non-enforcement across all the various safety measures proposed by the EC (see Table 1). For instance, CODEO reported that across the 100 registration centres they visited, there was non-enforcement of physical distancing in 28 per cent of centres during the first week (CODEO 2020a) and 26 per cent in weeks two and three (CODEO 2020b). At one point, a section of the medical professionals in the country petitioned the EC to halt the registration exercise to avert spread of the virus (BBC Pidgin 2020a; Darko 2020a).

In response the EC introduced a digital queuing management system. This was intended to allow prospective registrants to pre-book a slot before visiting the registration centre to avert crowding and congestion (Electoral Commission 2020c; Dogbey 2020). However, as can be deduced from Table 1 this did not solve the problem, since the non-enforcement of physical distancing was observed in 21 per cent of centres visited by CODEO during the fourth week (CODEO 2020c). This failure can be attributed to the system being made available in only some selected registration centres.

The gathering of so many prospective registrants defied expectations that public anxiety about Covid-19 would produce a low turnout for the registration exercise. The high turnout partly hinged on the use of the voters' ID cards in Ghana for other purposes; recent studies indicate that citizens use the voter ID card as an all-purpose identification card, something which tends to provide an added motivation for people to register (Agbele 2020a).

Table 1. Overview of adherence to Covid-19 safety measures during voter registration

Indicators	Phase	Observation		
Spacious centres		Spacious (%)	Not spacious (%)	
		91	9	
Observation of physical distancing		Enforced	Not enforced	Other observations
	Phase 1	72	28	Instances of overcrowding
	Phase 2	74	26	Slight improvement
Temperature		Checked	Not checked	Other observations
	Phase 1	92	8	Applicants with high temperature were turned away
	Phase 2	75	25	Temperature guns broke down in some centres. In some cases, registration was placed on hold while in others it continued without checks.
Sanitized equipment		Always	Often/sometimes	Never
	Phase 1	43	55	2
	Phase 2	38	58	4
Hand washing		Enforced	Not enforced	Other observations
		82	18	99% of centres had handwashing facilities, with shortages reported in 4%

Source: Authors, constructed using data from CODEO Preliminary Report (I-III), (2020a, 2020b, 2020c).

3. The electoral campaign: throwing caution to the wind

The outbreak of a global pandemic in an election year is likely to pose health risks during a fully-fledged campaign (Asplund et al. 2021). This is particularly the case in a developing country such as Ghana, where electoral campaigns are still primarily face-to-face (Agbele 2020b). It became evident from the early stages of the government's pandemic response that it was going to be challenging to fight against the spread of the virus, while also campaigning to win the election. For instance, many viewed the government's lifting of the ban on communal worship (5 June 2020) as a licence to enable the parties, particularly the incumbent party, to hold primaries on 20 June and start campaigning (Africanews 2020). There was no limit on the number of people allowed to gather for the 2020 political campaign.

The period saw very few major rallies, as these were replaced by smaller outdoor events including a 'health walk' (Knott 2020) and more frequent door-to-door canvassing (EU EOM 2020). The shift to mini rallies and the heavy use of the door-to-door approach to

canvass for votes did not mark a major change from the 2016 election (Agbele 2020b). Indeed, it became evident from media reports and footage that very little adherence to safety protocols was observed during political gatherings. Except in a few cases, where political candidates were meeting high profile people rather than the general populace, the campaign trail was marked by almost no adherence to physical distancing or use of face masks (Darko 2020b; Myjoyonline 2020b; Arhinful 2020a and 2020b). In response to angry complaints from some of the public, the incumbent party issued a notice to its campaign management teams to strictly adhere to safety protocols (CNR 2020a) but even so, not much improvement was seen.

To a large extent, the media coverage of the campaign did not seem to have been impaired by Covid-19. If anything, the pandemic situation prompted political candidates and parties to make fuller use of social media by continually posting live feeds of their campaign activities. A recent study (Gadjanova et al. 2019) showed a gradual increase in the use of social media to reach out to voters in particular, and it is not surprising that the 2020 campaign accelerated the trend. Closed WhatsApp chat groups were the most heavily used social media platform, followed by Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and others (EU EOM 2020).

Covid-19 and incumbent advantage

Until the outbreak of Covid-19 the electoral campaign, as in previous years, was going to be about the economy and how well the incumbents had delivered on programmatic promises. However, in 2020 the incumbents' campaign messages and political advertising shifted to how well they were managing the pandemic. The government secured Covid-19 emergency funds, which enabled it to run relief programmes supposedly meant to mitigate the financial and socio-economic effects of the lockdown on a section of the needy populace, as well as small and medium-scale businesses (SMEs). For instance, the government distributed hot meals (Lartey 2020b), absorbed water and electricity bills for three months (BBC News Pidgin 2020c), and provided a stimulus package for SMEs. This provided some incumbent advantages for the government as its campaign messages and advertisement material were able to refer to the relief activity. Aside from the campaign message, there were reports of the branding of packed food in the incumbent NPP party colours (Myjoyonline 2020c).

Another element of incumbent advantage observed was during the voter registration exercise. Due to the pandemic, all third-year students at senior high school level were allowed to stay in school boarding facilities to prepare for their final exams. The EC set up registration centres in the various schools to register the students, most of whom were eligible to vote. Due to the Covid-19 restrictions, political party agents were not allowed access to the schools. Nonetheless, there were instances where the party officials of the incumbent party were able to access some of the schools to solicit support from would-be first-time voters (3News 2020; MyNewsGhana 2020).

4. Covid safety on polling day itself

Polling day (7 December 2020) was preceded by the 'special voting' held on 1 December. A regular feature in Ghana, this voting arrangement is for security personnel and others whose services are engaged on election days. It is not open to the general public. In 2020, a total of 109,577 such voters were estimated to have participated. It was reported that the following Covid-19 protocols were observed: washing of hands with soap and water, wearing of face masks, hand sanitization, and checking of voters' temperatures before they were allowed to go through the voting process (BBC News Pidgin 2020b; Graphic Online 2020b). 'Covid-19 Ambassadors', tasked with ensuring compliance, were present at all the centres (BBC News

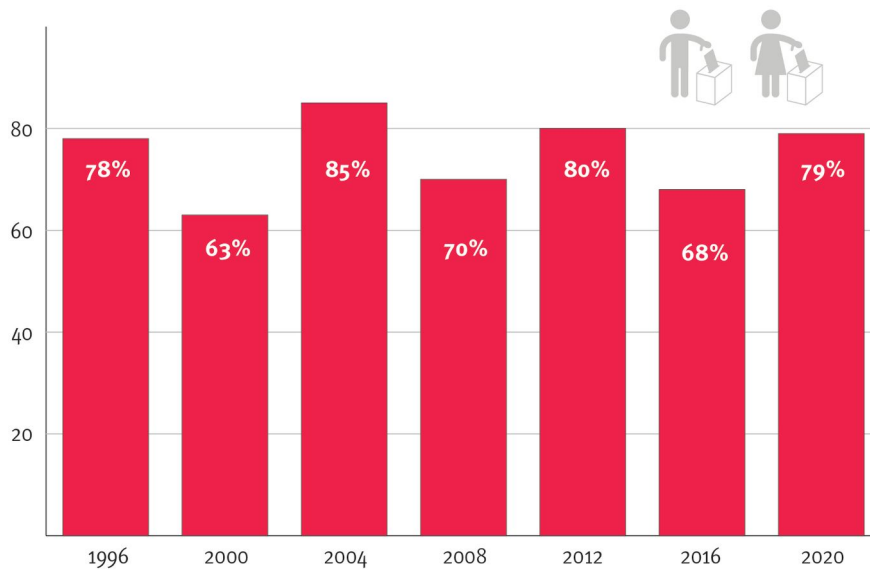
Pidgin 2020b). However, no information was made available on whether those people with a high temperature or in quarantine were enabled to vote.

For the main presidential and parliamentary elections on 7 December 2020 there were 38,622 polling stations across the country. The EC mandated the same Covid-19 safety protocols as for the registration period and, as earlier stated, these were in line with the recommendations from the Ghana Health Service (Electoral Commission 2020b). Voting centres were set up in open spaces, as in past elections. However, a preliminary report by CODEO indicates less than full compliance with the mitigation protocols. Out of the 4,400 polling stations observed, thermometer guns were reported in 95 per cent of the polling stations; provision of soap and water in 94 per cent; hand sanitizer in 93 per cent; and scanner wipes in 78 per cent (CODEO 2020d). (However, the report noted the *lack* of the above-listed protocols in less than 1 per cent of polling stations, which may reflect inconsistency in reporting methods and/or inability to get a comprehensive picture.) It is worth noting that the provision of these items did not translate into complete adherence regarding their use. The enforcement of handwashing was, for instance, observed in only 92.7 per cent of cases.

Media reports from several polling stations showed that the observation of physical distancing was not followed across all polling stations (see CNR 2020b; AFP 2020). This observation was corroborated by CODEO's report, which found adherence in 74.3 per cent of the polling stations visited. Similarly, the wearing of face masks was in evidence in some media footage, while it was missing in others. This was again confirmed by CODEO, which observed strict adherence with mask wearing in only 54.8 per cent of polling stations visited. Some voters who were not compliant with mask-wearing were turned away, in line with the 'no mask, no entry' requirement. Coupled with less than universal application of the rule (and in the absence of free masks given away at polling stations), this will have had discriminatory effects. Among the prospective voters denied will have been those unable to afford a mask. CODEO, for instance, noted they distributed GHS 100,000 (USD 17,500 approx.) worth of face masks in high need communities and to underprivileged registered voters.

However, judging from provisional electoral data, voter participation was not significantly affected by Covid-19 at an aggregate level. The EC reported a turnout of 79 per cent, representing an 11 per cent increase from the 2016 election. As can be deduced from Figure 1, it was the third-highest turnout since 1996. That said, participation in the election by Ghanaians living abroad was indeed affected by Covid-19. As disclosed by the deputy chair of the EC, there were plans to initiate the first diaspora voting to enfranchise Ghanaian expatriates registered at various diplomatic representations and Ghanaian scholarship students abroad (ECONEC 2020). However, with the outbreak of Covid-19, the diaspora voting system could not be rolled out.

Figure 1. Voter turnout 1996–2020

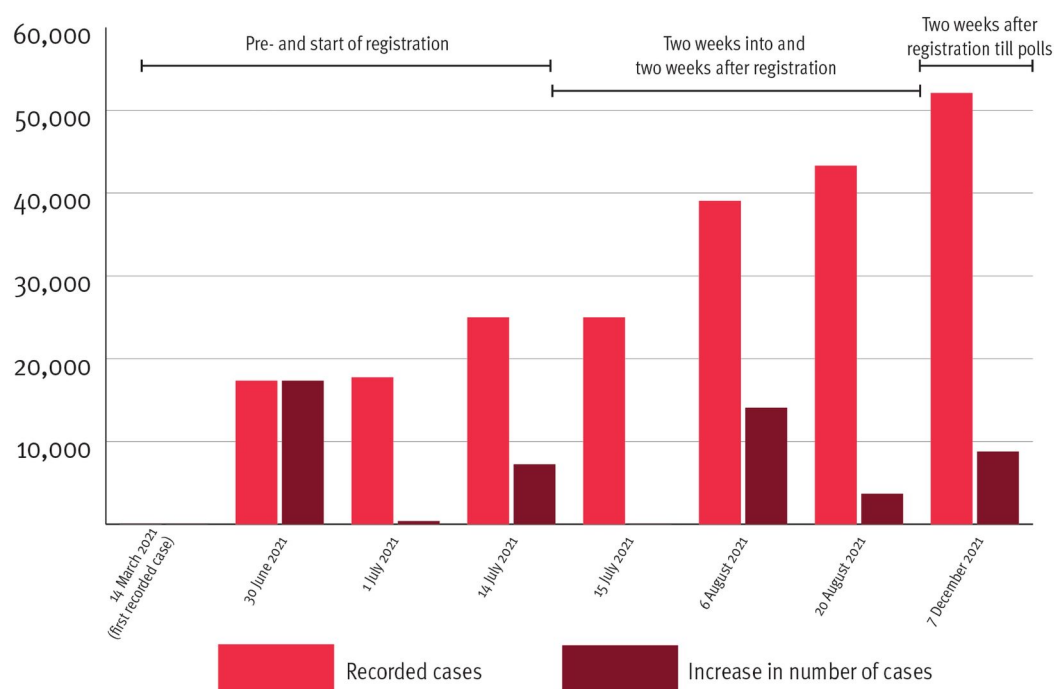


Source: Authors, based on data from Ghana Electoral Commission.

5. Tentative overview: Covid-19 infection during the 2020 electoral cycle

Based on Covid-19 data presented by the World Health Organization (WHO), a tentative overview of Covid-19 infections in Ghana during the electoral period can be presented. Although it is difficult to ascertain the health impact definitively, the numbers of cases at the start and end of voter registration are some indication. The pre-registration period is considered from the day the country recorded its first case up to two weeks into the registration, i.e., 14 March–14 July 2020, to accommodate the virus’s two-week gestation period. Based on Covid-19 data reported by the WHO, these 16 weeks saw a total of 24,988 recorded cases. The registration period is marked from this point until two weeks after the registration, i.e., 15 July–20 August 2020, to again account for the virus’s two-week gestation period. This period alone, less than five weeks, recorded 21,724 new infections, representing 34.1 per cent, while the remaining 14 weeks until 7 December saw only 16.8 per cent increases in infection (see Figure 2). Based on the above, the voter registration exercise period may have contributed to the number of cases recorded in Ghana. Having said that, this must be treated with caution since other reasons could have also contributed to the increase in cases.

Figure 2. Covid-19 infections, pre-electoral and voter registration period



Source: Authors, compiled from WHO data.

Conclusion

For a developing country like Ghana where health facilities are still under-served with an underdeveloped economy, managing the electoral process amid a global pandemic meant an enormous burden in terms of both the health risk and the extra financial costs of mitigation measures. In Ghana's specific case, the 2020 general election process started amid controversy and lack of trust, beginning with the replacement of the EC chairperson and two of its deputy commissioners by the new government. The challenge was compounded by the EMB's decision to compile a completely new voters' register despite opposition from independent civil society organizations and the main opposition party. Although the EC has not made its calculations publicly available, the compilation of the new register undoubtedly came at an extra financial cost to the nation, including the system's cost, i.e. the BVMS and ensuring Covid-19 safety protocols on registration day, but also an additional cost of ensuring Covid-19 safety protocols for the voting day.

Finally, it is important to point out that the 2020 general elections experienced more violence than those held in 2012 and 2016. At the time of writing this case study, and while protests against the EC regarding the outcome of the elections by the opposition NDC are still ongoing, there had been five reported electoral-related deaths (DW News 2020). The opposition NDC's presidential candidate rejected the outcome, claiming that the elections were manipulated in favour of the ruling government (Lartey 2020a). However, our observation is that the mistrust that followed the EC into the 2020 general election already made for crisis conditions, which then coincided with the pandemic as highlighted in this case study.

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