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Despite ELD's lengthy statement on GE2020, some key questions remain unanswered

Eugene Tan K. B.

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<https://www.todayonline.com/commentary/despite-elds-lengthy-statement-ge2020-some-key-questions-remain-unanswered>

The author says the ELD statement on Sept 10 on its findings on why there were abnormally long queues at some polling stations "could have shed more light".

Singaporeans went to the polls on July 10 amid an unprecedented set of public health and safety precautionary measures put in place to prevent the spread of Covid-19 infections.

Among other things, GE2020 would also be remembered for long queues at some polling stations and the less than positive voter experience. There was also the first-ever extension of polling hours nationwide by two hours to 10pm.

In GE2020, the Elections Department (ELD) deployed more election officials (36,000 or 20 per cent more than GE2015) and polling stations (832 in 2015; 1,097 in 2020) to allow for safe distancing.

But longer than usual queues developed at some 199 (or 18 per cent) of the 1,097 polling stations in the morning of polling day. Around 4 per cent — or 47 polling stations — had sustained long queues throughout the day.

In its Sept 10 press release on its findings on why there were abnormally long queues at some polling stations and what lessons are learned for future elections, the ELD noted, somewhat simplistically and self-evidently, that the precautionary measures resulted in "a reduction in the efficiency of polling" and "voters, in general, spent a longer time to queue and vote, as compared with past elections".

Four factors contributed to the sustained long queues. First, the safe management measures, including temperature-taking, donning of disposable gloves, and hand-sanitising, required additional time for each voter to complete voting.

Second, the larger polling stations (catering to more than 4,400 voters) tended to have long voter queues. Third, voter turnout was not evenly spread out across voting hours despite the ELD's recommendation of voting time-bands for voters.

Finally, voters had to self-scan their identity cards to reduce contact. Due to Covid-19, ELD could not conduct roadshows to familiarise voters with the e-Registration devices. Voters' unfamiliarity with the devices led to a longer process than planned.

Many of the above issues could have been anticipated. But the ELD did not explain why it still fell short.

For example, the higher concentration of voters in the morning had always been the case in previous elections.

In the interest of their health, seniors were allocated morning time-bands in GE2020.

It could have been expected that this naturally "slowed down voter flow-through rate" but we do not know how the ELD had planned to address that.

Some premises had housed two polling stations which led to confusion and delay as to which queue one should join. The two queues had originated from a longer queue outside the polling station.

Singaporeans are used to and expect a smooth and efficient voting process.

Since 1991 when I became of age to vote, voting has been both convenient (proximity to home) and smooth (efficiency). Voting was a breeze — I was in and out of a polling station within 10 minutes.

In an ELD-commissioned survey by the government feedback unit Reach, 80 per cent of the 1,000-odd respondents voted in under 30 minutes in GE2020, while 9 per cent took 45 minutes or more to vote.

The longer one took to cast his ballot, the more one became dissatisfied with the polling process. Voter satisfaction declined sharply after 30 minutes of waiting to vote. Voter experience was also poorer at the larger polling stations due to the longer time it took to vote.

These findings elicited the ELD's pledge to learn from GE2020 and to "put them right for future elections". It acknowledged that it was "not acceptable" that three in 10 voters had less than satisfactory voting experiences and apologised for that.

The ELD plans to increase the pool of reserve manpower and equipment which can be quickly deployed. Larger polling stations will see a reduction of the number of voters.

As the proportion of seniors will increase further by then, ELD will also review logistical matters such as the availability of wheelchairs, seats, and accessibility of polling stations.

Coming two months after the election, however, the ELD statement was a missed opportunity as it could have shed more light on the findings and properly address the significant less than positive voter experience.

For instance, ELD's point that the larger polling stations should have been better resourced with more officials or e-registration devices begs the question of why this was not done.

The ELD also did not address the elephant in the room: Why the extension of time for polling was needed, and why this was announced with less than an hour to 8pm when voting was originally scheduled to end.

It was reported that about 98 per cent of Singaporeans who voted had cast their ballots by 8pm.

A special voting hour between 7pm and 8pm was originally set aside for certain groups of voters, including those on medical leave for acute respiratory infection, and those who were detected with 37.5 deg Celsius and higher body temperature.

The extension of time could have exposed voters to unnecessary risk, notwithstanding the fact that there has been no reported Covid-19 community cases arising from GE2020.

What about the welfare of the election officials who had to remain in their posts for another two hours, and which had a knock-on effect on the ballot counting?

Another concern is whether the ELD had adequate time to respond from a tried-and-tested pre-Covid-19 plan to an evolving Covid-19 situation and an unprecedented crisis.

In other words, would the voting delays be avoided had the ELD had more time to prepare for the election?

The next scheduled national election is the presidential election in September 2023. Going forward, the ELD will also have to better understand the average voter.

The ELD indicated that should voter time-band allocation be continued, fewer voters will be allocated in the morning to reduce bunching up.

But would allocated time-bands really help evenly distribute voters throughout the 12-hours of polling?

Voting time-bands work well in theory but not so in reality.

As the ELD had observed, clearing the queues in the morning was not helped as one-third of voters who cast their ballots in the morning were non-seniors.

Singaporeans prefer to fulfil their voting obligation sooner rather than later so that they could have the rest of the public holiday at their disposal.

Although the voting delays did not affect the integrity of the election and safety of Singaporeans, the ELD will also have to work doubly hard on improving the overall voting experience, going beyond mechanical efficiency measured by the “voter flow-through rate”.

Often, the voting experience is one about being herded from one stage of the voting process to another.

Much as the voting process is procedural, the substantive meaning behind each stage of the voting process cannot be ignored.

The use of signages can help in directing voters and also explain the voting process.

Despite the public health concerns, Singaporeans responded admirably given the national issues at stake in GE2020.

Almost 96 per cent of eligible local voters cast their ballots to elect their representatives into Parliament. This was the highest voter turnout since the 1997 general election.

The ELD had to review what went wrong on polling day. While the released findings offered some reasons for the overcrowding and a promise that it will improve its systems and processes, the ELD could have been more candid and critical.

And instead of ELD issuing a 1,500-word statement, it would also have been useful for ELD head Koh Siong Ling and the Returning Officer Tan Meng Dui to hold a press conference on the findings and to answer any queries the media may have on them.

This would also have the added advantage of putting a much-needed public face to ELD’s explanations, apology and reassurance.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Eugene K B Tan is associate professor at the Singapore Management University School of Law. He served as a Nominated Member of Parliament between 2012 and 2014.