

EAC releases investigation report on polling and counting arrangements of 2021 Election Committee Subsector Ordinary Elections

The following is issued on behalf of the Electoral Affairs Commission:

The Electoral Affairs Commission (EAC) today (October 22) released an investigation report on the long queues at the polling stations and the prolonged time taken for counting votes in the 2021 Election Committee Subsector Ordinary Elections (ECSS0Es) held on September 19, with recommendations for improvement.

"The 2021 ECSS0Es were the first public elections after improving the electoral system. There are major changes to the composition of the Election Committee. Also, a number of enhancement measures for practical electoral arrangements have been implemented for the first time, including the Electronic Poll Register (EPR) system and the setting up of special queues. The relevant enhancement measures have been generally implemented smoothly on the polling day, laying a solid foundation for implementation of the above-mentioned measures in future public elections," a spokesman for the EAC said.

"However, a public election is a large-scale project. Major election-related activities basically take place on the polling day, and there is not much time allowed for participants, including staff from the Registration and Electoral Office (REO) and different government bureaux and departments, to adapt and adjust according to the actual situation. Even if different contingency plans have been prepared, there will still be unforeseeable circumstances as many electors vote on one day. The electoral arrangements are intertwined and inseparable. A delay in one step will affect the next.

"The long queues at the polling stations in the morning of the polling day and the prolonged counting time were far beyond expectations. The EAC has thus comprehensively reviewed the polling and counting arrangements, trying to find the reasons behind, and published this report based on the facts on hand at this stage with recommendations for improvement, so as to make comprehensive preparation for the upcoming Legislative Council General Election and Chief Executive Election."

The main findings of the report are as follows:

(1) Long queues in the morning

The EPR was used for the first time for issuing ballot papers. Overall, it operated smoothly. However, there were teething problems with the first use of the EPR, which affected the subsequent counting process.

The main reasons for the long queues at the polling stations in the morning were that the staff at the ballot paper issuing desks were new to the system operation, which slowed down the process; the voters/authorised representatives of corporate voters (voters) had relatively more enquiries on the new arrangements; it took time for explanation to some voters, replacement of the mistakenly marked ballot papers and handling identity verification of persons who were ineligible to vote in the queue; and a large proportion of voters cast their votes in the morning, representing four times the voter turnout rate of the 2016 ECSSOs during the same period of time. In view of the situation, the REO immediately deployed additional manpower to assist. The EAC Chairman also appealed that it was not necessary to rush for voting in the morning. As a result, the queues started to dissolve from noon.

In addition, four ballot paper issuing desks were present in the polling station at Sha Tin Town Hall, but only three of them were in operation in the morning, and the EPR tablet of the remaining one was used for ballot paper replacement. The fourth issuing desk was finally put into service at noon.

(2) Delivery of ballot boxes, election documents and materials

After the close of the poll, the Presiding Officers (PROs) were required to fill in ballot paper accounts, check the number of ballot papers issued and unissued, seal the counterfoils of issued ballot papers and the unissued ballot papers, and then deliver them to the central counting station together with the ballot boxes. The time taken for some polling stations was much longer than expected.

The reason for the delayed delivery of ballot boxes and election documents from the polling station at Princess Alexandra Community Centre to the central counting station was that the PRO discovered that the voter turnout counted by the EPR tablet did not tally with the number of issued ballot papers calculated based on the counterfoils of issued ballot papers, with two fewer ballot papers. The staff did not dare to doubt the data counted by the EPR tablet and spent a long time on repeated checking.

As for the polling stations at Kowloon Park Sports Centre, Tuen Mun Town Hall and Sha Tin Town Hall, the staff's unfamiliarity with the use of new electronic ballot paper accounts, failure to comply with the operational manual in completing the entire ballot paper issuing procedure, and misunderstanding that the ballot boxes could only be delivered after the handover of EPR equipment and documents to the system contractor were the respective reasons for the delay.

(3) Receiving ballot boxes, election documents and materials

After the arrival of ballot boxes and election documents at the central counting station, the counting staff had to first verify ballot paper accounts and various election documents and materials before unsealing ballot boxes. The staff at the central counting station found that the polling staff made mistakes when filling in ballot paper accounts and sealing election

documents and materials. For prudence's sake, the counting staff requested the polling staff concerned to return to the central counting station to make corrections before proceeding to unseal ballot boxes, which took a long time.

(4) Sorting and screening ballot papers

After unsealing ballot boxes, the counting staff had to sort the ballot papers in the ballot boxes by subsectors. However, this procedure took a relatively long time. For example, when sorting the ballot papers from the polling station at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the counting staff misplaced a ballot paper into the plastic box of another subsector. It took time for them to locate it and re-sort the ballot papers. For another example, when handling the ballot papers of the polling station at Sha Tin Town Hall, the staff failed to follow the established procedures, which require them to check the envelopes to see if any ballot paper is left when taking the ballot papers out of envelopes. Instead, they performed the two steps separately, doubling the time taken. The subsequent procedure of ballot paper screening was generally slow.

(5) Counting ballot papers by optical mark recognition (OMR) machines

After screening the ballot papers, the counting staff proceeded with scanning the ballot papers, which can be read by the OMR machines, but some of the ballot papers were jammed as they were not stacked up neatly.

With the implementation of the EPR system in the elections, to ensure voting secrecy, the barcodes on individual ballot papers to avoid double counting as in the previous practice were not printed this time. The REO had prepared contingency plans in which double manual key entries would be adopted to count choices on the ballot paper in the event of a paper jam. However, when the paper jam issue involved the subsectors with relatively more members to be returned, it would take a very long time if the process of manual key entry was continued. Thus, the REO requested the contractor of the counting system on the spot to study whether it was possible to scan the ballot papers with the OMR machines again on the premise of avoiding double counting.

(6) Determination of questionable ballot papers

In the determination of questionable ballot papers, the Returning Officers (ROs) had to invite the relevant candidates and/or their agents present to the desk for determination of questionable ballot papers, participating in the determination process and making representations to the ROs' initial decision on the validity of a questionable ballot paper. The main reason for the delay was that there was only one out of the three desks which could accommodate subsectors with a large number of candidates, therefore leading to the waiting.

(7) Announcement of the initial counting result

Upon completion of the count, the ROs had to make known the initial

counting result to the relevant candidates and/or their agents at the desk for determination of questionable ballot papers. The progress of handling questionable ballot papers of other subsectors was thus indirectly affected.

The EAC made a number of recommendations based on the findings of the investigation report:

1. The REO should rectify the related programming errors found in the operation of the EPR system and optimise the entire ballot paper issuing process;
2. Where venue and manpower permit, the number of polling stations and ballot paper issuing desks should be appropriately increased, and showing the approximate waiting time in certain places of the queues should be considered;
3. The procedures of compilation and verification of statistical reports after the poll should be streamlined and the procedures for the reception of ballot boxes, including the separation of the reception work of ballot boxes and electoral documents/materials, should be reviewed;
4. The entire process of the vote count and the deployment of manpower should be reviewed, indicators should be prepared on the expected amount of time required for each procedure, and better plans for the occurrence of paper jams in the OMR machines should be formulated;
5. Announcements should be made in the counting station on the progress of the vote count, including unexpected incidents or delays in the counting of votes, in a timely manner to avoid queries of candidates and/or their agents, as well as members of the public;
6. The staff in the Central Command Centre should remain vigilant against unusual delays or irregularities and take the initiative to study the problems, render assistance and strengthen the communication between different teams;
7. The training for electoral staff, especially on prompt reporting in the event of emergencies, should be strengthened; and
8. Staff equipped with experience of organising an election should be deployed to take up core electoral posts.

The EAC pointed out that the 2021 ECSSOs were the first public elections after improving the electoral system, which attracted much attention from various sectors of society. Putting excessive focus on the amendments to the electoral system and the enhancement measures on voting arrangements, the electoral staff might have overlooked other arrangements already in place.

"On the whole, the elections were conducted openly, fairly and honestly. Though the counting time was beyond expectation, the accuracy of the counting results was ascertained. The EAC is of the view that the REO should enhance efficiency of the process to avoid delays, without sacrificing the accuracy of counting results. It is also necessary to strive for improvement in areas of incompetence," the spokesman said.

Election is a solemn matter strictly governed by electoral legislations. The EAC believes that the REO will conclude the experience of polling and counting arrangements in the elections, identify the root causes of problems, and carefully study and explore how to implement the recommendations in the report. The EAC will continue to supervise the REO's work and is committed to ensuring that public elections are conducted in an open, fair and honest manner, and to make comprehensive preparation for the upcoming Legislative Council General Election and the Chief Executive Election.

A Chinese version of the full investigation report has been uploaded to the [EAC website](#) for public viewing.