# COVID-19 and Ghana's 2020 Elections

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Ghana was amongst the countries that held its national elections some months after its first cases of COVID-19 were officially announced. This meant that, by the time the polls took place on 7 December 2020, decision-makers understood the nature of the virus, how it was transmitted, and the measures needed to mitigate the risk. However, compiling a new voters' register and conducting the polls during a pandemic was still fraught with risk. How the country negotiated that risk, and the success with which it did so, is the primary focus of what follows. We also raise the larger question of whether the pandemic had any demonstrable impact on participation rates and electoral outcomes.

## Measures taken to tackle the threat from COVID-19

The larger context of COVID-19 in Africa has been addressed in the companion paper on Tanzania.[1] In contrast to some other countries, where the threat from the virus was downplayed or even denied, the response on the part of the Ghana government was to take the matter very seriously. The first confirmed cases and travel restrictions were announced on 12 March 2020. Three days later, President Nana Akufo-Addo gave a national address in which a series of measures was announced, including a ban on public gatherings - notably conferences, funerals, weddings, religious services, and political rallies - and the temporary closure of schools and universities.[2] Many of these restrictions were subsequently extended. Given that Kotoka International Airport in Accra had been the major vector for the importation of the virus,[3] arrivals were initially restricted and a two-week quarantine period was introduced before the airport was closed indefinitely from March[4] - stranding many Ghanaians in China, Europe and, North America.[5] At the same time, the government also began a series of rolling closures at the land and sea borders, which matched equivalent action taken by neighbouring countries.

On 23 March, an Executive Instrument came into effect that empowered the government to impose restrictions on public gatherings and travel to Ghana.[6] It also empowered the authorities to ensure safety in the country's crowded markets. Hence, markets across the country were closed to enable disinfection to take place, while social distancing measures were introduced for traders.[7] On 21 March, the government imposed a partial lockdown on Accra, Tema and Greater Kumasi for a period of two weeks.[8] To mitigate some of the effects on household incomes, the government absorbed the cost of water bills and subsidised electricity bills for three months. In addition, cooked foods and other essentials were distributed free of charge to market porters and street hawkers. The wearing of facemasks in public also became mandatory everywhere from June. At the same time, authorities strongly encouraged handwashing and social distancing. From an early point in the pandemic, the authorities initiated a process of contact tracing and testing that received much favourable comment internationally and appears to have been effective.[9] The regular COVID-19 update by the President and media briefings led by the Minister of Information and the Director General of Health confirmed not merely a steady rise in the number of infections, but also revealed that the virus had spread beyond Accra and Kumasi to almost all the regions by June. There had also been an increase in the number of cases amongst students after Junior High and Senior High Schools were reopened from 5 October to 14 December 2020 in order to complete the academic year. When Kotoka International Airport fully reopened in September, new measures for arriving passengers were put in place that required negative test results before departure and in situ testing on arrival.

1. Victoria Lihiru, Robert Macdonald and Thomas Molony, COVID-19 and Tanzania's 2020 Elections (2021), African Elections during the COVID-19 Pandemic project working paper, https://aecp.sps.ed.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/COVID-19-and-Tanzanias-2020-Elections.pdf

2. "President Akufo-Addo addresses the nation on measures taken by gov't to combat the Coronavirus pandemic", http://www.presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/speeches/1535-president-akufo-addo-addresses-nation-on-measures-taken-by-gov-t-to-combat-the-coronavirus-pandemic

3. https://citinewsroom.com/2020/03/coronavirus-travellers-from-countries-with-over-200-cases-wont-be-allowed-in-ghana/

4. https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-coronavirus-borders-closed-directive-will-last-2-weeks.html

5. https://www.adomonline.com/ghanaians-stranded-abroad-beg-akufo-addo/

6. "Imposition of Restrictions (Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Pandemic) Instrument, 2020", Executive Instrument 64, 23 March 2020, http://www.ilo.org/dyn/natlex/docs/ELECTRONIC/110061/136746/F1833514912/GHA110061.pdf

7. Lewis Abedi Asante and Richard Odarko Mills, "Exploring the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 pandemic in marketplaces in urban Ghana", Africa Spectrum 55 (2) 2020, pp.172-73.

8. Hagan Sibiri, David Prah and Sanusi Zankawah, "Containing the impact of COVID-19: Review of Ghana's response approach", Healthy Policy and Technology, November 2020, no page given.

9. Ibid.

In the early phase of the pandemic, these measures appeared to have given the authorities a handle over the spread of the virus, and in a manner not seen in many wealthier countries – although this clearly needs to be seen in the context of relatively low levels of infection. However, certain pressures made it difficult for the Ghana government to remain on the same track. Although there was a clear concentration of cases in the main cities, it was politically inexpedient to prolong the lockdown. Moreover, the regular updates on the number of new cases threatened to backfire because the rising numbers through to August could be used to make the political argument that the government did not have the situation under control. This was precisely the time when the level of proactive testing and tracing was scaled back. The total number of people per head of population that were tested declined from 0.12 per thousand at the end of July to 0.04 in mid-October – whereas the trajectory of neighbouring Togo, for example, was in the opposite direction.[10] The Ministry of Health's own data indicates that contact tracing became considerably less significant, relative to routine testing, in the identification of new cases over July and August (see Table 1).[11] Part of the reason may be that once the virus had spread across the country, a law of diminishing returns had set in, and contract tracing became less strategically significant when attempting to curb the spread. In addition, there was mixed messaging at the peak of the crisis. In particular, there were discrepancies between data on the Ghana Health Service website and the figures that were announced publicly – which fuelled media speculation about the accuracy of what existed in the public domain.

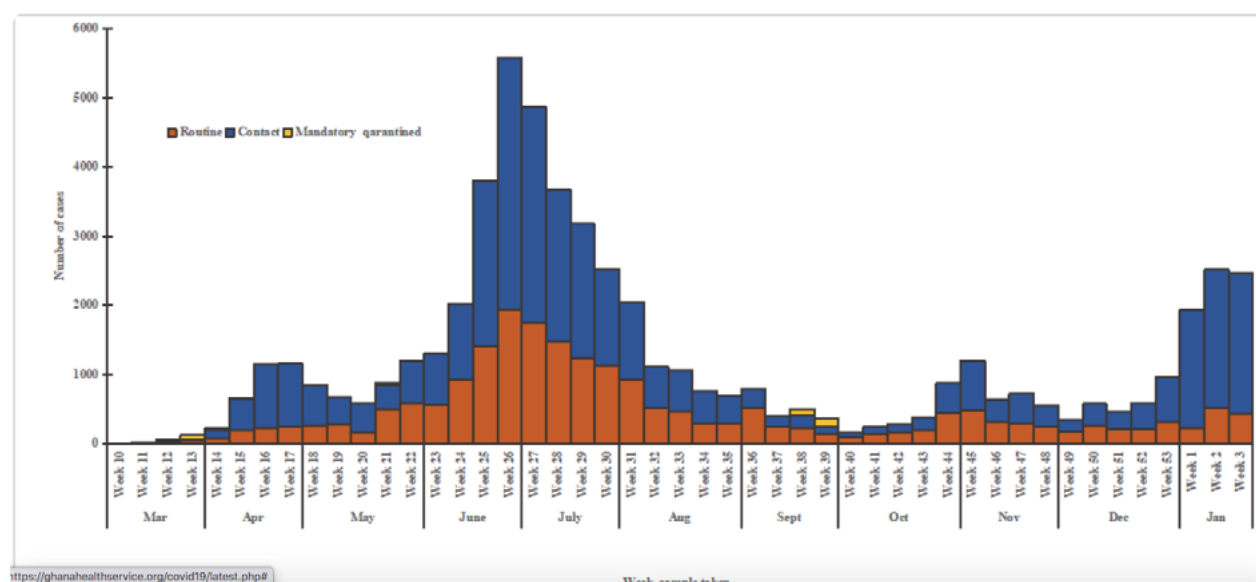**Distribution of COVID-19 cases by samples taken, March 2020 - January 2021**



**Table 1 — Source:** https://ghanahealthservice.org/covid19/latest.php#, **accessed 29 January 2021**

The government continued to keep the public informed through media briefings and regular updates to the Ghana Health Service website. However, Akufo-Addo became somewhat less visible in updating the nation on the pandemic as the country moved closer to the election. In the three months between mid-March and 14 June, the President gave a total of 11 COVID-19 updates. In the subsequent four months to 18 October, this slowed to an additional 7 updates. On the latter occasion, Akufo-Addo struck a cautiously optimistic note, stating that Ghana seemed to have successfully avoided the pressures affecting other countries:

> When you take a close look at the measures some other countries are having to take, including imposing night-time curfews and partial lockdowns, declaring state of emergencies, limiting the numbers of people permitted at public gatherings, and mandatorily fining persons for not wearing masks, all in the bid to contain the second wave of the virus, we, in Ghana, have been spared all these developments and restrictions. We must, thus, be doing something right.[12]

Akufo-Addo's initial handling of the situation served to burnish his public image as a hands-on leader. But as the election

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10.  https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-testing#the-scale-of-testing-compared-to-the-scale-of-the-outbreak

11.  Airport testing was classified as mandatory and became effective from 21 March.
     See https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-coronavirus-borders-closed-directive-will-last-2-weeks.html

12.  "Update No 18: Measures taken to combat spread of Coronavirus", 18 October 2020, https://www.presidency.gov.gh/index.php/briefing-room/speeches/1756-update-no-18-measures-taken-to-combat-spread-of-coronavirus

campaigns picked up, it seemed important for the remainder of the coronavirus communiqués to emphasize the government's success in fulfilling its 2016 campaign promises with respect to free secondary school education and the completion of infrastructure projects. The perception was that the government had become less strident on the need to enforce mitigation measures, perhaps due to sensitivity to the public mood. Meanwhile, amongst the public at large, the customary handshake was generally replaced by the elbow-bump, but it was widely noted that social distancing and wearing of facemasks was more honoured in the breach than in the observance. The fact that members of the public had come to weigh up levels of 'acceptable risk' made some worry that, with an election looming, the country was sleepwalking into a serious public health crisis.

As part of this research project, a nationally-representative opinion survey was conducted which sheds some light on public perceptions in the run-up to the polls.[13] Table 2 reveals that as many as 87.0% of respondents considered that the country had done well or very well in fighting COVID-19. Secondly, most informants rated COVID-19 as a rather marginal health issue in their communities. Predictably, malaria (69.0%) was considered by far the greatest threat. COVID-19 was listed by only 2.0% of respondents as amongst the top three challenges in their area, somewhat behind heart disease and stroke (3.4%), diabetes (3.0%) and cholera (2.6%). Yet as a directly transmittable disease, COVID-19 remained the dominant threat next to cholera. Strikingly, Table 3 indicates that 87.0% of respondents felt concerned or very concerned about themselves or a member of the household contracting COVID-19, even if only 0.46% believed that someone in their household had actually done so. These findings suggest that the population remained conscious of the fact that COVID-19 was a reality, even if infection rates seemed to be low and mortality even lower.
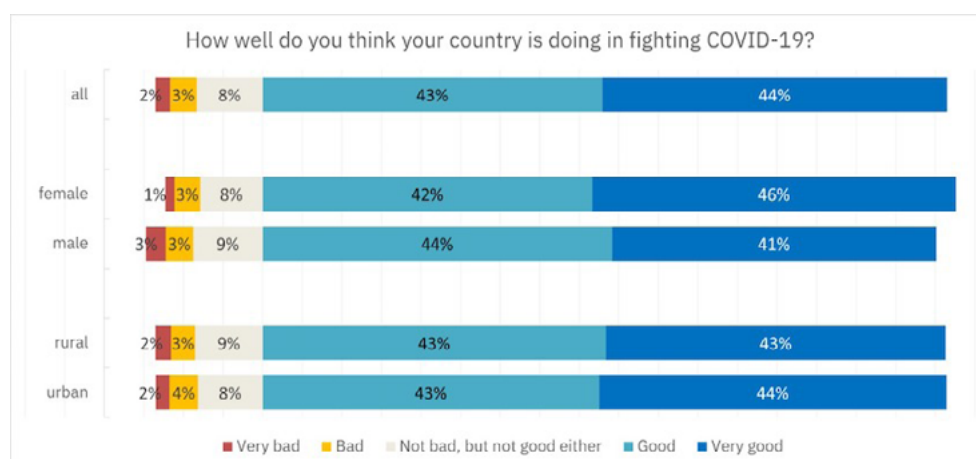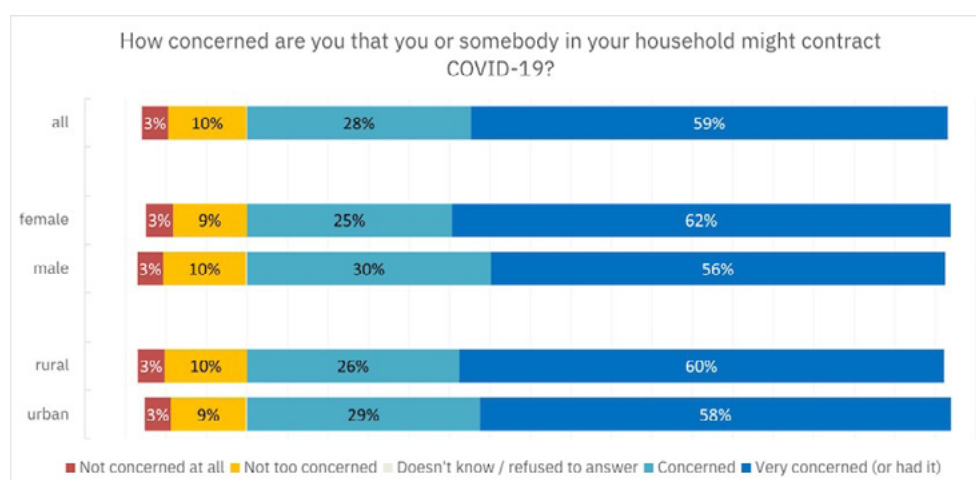


**Table 2**



**Table 3**

## The Electoral Commission, voter registration and preparation for the 2020 polls

As early as April, there had already been considerable discussion over the airwaves and on social media regarding the constitutional possibility of postponing the elections in the light of the rising number of cases.[14] However, neither the political parties nor the Electoral Commission (EC) felt there was a pressing need to do so. Indeed, although the country already had a voter roll compiled, the EC announced its intention to conduct a fresh voter registration exercise in advance of the 2020 polls. The grounds for doing so were that the existing register contained the names of many who ought not to have been eligible. ID cards or birth certificates were now deemed ineligible documents for registration, whereas the Ghana Card – the country's national ID card that was still in the process of being rolled out[15] – or a passport were deemed sufficient. This was later amended to enable those with neither document to register, provided they could produce two guarantors. Some cast doubt on the claim that the existing register was bloated.[16] Others pointed to the logical inconsistency of refusing birth certificates that remained a valid document for the acquisition of a passport.[17] Many also doubted whether there would be sufficient time to complete the registration exercise without incurring a serious risk of spreading the virus.[18] While the opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) opposed the registration exercise on the grounds that it was a calculated effort to disenfranchise many voters, the incumbent New Patriotic Party (NPP) supported the EC position that it was necessary to ensure a credible election.

The registration exercise was carried out between 30 June and 9 August. The total number of registered voters actually increased substantially: by the end, there were 17,027,641 registered voters by comparison with 15,712,499 in 2016.[19] This allayed initial fears that the pandemic would have a negative effect on registration turnout. It also casts doubt on the allegations of a bloated register, although high turnout also reflected the decision of the NDC to urge people to register in its strongholds once its attempt to block the registration exercise failed. The early phases of registration were closely covered in the media, which reported that there was minimal respect for social distancing and use of face coverings in areas where large numbers of people turned up to register at the same time. The EC insisted that it was doing its best to avoid the spread of COVID-19 and announced a series of new measures to contain the virus. This included queue management strategies such as the use of chits to cut down on the number of people who visited the registration centres at the same time.[20] It later announced the introduction of a digital queue management system in a few constituencies in Greater Accra to address overcrowding and prolonged congestion in registration centres.[21] Finally, the EC made it possible for people to use a short messaging code system on their phones and to check the final register online in order to verify that their names were included[22] – thereby obviating the need to turn up in person. Nevertheless, reports by the Coalition for Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) highlighted various breaches of COVID-19 protocols, especially non-enforcement of social distancing and hand washing at the registration centres.[23] EC officials were expected to clean and sanitize the biometric devices after each registration, but this was not fully adhered to.[24]

14. Christopher Nyinevi, "Ghana, COVID-19, Election 2020 and matters arising", the Ghana Law Hub, 18 April 2020, https://ghanalawhub.com/ghana-covid-19-election-2020-and-constitutional-matters-arising/
Kojo Pumpuni Asante, "The Covid-19 pandemic and its implications for the conduct of the 2020 elections in Ghana", 14 April 20202, https://www.myjoyonline.com/the-covid-19-pandemic-and-its-implications-for-the-conduct-of-the-2020-elections-in-ghana/

15. The National Identification Authority won a legal case that permitted to continue registrations for the Ghana Card over March and April. See https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/general-news/ghana-news-court-gives-nia-green-light-to-continue-with-mass-ghana-card-registration.html

16. B.B. Simons, "Verdict: Ghana's voter register can't be bloated. This is why", https://imaniafrica.org/2020/05/16/verdict-ghanas-voter-register-cant-be-bloated-this-is-why-imanis-b-b-simons/

17. Isaac Haruna Ziaba,"Can Ghana's Electoral Commission compile a 'credible' register?", http://democracyinafrica.org/can-ghanas-electoral-commission-compile-credible-voters-register/

18. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20200611075028349

19. https://www.facebook.com/ECGOVGH/posts/3648055895255993

20. https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/voter-registration-ec-introduces-chits-for-queue-management.html

21. https://www.myjoyonline.com/ec-introduces-digital-queue-management-system-to-reduce-congestion-at-registration-centres/

22. https://www.graphic.com.gh/news/politics/ec-introduces-short-code-for-voter-verification.html

23. See CODEO's statement on the 2020 biometric voter registration exercise https://codeoghana.org/assets/downloadables/CODEO%20BVR%20Phase%20One%20Observation%20Report-FV.pdf

24. CODEO 'preliminary report (II) on the ongoing biometric voter registration exercise by the Electoral Commission' https://codeoghana.org/assets/downloadables/CODEO%20BVR%20Phase%20One%20Observation%20Report-FV.pdf

The coincidence between the timing of the registration exercise and the trajectory of infections is striking. When taking account of the time-lag between COVID-19 infection and the manifestation of symptoms, one would have expected any impact from the registration exercise to have become manifest by the end of the first week of July. Between 30 June and 9 July, the seven-day average of new cases surged from 453 to 761. This fell back to 380 in the week of 16 July, for reasons that are not entirely clear,[25] before reaching a new peak of 782 on 30 July at a time when registration was in full swing.[26] With many voters returning to their home towns to register, it is possible that the registration played a part in the spike of new COVID-19 cases – especially as the number of instances in the regions beyond the main cities was increasing. However, it also has to be recognized that infections were already on the rise from late May anyway. Amongst Ghana's neighbours, Nigeria, Benin and Côte d'Ivoire exhibited a similar pattern, but in the latter case the slightly earlier spike in June coincided with that country's own voter registration exercise in advance of the October polls. Coming to a firmer conclusion would involve mapping the pattern of infections in Ghana's regions to where registration was taking place at a particular time. But at this stage, it seems reasonable to suppose that the exercise was at least a contributing factor.



## Daily new confirmed COVID-19 cases
Shown is the rolling 7-day average. The number of confirmed cases is lower than the number of actual cases; the main reason for that is limited testing.
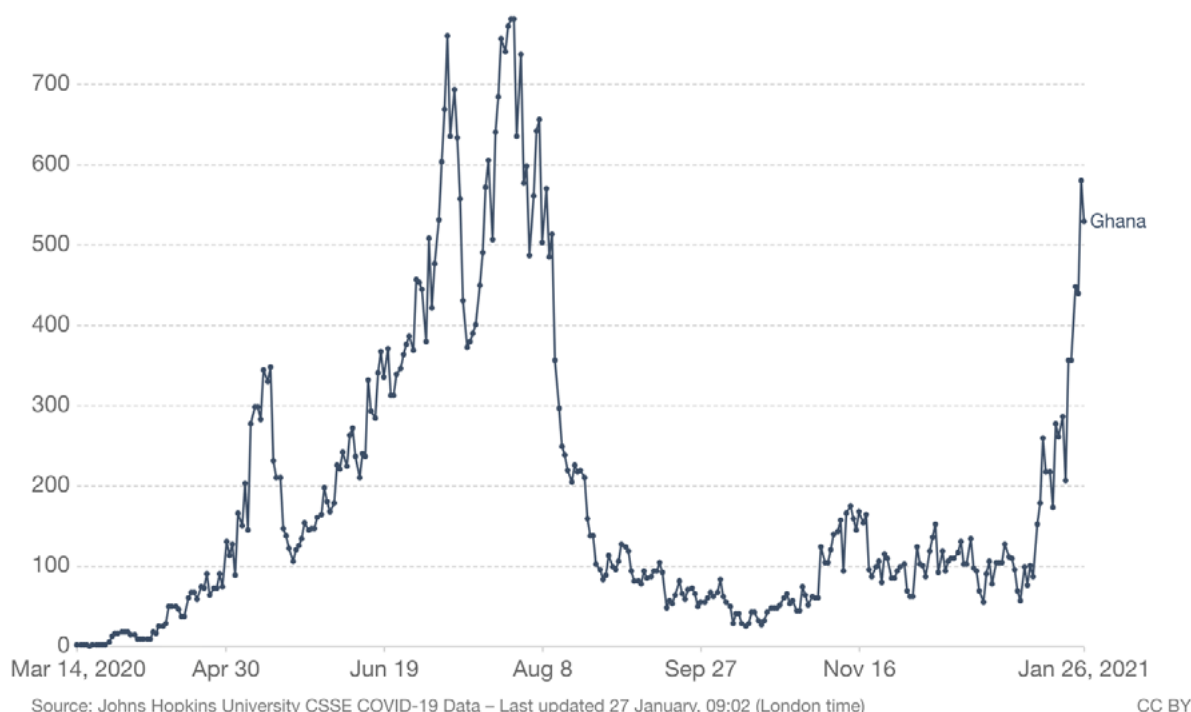
Source: Johns Hopkins University CSSE COVID-19 Data – Last updated 27 January, 09:02 (London time) CC BY

**Table 4**

Following expressions of concern about what had transpired during the registration exercise, the EC promised to ensure that the elections themselves would be held in such a manner as to safeguard the safety of voters. In order to reduce the pressure, the EC introduced 5,357 new polling stations compared to the 2016 elections, which were spread across 275 constituencies. The maximum number of voters per polling station was fixed at 700 and, where that number was exceeded, the principle was that the station would be split into two - an 'A' and 'B' located at some distance from one another.[27] In addition, the EC indicated in September that it would train 'COVID ambassadors' to ensure that the COVID-19 protocols were respected. These included the enforcement of social distancing in queues, the temperature testing of everyone entering the voting area, the insistence on wearing facemasks, the application of sanitizer and the regular cleaning of biometric verification devices. At the district level, the EC was expected to educate its own electoral officers on what was required. Strikingly, the messages about what the public needed to do to remain safe were divorced from the messaging

25. There had been some reduction in testing at that time.
26. https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/ghana?country=~GHA
27. Dr. Bossman Asare, deputy chair of EC, quoted in "EC to appoint COVID-10 ambassadors for polling stations on election day", http://www.faapa.info/en/2020/09/23/ec-to-appoint-covid-19-ambassadors-for-polling-stations-on-election-day/

about the voting process. In an unconscious manner, Figure 1 points to multiple points of contact between voters, materials and officials – with not a rubber glove or a bottle of sanitizer in sight. The reason may be that the EC did not have a public health mandate. However, it would have made much more sense to have dealt with voting and COVID-avoidance in a holistic fashion. The National Commission for Civic Education (NCCE) would ideally have played a very prominent role in linking public health messaging to voter education, but its underfunding over many years made it a rather minor partner.



**Figure 1: EC voter education**

Finally, a threat that the EC had no mandate to address was the movement of voters back to their home constituencies on the weekend before polling day. Travellers were expected to wear facemasks, but COVID-19 protocols were practically impossible to enforce as crowded vehicles made their way across the country.

## Campaigning during a pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably had a significant impact on how the political parties disseminated their messages. In past elections, the parties went to the main regional centres to stage rallies, which typically grew in size as polling day approached. However, the parties had increasingly turned to alternative ways of reaching voters. Health walks and so-called 'door to door campaigning' (in practice something much looser than the term implies) had become commonplace for at least a decade before these elections. Once restrictions were placed on campaign rallies, the parties adjusted their focus towards activities that were less likely to invove large crowds. However, in close settled areas, these participatory strategies arguably had as much potential to spread the virus, especially when those involved were neither socially distancing nor wearing masks. The health walks, which were mostly led by party officials, were not regulated to ensure conformity with the COVID-19 rules. Politicians contributed to a culture of non-compliance by campaigning without facemasks, and in one case, being out in public despite having tested positive. In the run-up to the polls, the visitations of presidential and vice-presidential candidates to constituencies inevitably attracted larger crowds that generally disregarded COVID-19 protocols.

## Observation of mitigation measures on election day

It is worth summarizing the specific stages that a voter was expected to negotiate having arrived at the polling station. (1) they would be required to join a queue while respecting social distancing (2) they would be invited to wash their hands at a Veronica bucket filled with soapy water or with water and soap in tandem - whether before joining the queue or at some later

point (3) the voter would have their temperature taken and would either be allowed to proceed or directed to a separate area to await further attention (4) hand sanitizer would be applied, either before or after the temperature was checked (5) the voter would present the voter identification card which would be checked against a manual register and ticked off (6) the card would be checked against a photographic register and a record taken with the biometric verification device (7) the voter would be requested to place their right forefinger on the biometric verification device (8) if that proceeded without any problem, the voter would place the small finger of the right hand in a pot of ink to signal that they had voted (9) the voter would collect a ballot paper for the Presidential election and proceed to place a thumb print next to the choice of candidate and then to drop this in the ballot box. This was then repeated for the Parliamentary election (10) the voter would exit the voting area. At the close of polls, the returning officer would cordon off the area, sort out the ballot papers for each candidate in the presence of party agents, and then the vote count would begin in full public view. The result for the polling station would then be announced and party agents would be asked to sign the result declaration form. At this point, the ballot box and the forms would be transported to the collation centre where all the results from the individual polling stations would be totalled in the presence of party representatives. Throughout this process, there was a danger of voters coming into close contact with officials and each other, and risks associated with handling materials in the polling area. The use of facemasks and rubber gloves by EC officials was therefore essential. There were particular risks when electoral officials were required to steer elderly and infirm voters through the process. The most obvious potential vector for COVID-19 transmission was the biometric device that would be touched by hundreds of people over the course of the day.

In the context of the pandemic, the presence of international observers was limited, but the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO) was present and visible in most polling stations.[28] The attention of observers and the media was understandably mainly focused on the integrity of the electoral process rather than on whether COVID-19 mitigation protocols were being observed. However, CODEO also paid close attention to the issue and, in its report of 8 December, it confirmed that the EC had fulfilled its pledge to supply the polling stations with the necessary materials.[29] Of those polling stations that were assessed, the following items were available at the opening of the polls: 95% had temperature guns, 94% had soap and water, 93% had hand sanitizer and 78% had wipes for the biometric devices. Less than 1% of polling stations lacked all these materials. During voting, CODEO found that social distancing was strictly observed in 74.3% and that facemasks were worn at only 54.8% of polling stations. Handwashing was observed in 93.8% of stations. CODEO observers appear not to have focused specifically on cleaning of the biometric devices

Two members of the project team who had EC accreditation as observers were able to visit a number of polling stations and to monitor adherence to the protocols. Their findings broadly confirm those of CODEO, but with greater granularity. Thomas Molony visited 44 polling stations, covering 8 of the 36 constituencies in the Greater Accra Region.[30] Paul Nugent devoted his time to close observation of 10 polling stations, 8 of which were located in the Ketu South constituency in Volta Region and two in Greater Accra. On polling day, the following was observed:

In Accra, the **facemask** requirement was strictly enforced by EC staff and security officers who monitored those queueing to vote. People without masks were either turned away or directed to nearby vendors – confirming CODEO observations. In a few locations, such as at a multi-station polling centre in Ablekuma North, party agents supplied unused surgical masks to those voters who would otherwise have been turned away because they were without a facemask. However, in one very busy polling station close to the Aflao border, very few people were wearing masks and there was no attempt to enforce distancing rules in the queue. While voters generally wore their face coverings correctly for the short period of time that they

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28. CODEO deployed around 4,000 and the Institute for Democratic Goverance (IDEG) another 700 observers. A European Election Observation Mission deployed 40 long-term observers, and was able to draw on embassies for an additional 40 observers on election day. https://eeas.europa.eu/election-observation-missions/eom-ghana-2020/88509/eu-deploys-election-observation-mission-ghana_en. The African Union was only able to deploy 21 short-term observers https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20201209/preliminary-statement-au-election-observation-mission-presidential-and. Finally, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) despatched 125 observers two days before the election https://www.ecowas.int/ecowas-deploys-125-election-observers-for-presidential-parliamentary-elections-in-ghana/

29. https://codeoghana.org/assets/downloadables/CODEO%20Mid-day%20Press%20Release%20on%202020%20Elections_07dec_2020%20FINAL-FINAL_without%20image%20(1).pdf

30. Constituencies were visited by Molony in the following order: Klottey Korle (1 polling station), Odododiodioo (6), Dade Kotopon (6), Ayawaso East (3), Ayawaso North (5), Ablekuma Central (6), Ablekuma North (10), and Okaikwei Central (7). Close of polls was observed in Ayawaso East, and the count (and collation) in Ayawaso North. Nugent observed the vote in Ketu South and returned in advance of close of polls to observe a polling station in Trobu and another in Ayawaso West Wuguon.

**Image 1: Crowded polling station Mamprobi Salaga, Accra**


**Image 2: Crowded polling station, Aflao**

were in the polling station, as the day progressed and the temperature rose, many polling station personnel allowed their masks to slip down from their noses and/or mouths, or removed them completely. The voter identification process did not require voters to remove their facemasks. In the few cases where voters' identities could not be verified, individuals were required to remove their mask while the operator sought to identify them using a camera on the biometric device. This process was carried out at arm's length, and the operator's mouth was covered by a facemask.


**Image 3: Social distancing at polling station, Accra**

**Handwashing** was well-enforced prior to voters being allowed to enter the polling stations and handle materials. Voters were directed to Veronica buckets, although these were sometimes placed at distance from the queues and were not always used. There was greater attention to the application of hand sanitizer at the point of entry to the voting area, immediately before voter registration cards were accepted.

**Temperature checks** were conducted, although this was less rigorously enforced than mask-wearing and handwashing. Generally, polling centres with one entry point were better able to enforce these protocols, since an official could more methodically check that all voters queueing to enter were wearing masks, and, at the same time, the temperature check could be conducted. In open polling centres, where a single point of entry to the various polling stations was more difficult to regulate, the temperature check was often left to the individual polling stations. We observed three cases where, as the day proceeded and as staff took breaks and covered for each other, the temperature gun was left aside and voters' temperatures were not taken. Those staff whose primary responsibility was to check temperatures tended to have an excellent knowledge of the gun's function and purpose and could explain how the device indicated whether a voter could proceed into the polling centre/station or remain outside. Of the 44 polling stations visited by Molony in Accra, only one operative reported having come across a voter whose temperature was in the amber or red range.[31] We only encountered two instances in which temperature gun operatives were failing to perform their role. In both these cases, the operative began to use the device to check

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31. In this case, the operative asked the person to sit in the shade for a while and drink some water. When tested a second time, their temperature had dropped to the acceptable temperature. The EC regards a high temperature as one detected to be above 37.8 degrees Celsius.

temperatures only when the researcher asked about its use. One operative could not explain what the numbers or associated colours on the gun indicated, while the other allowed voters to enter the polling station after pretending to perform temperature checks with a device that was incapable of working because no batteries had been installed.


Image 4: Temperature checking, Accra


Image 5: Handwashing, Accra


Image 6: Sanitiser, handwashing and temperature testing, Aflao

At no point in Accra was **cleaning of the fingerprint scanner on the biometric device** observed. This was despite earlier assurances from the EC's regional director for Greater Accra that cleaning would take place "before and after capturing fingerprint of voters with either alcohol-based wipes, disinfectant wipes or ammonia-based glass cleaner wipes".[32] None of these materials were observed being used on the fingerprint scanner. In Ketu South, the use of a cloth was observed at one polling station, but without any cleaning liquid applied to it. One possible explanation for not cleaning the fingerprint scanner is a fear of liquid damage to the biometric device. However, the paper tissue (used to absorb the indelible ink) and the small, black dry cleaning cloth (similar to that used on spectacles, and supplied with the biometric device) were not routinely used. In effect, therefore, every person who voted had had contact with exactly the same uncleaned surface area as all other previous voters at the same polling station.

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32. https://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/regional/Election-2020-Strict-coronavirus-protocols-will-be-observed-EC-1116905.

In Accra, very few polling station staff were observed wearing the supplied protective rubber gloves, while in Ketu South around half of them were doing so. Some polling staff clearly regarded it as too hot to be wearing gloves all day. In Accra, gloves were never observed being worn by the polling clerk operating the biometric device. The latter frequently held a voter's finger and pressed it onto the glass pane of the fingerprint scanner to ensure that the scan was captured. The same polling clerk also had the job of then directing the voters to place their index fingers in the indelible inkpot and to guide them to use the absorbent paper tissue to prevent the ink from dripping. At times, the clerk also physically held the voter's finger or hand during this procedure. When polling station staff were asked about these unprotected points of physical contact – each voter's finger touching the scanner that was not then cleaned, and voters' fingers or hands often needing to be held and guided – they generally explained that there was no risk of infection or cross-contamination because each voter's hands had been sanitised upon entry to the polling station. There is a logic to this argument, but it does rely on effective hand-cleaning.

**Social distancing** was seen to be better observed when voters were within the bounds of the polling stations than when they were in the initial queue to enter the polling centre/station. There was minimal congestion when voters moved from receiving their ballots, to marking and then casting them. After voting and leaving the polling station, voters also tended to leave the immediate surroundings, thereby reducing congestion. Polling staff and party agents were in particularly close proximity during the close of voting and when the ballots and registers were prepared for the count. At this point the general public gradually congregated outside the bounds of the polling station, where no social distancing measures were followed, and few masks were worn.



**Image 7: The count, New Town, Accra**

In sum, it would appear that the EC's protocols were broadly observed but that there were some lapses. The hand sanitizer was the main line of defence against physical transmission, while the biometric device represented the most significant threat. In only one polling station did the researchers observe the worst-case scenario where the sanitizer was not applied, the device was not cleaned, and many of the staff were not wearing gloves. It is somewhat ironic that voters' adherence to the COVID-19 protocols was at times better than that of the polling officials enforcing them. This is perhaps understandable since voters spent an average of five minutes in the polling station,[33] while polling officials had to follow the protocols from around 05.00 on 7 December until at least the early hours of 8 December. Wearing facemasks and rubber gloves for this entire period – often in the sun – takes a certain resilience.

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33. For each polling station, a voter was timed from their temperature being measured until their departure.

## The impact on outcomes

We also wish to consider the various ways in which the pandemic might have affected electoral outcomes. In some countries, incumbent regimes have been able to instrumentalise COVID-19 by restricting campaigning, ostensibly on public health grounds. For instance, the Electoral Commission of Uganda banned campaigning in about 10 districts, including Kampala, citing fear of spreading COVID-19, while President Yoweri Museveni was able to campaign in those areas under the guise of launching government projects.[34] President Idriss Déby of Chad completed his election campaign and then prevented the opposition from doing the same by immediately imposing a strict lockdown.[35] In Ghana, as elsewhere, there was also a chance that vulnerable groups, such as those with underlying health conditions, would feel less inclined to participate given the attendant risks. Finally, the possibility existed that lower turnout rates would have an impact on the final results – typically where opposition parties score well in urban areas, where the virus also happens to be more prevalent.

While the race between the NPP and the NDC was especially tight, we found little evidence from Ghana that the outcome was affected by COVID-19 in any significant way. The NDC claimed that the continuing closure of the land borders during registration and on polling day itself was intended to reduce the number of votes in its core areas.[36] In the Volta Region, the deployment of the military to patrol the borders was a source of particular grievance, as interviews in Ketu South confirmed. On polling day, the concerns that there would be a heavy military presence that might intimidate voters proved to be unfounded. It would appear that the outcry during the registration process led the authorities to exercise restraint, and the election passed off without major issues in the Volta and Oti Regions. Across the country, the NPP probably derived some benefit from a perception of having responded effectively to the crisis. However, the pre-election survey indicated that only 14.03% of respondents ranked health as their top priority in shaping their choice – well behind employment (31.48%) and education (23.02%). The main advantage for the NPP resided in being able to time infrastructure projects to come to fruition just before the election. The incumbent also enjoyed better media access and commanded the financial resources to erect large billboards along the main roads – although their efficacy has yet to be established. Interestingly, few of the billboards referred to Akufo-Addo's role in fighting COVID-19.

The pre-election survey indicated that the vast majority of respondents intended to vote and that there was an expectation that, if anything, women were more likely to cast their ballot.[37] The survey also suggested that most people did not have serious concerns about the safety of the voting process – although, unfortunately, a question about biometric devices was accidentally omitted during the survey. The final declared results demonstrate that there was, in fact, a significant increase in turnout across the country. In 2016, voter turnout was 68.6%,[38] but in 2020 this rose to 79.0%.[39] This confirms that voters were not deterred from casting their ballots in the midst of the pandemic. There was significant variation from one region to the next, but there is no clear urban-rural pattern. The turnout in Greater Accra was significantly lower than in some other regions, which may have worked to the disadvantage of the NDC,[40] but this might simply reflect disillusionment with the main parties more than concerns about COVID-19. In general, therefore, the pandemic does not seem to have had a major impact on participation or the electoral outcome.

## The elections and COVID-19 transmission

As indicated above, there was a spike in reported COVID-19 cases during the registration exercise. Immediately after the elections themselves, the number of cases remained low. However, it increased very rapidly in early 2021, bringing the

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34. https://www.africa-confidential.com/article/id/13208/Iron_fist_carries_the_day
35. Patrick Smith http://www.cas.ed.ac.uk/events/seminar_series/2020_2021/africa_in_2021_covid,_climate_and_democracy2.
36. https://citinewsroom.com/2020/06/minority-demands-withdrawal-of-soldiers-from-ndc-strongholds-ahead-of-voter-registration/
37. 61.4% of respondents (59.6% of men and 63.1% of women) believed women were more likely to vote.
38. https://twitter.com/ECGhanaOfficial/status/807332823841513473
39. https://www.ec.gov.gh/summary-of-the-2020-presidential-election-results-without-techiman-south-constituency-results/
40. This is based on the swing from NPP to NDC in Greater Accra. However, the relatively low turnout may reflect the failure of natural NPP voters to participate. On that basis, a higher turnout might have benefited NPP. The same logics were apparent in Volta Region in 2016.

country back to the peak levels of early August 2020 by the end of January (Table 3). By that point, Ghana was experiencing the second wave that Akufo-Addo believed the country had averted. It might appear difficult to attribute the new spike in cases to the elections themselves given the time-lag. However, it is worth bearing in mind that significant numbers of Ghanaians returned to their home areas to vote on 7 December, then returned to the cities before returning home again for the Christmas holiday period. If we see December as a month when Ghanaians are more than ordinarily mobile – with elections providing part of the reason for that reality – then it is reasonable to suppose that the polls played some part in the increasing transmission. Equally, if there had been a run-off on 28 December, the picture might have looked considerably worse. As it happened, the EC declared NPP the winner, and a further round of voting was avoided. Nevertheless, the aftermath of elections was marked by victory celebrations on the part of NPP loyalists and a series of rolling demonstrations by NDC supporters across the regions, stretching from 9 December through to the first week of January 2021. Given that a more virulent strain of COVID-19 was said to be in the country by that time, the staging of such mass events without the observance of COVID-19 protocols may have played their own part in the second wave at the start of 2021.

## Lessons learned

Finally, given that this is the first time that many countries across Africa have had to schedule elections during a pandemic, we wish to distil some broad lessons for other countries with elections in sight:

### 1. The importance of sustained public education.

From the start, the Ghanaian government was pro-active in disseminating information about how COVID-19 was transmitted and why the protocols needed to be applied and observed. Information fatigue is probably greater when it comes from a single source. In Ghana, private radio and television stations were important in their own right and were proactive in scheduling programmes to educate the public on COVID-19 prevention. This underlines the benefits of government engaging with the media, civil society, and traditional authorities (where relevant) and exchanging information, with a view to enhancing the quality and reach of public education. In Ghana, there was there was a divorce between the public health messaging and the voter information delivered by the EC. That could have been resolved through a more holistic approach, uniting the health, civic education and electoral bodies.

### 2. The need to gather and disseminate good data.

The government initially made considerable strides with contact tracing and testing. However, the resources needed to keep the operations rolling once COVID-19 spread beyond the main cities were too great. This inevitably meant that the quality of the data suffered, and the spread of the virus was probably underestimated as a consequence of reduced testing. However, despite some mixed messaging, the Ministry of Health provided readily accessible information that kept the general public and relevant decision-makers abreast of the situation. This is something positive that other countries can learn from, assuming the data is consistent and robust. However, given the chances that a health crisis can easily be politicised during an election year, it is recommended that institutions that are independent of the government machinery take the lead.

### 3. The need to take voter mobility seriously.

Regardless of the political arguments, it was risky to conduct a nationwide registration exercise and possibly two rounds of polling, all within six months. Even if the EC had fully enforced their protocols at the polling stations, the movement of significant numbers of people back and forth between their places of origin and where they normally lived remained a real risk. The voter registration exercise, whose necessity was in question, may have contributed to the mounting rate of infections in July and August 2020. Although it is not possible to prove a causal link based on the current data, it is plausible to suggest that a combination of mobile voters and campaigning by candidates across the country played some part in the second wave of 2021. This was compounded by the contentious aftermath of the polls when mass gatherings were held at a time when a more virulent strain of the virus was in the country.

### 4. Impartial and consistent enforcement of COVID-19 prevention protocols.

This is key to ensuring public trust in government messaging and compliance with the protocols. In Ghana, public

compliance, with respect to the wearing of facemasks, handwashing and physical distancing declined following the end of the partial urban lockdown. It was noticeably absent in the run-up to the polls, and immediately after the elections when large crowds gathered. While strict and consistent enforcement is likely to stifle some political activities, it ensures consistency and commitment of the government in the fight against the virus. It also reinforces the public education messages (Point 1).

## 5. The importance of the electoral management body.

The Ghana experience shows that it is possible to hold an election in the middle of a pandemic provided the election management body is well-resourced and works closely with the public health authorities, the political parties, and other actors to train officials and educate the voting public. It is essential to adopt measures well in advance to prevent overcrowding, such as the creation of additional polling stations and the crafting of strategies to manage queues. The use of mobile phone technologies to enable members of the public to check the register is also replicable elsewhere. The Ghana case demonstrates the importance of enforcing COVID-19 protocols at every stage of the voting process. On election day, handwashing and the application of hand sanitizer was the norm and reduced the risk of transmission. However, the weak link was the biometric devices. It would appear that these were not cleaned routinely and in a manner that would have effectively prevented transmission of the virus via the devices. It is worth underlining that these are not a substitute for manual registers and therefore do not reduce physical contact. Moreover, they are touched by all voters, as well as by electoral officers, which makes them potentially a powerful vector for transmission. For countries contemplating using such devices as an aid to voter verification, the importance of marshalling the resources to equip all polling stations with sanitizers cannot be overemphasized. This needs to be adequately budgeted for, and delivery should be factored into the logistics. Thought also needs to be given to how electoral officers can protect themselves and the voting public. Wearing rubber gloves and masks under conditions of extreme heat is difficult to enforce. Many of the breaches at polling stations in Ghana came from officials who placed their trust in the sanitizers and took a gamble.

## Acknowledgements