

## Voter Experiences during Bougainville's 2019 Independence Referendum

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In Brief 2020/30

This In Brief sets out the results of the independence referendum in Bougainville, held between 23 November and 7 December 2019, and presents the findings of research undertaken on a range of administrative irregularities and problems that affected voter participation in what has generally been accepted to have been a successful referendum. Primary data for the research was collected through interviews with Bougainville Referendum Commission (BRC) officials, scrutineers, polling officials, police officers and observers.<sup>1</sup> Secondary data was collected through mass media, radio broadcasts, Facebook and other online sources.

### Referendum results

The referendum vote was conducted in a total of 829 polling locations, 796 of which were in Bougainville and 29 in Papua New Guinea (PNG).<sup>2</sup> There were two polling places each in the Solomon Islands (Gizo and Honiara) and Australia (Cairns and Brisbane). Around 2000 polling officials worked on the ballot with an estimated 750 scrutineers. Of the scrutineers, 81 were official – the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG) assigned 60, of which 38 were deployed across all PNG provinces with the exception of Southern Highlands and Gulf Provinces. The 21 PNG government scrutineers were deployed in Bougainville. The remainder of the scrutineers came from other stakeholders including veterans and communities in urban centres of PNG provinces.

There were a significant number of local and international observer groups. According to the Commonwealth Observer Group, the referendum was [credible, transparent and inclusive](#). Their assessment derived from observations of the high voter turnout at 87.4 per cent (12.6 per cent of whom were first timer voters), the fair gender participation (105,411 men and 101,215 women) and the inclusion of those with disabilities. Bertie Ahern, the BRC chairman, while thanking stakeholders, also said that the referendum was [successful and credible](#).

Overall, of the 206,731 enrolled eligible voters, 181,067 (87.4%) cast their votes and 25,664 (12.4%) did not vote. Of the total registered voters, 176,928 (97.71%) voted for

independence while 3043 (1.68%) voted for greater autonomy and 1096 (0.6%) were informal votes. The number of provisional votes was 10,429 and of these, 7528 were admitted for counting while 2901 were rejected.<sup>3</sup>

Security of ballot boxes was provided jointly by the Bougainville Police Service and the RPNGC (PNG police), under the leadership of New Zealand police, to ensure there was no tampering with ballots. Assistant returning officers (AROs), together with scrutineers, reconciled seal numbers with the corresponding numbers on the ballot boxes to confirm that they had not been opened and/or tampered with. All 249 ballot boxes were verified. None were disputed or rejected (Interviewee 1).

### Factors affecting voter participation

There were many logistical factors that prevented voter participation. The first example was where Bougainvilleans living in rural areas in PNG (for example, teachers and health workers) could not get to polling locations due to lack of communication and/or transport-related problems, so they did not cast their votes. There was also an incident where the Jiwaka Province ARO conducted polling on Saturday 23 November 2019 instead of Monday 25 November and Tuesday 26 November 2019, the gazetted dates, so those who planned to come on the gazetted dates missed out (Interviewee 2).

Whilst major improvements in voter registration were made for the referendum, some problems (mostly administrative) were encountered in polling locations both inside and outside Bougainville. In one case in Kundiawa (Chimbu Province), more than 20 voters came with proof of enrolment (part of the enrolment registration form torn off and retained by registered voters). However, only six had their names on the final referendum roll. They were able to cast their votes, but the rest had to cast provisional votes with others who claimed they had enrolled in Bougainville. This raises questions about the effectiveness of BRC's awareness/training for polling officials/scrutineers, who should have known that voters who provided proof of registration should have been allowed to cast their votes, provided they gave evidence that they were enrolled, without going through the

provisional voting system.

As the previous case shows, the processes for administering provisional voting might not have been well understood by all polling officials and this resulted in some discrepancies. A further example of this was at Bel Isi Park in Buka where the polling official did not write down names of 23 provisional voters — the voters merely signed the envelope — so it was difficult to link the names to the BRC's master list with only the signatures (Interviewee 3).

In another example, in one polling location in Buin, voters with proof of being registered voters were not allowed to cast a provisional vote (Interviewee 4). There were also some cases where the enrolled name was different from the name written on the envelope of the provisional votes (Interviewee 5). In Waluwalu ward in Bolave constituency, one voter, known widely by his nickname, had his real name entered by the ward recorder, but the polling officials were not aware of who he was so did not allow him to vote (Interviewee 6).

Other factors affecting participation included Bougainvilleans living illegally in Solomon Islands who felt they could not enrol to vote because it would reveal their identity as illegal migrants (Interviewee 7). And despite comprehensive awareness campaigns, there were incidents that revealed a lack of awareness about the referendum for some residents of Bougainville. For example, in the inland area of Wakunai District (Central Bougainville), residents of the Atasiapa village border between Wakunai and Torokina did not vote because they did not know what the referendum was or its purpose in their lives (Interviewee 8).

In relation to voter choice (Interviewee 9), a reserve police officer reported 13 cases where voters, especially illiterate people, accidentally turned the ballot papers upside down and marked the wrong box. During the campaign period, the message for independence was 'mark box number two'. This mistake arguably may have contributed to the 3043 votes for greater autonomy.

People posting photos of their votes on social media raised concerns for the BRC, including whether these votes were free and fair, although there is no evidence that this action had any correlation with influence on voter choice. For some, sharing photos publicly may have represented pride at participating in an event which Bougainvilleans have longed for — a key step in their long struggle for political independence. In any case, the action was inconsistent with the BRC's key messages, which emphasised the importance of confidentiality (Interviewee 10).

On the flip side, other factors promoted voter participation. A total of 11 sick patients in hospitals cast their votes (one in Port Moresby, one in Buka and nine from Arawa). In most polling locations, voters without names but within the approved eligibility criteria were allowed provisional voting. One practice that

motivated voters was where community leaders usually went first to cast their votes — so others followed suit. An allowance was made for people wearing *Upe* (a sacred totem not allowed to be seen by women) where they could vote under special arrangements.

Generally, people took ownership of the referendum vote as reflected in the celebrations held in almost all polling venues throughout Bougainville. Even people who temporarily moved to other places (such as alluvial gold miners) returned home to cast their vote. Such commitment has never been demonstrated in either national or ABG regular elections (Interviewee 6), although it should be said that the referendum was much more highly anticipated than a regular election.

## Conclusion

The research revealed that despite the 2019 Bougainville independence referendum being declared free, fair and successful, the vote was nevertheless influenced by a range of problems affecting the ability of a small number of voters to cast their vote. Logistical issues, discrepancies in the referendum roll, misunderstanding of provisional voting, and lack of awareness about the referendum and the voting processes were factors. The type or format of the referendum question — arguably not suitable for illiterate people — may have resulted in voters not casting a vote for their choice. These factors may have contributed in a small way to the outcome of what was an overwhelming referendum result and may provide lessons to improve future elections and referendums, both in Bougainville and internationally.

## Author notes

*Steven Kolova works for the Autonomous Bougainville Government as Director of Autonomy, Department of Post Referendum Consultations and Dialogue. He was a participant in the 2014 Pacific Research Colloquium run by the State Society and Governance in Melanesia program (now the Department of Pacific Affairs) at The Australian National University.*

## Endnotes

1. Information provided here comes from various scrutineers who were interviewed at Buka between 16 and 18 December 2019. Each has an identification number given in brackets.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, figures are taken from [Bougainville Referendum Commission](#) records, 2019.
3. A provisional vote is when a voter cast their vote at a polling place away from their home location and their name did not appear on the roll. These votes were later admitted after ensuring that the names were on the master roll.

