



MANAGING ELECTIONS DURING FLOODS: THE CASE OF VICTORIA, AUSTRALIA

Case Study, 17 July 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Victoria held state elections on Saturday 26 November 2022. Six weeks previously, the state had suffered serious floods. Home to over 6.6 million inhabitants and 4.4 million voters, its 79 local government areas (LGAs) are classified as cities (34), shires (38), rural cities (6) and boroughs (1). At 227,444 square kilometres, Victoria's land area is as big as Ghana, Laos or Romania. Such a comparison is important in grasping the scale of the 2022 floods. In order to provide financial assistance to the natural-disaster-declared areas in each state or territory, there are the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA), a joint Australian, state and territory governments' initiative. DRFA measures include, among others, relief for personal hardship and distress; removal of debris from residential properties, counter-disaster operations; restoration of damaged essential public assets; and concessional interest rate loans or/and freight subsidies (Australian Government 2023).

Victoria is the 'most distinctive fire region of Australia and the most dangerous in the world' (Griffiths 2009) followed by California and Greece (Cook 2022). The state's mountain topography is one of steep slopes, ridges and valleys that channel hot air. If a high-pressure system stalls in the Tasman Sea, then hot winds flow across the south-eastern forests. When temperatures rise to extreme levels and humidity evaporates, lightning hits the ground 'raging fires suddenly upon its victims' (Griffiths 2009). But September 2022 was wetter and colder than usual, and floods hit.

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Commission (VEC) had plenty enough time to prepare. After all, Australia is a wealthy and developed country where elections usually run smoothly. However, there are at least five reasons to subject that argument to detailed examination in this case study.

First, as it is shown below, time and resources per se guarantee neither that the organizer can run the election perfectly in all districts, nor that the public is fully satisfied. Second, shaping how the response to the hazardous event is configured is extremely important and there may be different approaches (with significant variations and impacts) even within the same jurisdiction, as Birch and Fisher (2022) show for the Californian case. Third, planned responses need to be in place and so preparation before the event—regardless of its nature or scale—is of paramount importance. In that regard, the lessons that can be drawn from the Victorian case can be adapted for use in other jurisdictions, in some cases even perhaps as a blueprint. Fourth, the impact of floods goes far beyond the flooding period itself. Once waters recede many problems may arise—from affected homes and infrastructure to lost or damaged crops and harvests, to individuals' distress—to mention just a few. Fifth, the floods in Victoria are an important case as this type of environmental hazard (and others) will continue and worsen in Australia due to climate change (RCNNDAR 2020). Unfortunately, Australia is not alone in this. Several other countries will face very similar challenges or are already doing so.

Therefore, the aims of this case study are, first, to give an overview of how the floods and related events unfolded in Victoria. Second, to explain the legal and institutional background of the VEC (the main organization in charge of carrying out the elections), the electoral system and modes of voting, and how these were affected by the floods, likewise turnout and campaigning. Third, to describe which risk management (and resilience-building) tools were used to address the challenges. The crisis management approach, understood as the 'pathway for effective recovery when the integrity of electoral processes and institutions is significantly damaged or lost'. (Alihodžić 2023: 13) did not feature—although the VEC does have crisis management plans in place—and so will not be addressed in this case study. Fourth, to close, it presents some of the lessons learned along with some general reflections on the modes of voting, participation and campaigning.

The research for this case study is supported by diverse materials. Public documentation was offered by the VEC in the form of service plans, annual reports, and press releases. The author gathered further official documentation from parliamentary submissions at both the federal and the state level. Readers can find links to the mentioned documents in the reference section. In analysing the participation results, the author relied on data offered by the VEC which at the time of writing has not been published as definitive. Several semi-structured interviews were conducted with key actors involved in the elections. The questions put to these respondents are available in the annex and the insights obtained from the interviews have been incorporated into the case study. Finally, the author also used documentation provided by the International

Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) such as reports, working papers and transcriptions.

LEGAL AND INSTITUTIONAL BACKGROUND

On 26 November 2022, 4.4 million eligible Victorians were called to cast their vote to elect the 60th Victorian Parliament. The responsible agency for managing every election of the Victorian state election is the VEC. There follows a snapshot of the VEC's origins, features and responsibilities. Then the Victorian electoral system is addressed, which is not replicated anywhere else in Australia.

The Victorian Electoral Commission

It was in 1851, when the state of Victoria achieved independence from New South Wales, that elections to the Victorian Parliament started. The first Chief Electoral Inspector of the state was appointed to lead the State Electoral Office in 1910. For 70 years, this office was part of the public service department. As time passed, it was deemed necessary to separate the conduct of elections from ministerial direction. Accordingly, on 1 January 1989, the independent statutory office of Electoral Commissioner was established. The Electoral Commissioner was to report to the Parliament rather than a minister. The State Electoral Office was renamed the VEC in 1995.

The VEC's functions are to maintain the electoral enrolment register; conduct state, local and statutory elections and polls as well as fee for service¹ elections; conduct reviews of electoral boundaries; and administer the laws on political funding and donation disclosure. The VEC has also duties to conduct electoral research, provide education services and communication with stakeholders, and inform and engage Victorians in the democratic process (VEC 2022a).

All such functions are delimited by six acts that are, chronologically: (1) the Constitution Act (1975) which determines who is entitled to enrol as an elector, who can be elected to Parliament, and the size and term of Parliament; (2) The Electoral Boundaries Commission Act (1982) which determines and governs state electoral boundaries; (3) The Financial Management Act (1994) defining how the VEC manages finances and financial reporting; (4) The Electoral Act (2002) setting out the VEC as an independent statutory authority, establishing its functions and powers and prescribing processes for state elections (see: Victoria (2002), especially section 9(2) on the VEC's powers); (5) The Infringements Act (2006) covering aspects of compulsory voting enforcement; and (6) The Local Government Act (2020) setting out the conduct of local government elections (and which replaces the 1989 Act) (VEC 2022a).

¹ A fee-for-service election is when the Electoral Commission provides an election for a fee. The VEC offers such service based on the size of the election; the documented process for the election; and which other elections are held (VEC n.d.).

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As is well established, in times of peace elections are among the ‘costliest and most administratively and logistically burdensome’ operations that a democracy can undertake (International IDEA 2020). The VEC is exclusively funded by ‘Government special appropriations’ (VEC 2022b). Specifically, the total funding received for 2021–2022 was AUD 50.12 million (approximately USD 35 million). In times of crisis or emergencies such funding may need to be increased.

Two additional contextual features of the 2022 election must be considered from the VEC’s organizational perspective: (a) the need to expand services in line with population growth of around 230,000 electors since the previous election in 2018; and (b) the redrawing of electoral boundaries within the state, which had resulted in a transfer between districts of over 910,000 (just over 21 per cent) of electors. This latter event limits the scope of the comparisons that can be made.

The VEC is structured around two main functional units, the Electoral Functions Group, led by the Deputy Electoral Commissioner, and the Corporate Services Group, led by the Executive Director, Corporate Services. Both are overseen by the Electoral Commissioner. In the case of the VEC, it is the Executive Director, Corporate Services who is responsible, in coordination with the rest of the VEC, for risk management (see ‘Voting operations’ below).

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Electoral system

Victoria’s state elections use two versions of the preferential voting system, in which voters can order their preferred candidates in the ballot. Specifically, the Lower House, also known as the Legislative Assembly and which has 88 seats, relies on full preferential voting to choose its members. This means that voters write a ‘1’ by their most preferred candidate and then must rank all the remaining candidates in their preferred order. If the voter fails to fill every single box in the electoral division, the vote is not valid and not counted.

The Upper House, known as the Legislative Council, relies on optional preferential voting, as several candidates are elected per region. There are eight electoral regions, each selecting five Legislative Council members per region.² Voters can do one of two things: either to vote ‘above the line’ or ‘below the line’. The latter means that voters cast the ballots as for the House, assigning preferences to individual candidates. In the former, the voter here supports only a list of candidates rather than individual candidates. Such a list of candidates is previously registered with the electoral commission. Voters then just write the number one in the box of the group they support and leave the rest of the ballot paper blank. This opens the door for negotiations and trading among parties. Also known as ticket voting, in Australia it only happens in elections to the Victorian Upper House.

² Those regions are Eastern Victoria, North-Eastern Metropolitan, Northern Metropolitan, Northern Victoria, South-Eastern Metropolitan, Southern Metropolitan, Western Metropolitan, and Western Victoria. Five regions are metropolitan and three are rural.

NATURAL HAZARDS AND ELECTIONS

Australia is no stranger to natural hazards affecting its elections. For example, fires that covered about 60 per cent of the shire were present in the federal by-election of Eden-Monaro in 2020, where the Australian Labour Party candidate Kristy McBain was the mayor of the Bega Valley LGA that lost 467 homes and four lives (McKnight 2021) and the Coalition candidate Fiona Kotvojs almost lost her farm to the fires. When Covid-19 arrived to Australian shores, it also impacted the management of local elections in Queensland. The Electoral Commission Queensland had to implement a series of safety measures as Covid-19 was at its peak in the state (Martinez i Coma 2020). In New South Wales elections were postponed for over a year. In Victoria, the local election in 2020 was run via postal voting only due to a change in the Local Government Act—which proved helpful in the context of Covid. It is worth remembering, however, that Victoria had the second longest continuous Covid-19 lockdown in the world.

In the run-up to Australia's federal elections on 21 May 2022, the New South Wales city of Lismore was ravaged by floods in February and March 2022 (SCU 2022). Residents had to evacuate as the waters rose over 14.4 metres, the highest level ever recorded (VST and Gilmore 2022). At the peak of the first flood, engineering and science professor Bradley Eyre declared that the water 'would have filled an Olympic-sized swimming pool in just over a second' (SCU 2022). More rain would hit Lismore in early May, just weeks before the federal polls. The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that more extreme weather events are expected for Australia in the near future (IPPC 2022).

Early voting in Australia currently represents over 40 per cent of the ballots cast (Martinez i Coma and Smith 2023) and if the early voting centres are affected by floods, there may be problems of accessibility. Unsurprisingly, some voters in Lismore found voting difficult in the federal election (Rose 2022) as securing new voting locations is not an easy task, taking resources and time. Moreover, any changes in electoral delivery introduce the chance of complications.

Flooding ahead of the Victoria State election

On 13 September 2022, the Bureau of Meteorology (BoM) declared that Australia was officially under the third La Niña. The BoM warned the eastern communities, especially those on the coast, to be prepared for more rain. This was the third consecutive year featuring La Niña, previously seen in 1954–1957, 1973–1976 and 1998–2001 (Hannam 2022). In addition, there was the Indian Ocean Dipole, a climate phenomenon affecting rainfall patterns (Reuters 2022).

According to the BoM, September of 2022 in Victoria was wetter than average and colder. State-wide, rainfall was 34 per cent above the 1961–1990 average and the highest since 2016. Some sites had their highest September daily rainfall on record (BoM 2022a). Some central and northern catchments of the states suffered minor to moderate flooding. And the largest dam of the state,

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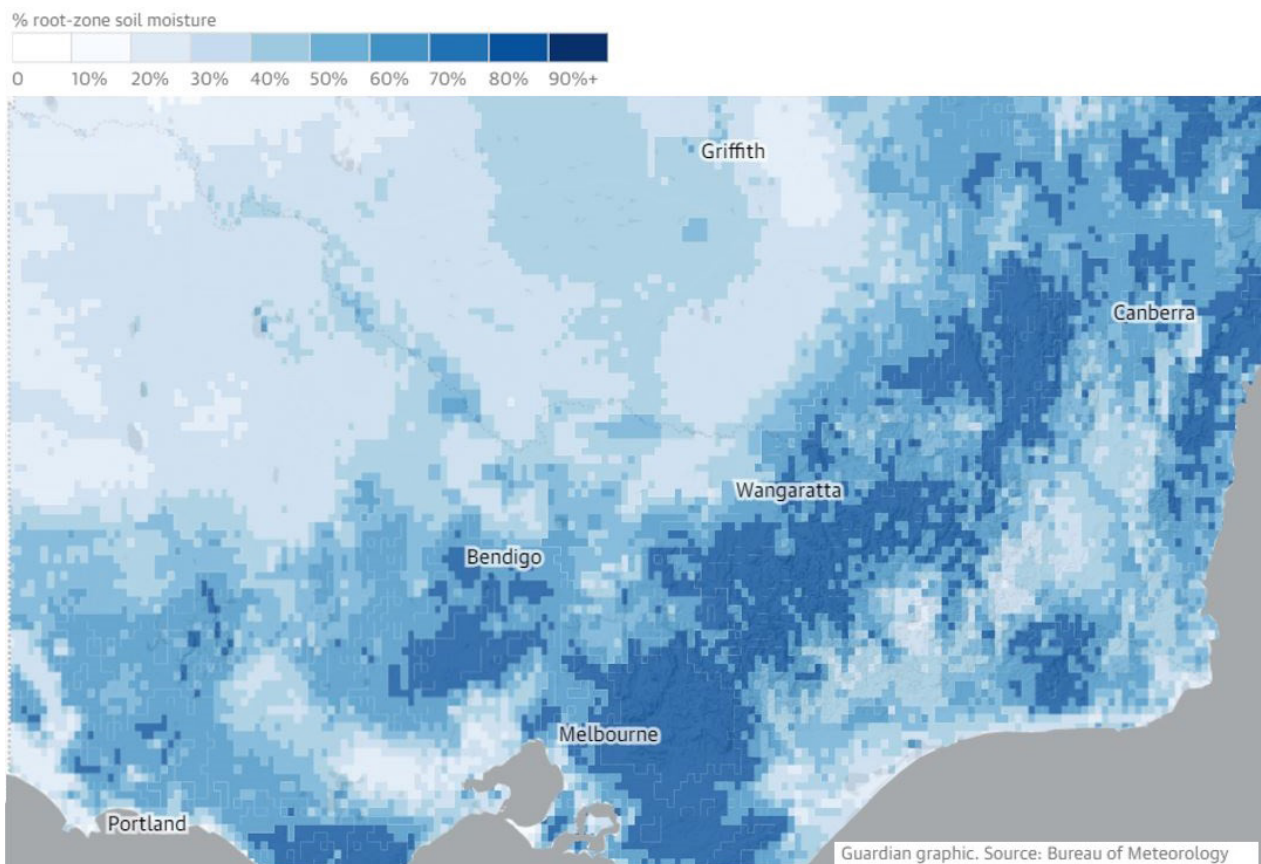
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Dartmouth, spilled over. Its previous spill was in 1996 (Brown 2022). Overall, during the first nine months of 2022, rainfall was 12 per cent above average across the state.

When there is cold weather less water evaporates, increasing the probability of floods. All the rain of September implied that in many areas the ground was already saturated. Hence, more rain would make the state 'primed for floods' (Cook 2022). When the rains hit again in October, soil moisture was very high (see Figure 1) and with the predicted result.

October was a much wetter than average month in most of the state. In some parts it was the wettest October on record (BoM 2022b) or for at least 20 years (BoM 2022b), and the state average was more than double the average for Octobers during 1961–1990. A total of 63 LGAs were affected by the floods,

Figure 1. Victorian floods: soil moisture on 13 October



Source: Evershed et al, 'How northern Victoria flooded—visual explainer, *The Guardian*, 20 October 2022, <<https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/ng-interactive/2022/oct/21/how-northern-victoria-flooded-visual-explainer>>, accessed 9 June 2023.

commencing on 6 October 2022.³ These local government areas reached their highest October daily rainfall on record between the 12th and 14th of the month, which was reflected in more than 90 flood warnings throughout the state. Several sites recorded their two wettest consecutive days. Parts of the state suffered their worst flooding in five decades. Evacuation orders were in place and homes in the west of Melbourne were inundated (ABC 2022a). Schools were closed, 'roads swamped and power to around 5,000 households cut' (Davies 2022a). Victoria State Emergency Service (VICSES), during the 24-hour period of 14 October, received 2,679 assistance requests, among them 119 flood rescues (Davies 2022a). Up to 450 personnel from the Australian Defence Force were deployed to support emergency services in the 'relief and recovery efforts in areas such as Echuca, Wangaratta, Shepparton, Swan Hill and Bendigo, from October 17' (ADF 2022). Figure 2 presents a BoM map showing the flooding along many rivers in Victoria (and also New South Wales and Tasmania). The Lake Eildon dam spilled for the first time in 28 years (Lu 2022). Overall, during the first 10 months of 2022, rainfall in Victoria was 29 per cent above average, the highest since 1974.

The fifth wettest November on record had a negative impact on Victoria as rainfall state-wide was 96 per cent above the 1961–1990 average (BoM 2022c). It was the rainiest November since 1954. Evacuation warnings were issued during the second week of November (Salvo 2022); some sites had their highest November daily rainfall on record on the 13th and the 14th, as shown in Table 1, and many also had their highest total November rainfall on record or for at least 20 years (BoM 2022c). There were flash floods in several sites, as high rainfall over previous months had already inflicted severe flooding. VICSES addressed more than 780 calls for assistance and rescued more than 50 people (Davies 2022b). Due to flash floods there were reports of landslides, damaged roads and even the derailment of a freight train (Evans and Marin 2022). Overall, during the first 11 months of 2022, rainfall in Victoria was 35 per cent above average, the highest since 1974. Table 1 provides an overview of the main weather and election logistics events in the state.

Given the impact of the floods and the intensity and frequency of the 'rain bursts' (Environment Victoria 2022), the Environment and Planning Committee of the Victorian Parliament launched an inquiry in February 2023 into 'the state's preparedness for and response to Victoria's major flooding event of October 2022' (Legislative Council 2023).

Overall, during the first 11 months of 2022, rainfall in Victoria was 35 per cent above average, the highest since 1974.

³ Those areas were Alpine, Ararat, Ballarat, Banyule, Baw Baw, Benalla, Boroondara, Brimbank, Buloke, Campaspe, Cardinia, Casey, Central Goldfields, Colac Otway, Corangamite, East Gippsland, Gannawarra, Glenelg, Golden Plains, Greater Bendigo, Greater Geelong, Greater Shepparton, Hepburn, Hindmarsh, Horsham, Hume, Indigo, Latrobe, Loddon, Macedon Ranges, Manningham, Mansfield, Maribyrnong, Maroondah, Melbourne, Melton, Mildura, Mitchell, Moira, Moonee Valley, Moorabool, Mornington Peninsula, Mount Alexander, Moyne, Murrindindi, Northern Grampians, Nillumbik, Pyrenees, South Gippsland, Southern Grampians, Strathbogie, Surf Coast, Swan Hill, Towong, Wangaratta, Warrnambool, Wellington, West Wimmera, Whittlesea, Wodonga, Wyndham, Yarra Ranges and Yarriambiack and one (1) Alpine Resort of Falls Creek.

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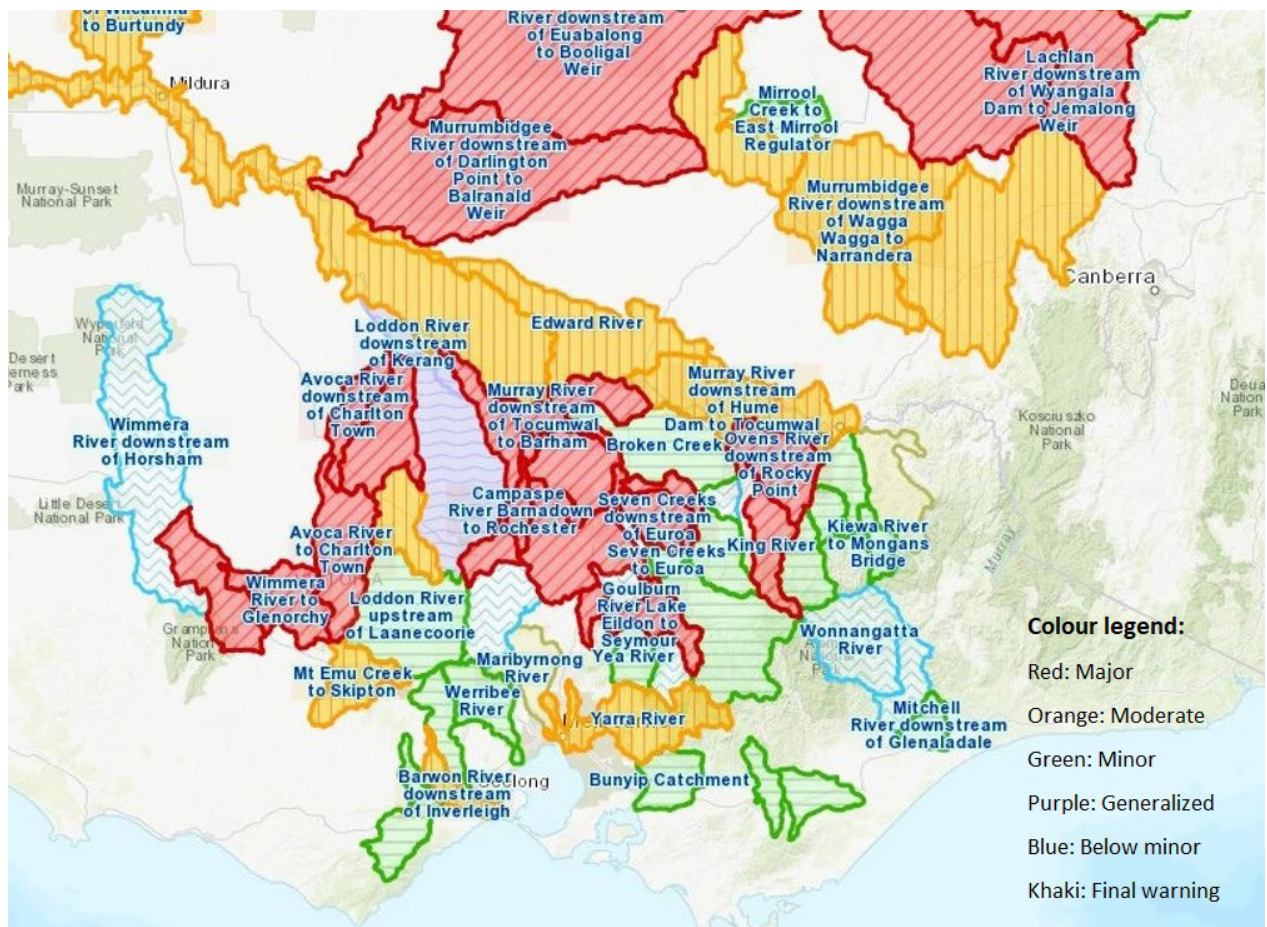
CAMPAIGNING

In interview Will Fowles MP, Chair of the Electoral Matters Committee of Victoria, pointed out that although the floods affected many parts of the state, campaigning was not much affected overall in many seats because they came six weeks in advance of polling. Campaigning was carried out as usual with MPs and candidates reaching out to the respective communities in the usual forms such as meet and greet, neighbour meetings, candidates and parties' stalls, town halls, door knocking, etc.

The Australian Labor Party MP suggested, however, that there were exceptions: in the seats of Shepparton, Euroa and Lowan campaigning was not conducted as usual because of the impacts of the flood (Fowles 2023).

The author interviewed Shepparton's representative, independent MP Suzanna Sheed. She lost to National Party candidate Kim O'Keefe after serving two

Figure 2. Flood warnings on 16 October



Source: Bureau of Meteorology, 'Significant flooding continues...', Twitter, 15 October 2022, <https://twitter.com/BOM_au/status/1581379860001280000>, accessed 9 June 2023.

terms. The seat, covering 3,289 square kilometres, had previously supported the National and Country parties since 1945.

For Sheed, the campaigning period was significantly shorter than in 2018, the main reason being that she was working on duties associated with the role. As her district was impacted by the floods, she had to participate in coordination meetings with emergency services, work with ministers to address problems, go to flooded areas, meet with locals, etc. Once the main urgencies of the district were addressed and it was campaigning time, she was 'exhausted' (Sheed 2023). Had the floods not happened, the campaigning would have been different, at least on her part.

Sheed also mentioned that when campaigning she felt two kinds of 'moods' within the public: those that were affected by the floods and those that were not. Among the former, the election was not a priority as they were dealing

Table 1. Elections and flood chronology

Event	Date/days before polling	2022 Victorian state election
BoM declares third La Niña for Australia	13 September (74)	
Widespread rainfalls and showers	6 October (51)	
Widespread rainfalls and showers	7 October (50)	
3,049 requests for assistance (including 1,766 flood incidents and 128 rescues)	13 October (44)	
More than 90 flood warnings in Victoria	14 October (43)	
Around 34,000 homes inundated or isolated	17 October (40)	
	2 November (24)	First day for submission of postal vote applications
Evacuation warnings issued	7 November (19)	
	8 November (18)	Close of electoral rolls
BoM issues severe weather warnings for heavy rainfall	13 November (13)	Close of group voting ticket lodgements
Cars and trucks driven through floodwater in Melbourne's west suburbs	14 November (12)	Early voting commences Mobile voting commences
More than 650 calls for help across the state	15 November (11)	
	23 November (3)	Close of submission of postal vote applications
	25 November (1)	Close of early voting
	26 November (0)	Election day

with other priorities such as house repairs. This may be reflected in the turnout findings below. Regarding the delivery of the election, she commented positively that the VEC was ‘proactive and supportive’ (Sheed 2023).

VOTING OPERATIONS

Victorians can cast their vote through in-person voting, early voting, postal voting, mobile voting, telephone assisted voting, and interstate and overseas voting. Additionally, the VEC ensures that Victorians in the Antarctic division can vote.

Full causal analysis of whether and how the floods may have affected the mode of voting is beyond the scope of this case study. However, comparing the 2022 election data with 2018 (see Table 2) and with the interviews provides some context and likely impacts.

The traditional voting mode is for voters on election day to come to their preferred voting centre and cast their ballot in person. There were over 1,700 voting centres on election day, similar to the number in 2018. Two voting centres were abolished (closed with no new location opened) and a handful more were moved, so the total available did not change markedly due to the floods.

The VEC’s public information campaign specifically targeted voters in flooded districts, informing them about voting modes available.

Early voting has been gaining traction in recent years and in 2022 represented about 48 per cent of all the ballots cast, compared to 35 per cent in 2018. More than 400,000 Victorians cast their votes in the first three days of early voting (VEC 2022e), which was available for two weeks before election day. Because this was approximately one month after the height of the floods, early voting centres could open without problems. In 2018, there had been 103 early voting centres, with at least one centre per district. In 2022 the figure increased to 155, with two centres in those districts where a high number of early votes was anticipated. Early voting centres were opened all weekdays, in some cases with extended operating hours until 20:00. Additionally, early voting centres were open during Saturday 19 November (VEC 2022a, 2022f). The VEC’s public information campaign specifically targeted voters in flooded districts, informing them about voting modes available (see more detail below). Victoria is not alone in the use of early voting; as recently shown by Martinez i Coma and Smith (2023), the upsurge of early voting is also a federal trend.

Postal voting has been widely available in Australia since the early times of the federation, at both the state and the federal level. It increased in the 2022 elections as Table 2 shows. Traditionally, at least at the federal level, older voters rely more on postal voting (Martinez i Coma and Smith 2023) and its popularity is usually quite stable. However, between 2018 and 2022 there was an upsurge of about 3 percentage points, to 10.5 per cent. There may be several reasons for this increment. One may be that Victorians took advantage of the postal voting option because the rain continued. Recent experience of

the previous local government elections that were entirely postal, in October 2020, could have also played a role (Doyle 2023). Finally, Covid-19 concerns could also have played a role.

During the early voting period, mobile voting teams visit nursing homes, homelessness support agencies, Aboriginal community locations and other institutions. Such teams enable citizens to vote who are unable to attend an early voting centre. Compared to 2018, the numbers of votes gathered by mobile voting were lower. This was mainly because of adherence to Covid-19 protocols in hospitals and care homes for the elderly.

Telephone voting eligibility was expanded due to the floods. Telephone voting in Australia—also available in New Zealand—consists of two phone calls. In the first call, voters are registered and obtain a unique code. In the second, voters use the code provided to cast their vote, guaranteeing that voters remain unidentified and assuring ballot secrecy. Citizens follow either of the systems described earlier, only they give their preferences to the operator who writes them down. The operator is observed by a second operator, ensuring that the preferences are fully transcribed.

Telephone voting is acknowledged to be a resource-intensive system; it was initially designed for citizens who are blind or partially sighted or have a mobility impairment and so cannot vote without assistance. However, the VEC extended eligibility to voters in areas that were impacted by floods (occurring on or after 13 October) and who were unable to access a voting centre (from 19 November to 18:00 on 26 November) (VEC 2022c). To use this mode, citizens had to make a declaration that their place of residence and their mobility had been so impacted (VEC 2022d). As Table 2 shows, telephone voting grew more than fivefold in comparison with the 2018 elections. The interview with the VEC executive confirmed the efforts invested in telephone voting.

Regarding Covid-19, the VEC opened a voting centre for those citizens with evidence of a positive rapid antigen test (RAT) or polymerase chain reaction (PCR). There was only one site (available for just three days, inclusive of election day itself), as there was insufficient time to find and lease 'any other premises large enough to handle the demand' (Hall 2022).

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TURNOUT

Compulsory voting is one of the notable features of elections in Victoria and Australia as a whole. Registration is compulsory and, in contrast to many European countries, is not automatically done by the state but is an individual responsibility. Once the citizen registers for the first time, they remain on the electoral roll and the electoral commission can verify whether a vote has been cast. If the citizen has not voted, the commission can issue a fine. Every

Table 2. Voting arrangements, 2018 and 2022¹

Voting channel	2018 (total votes taken by number and %)	2022 (total votes taken by number and %)
In-person election day voting	2,058,506 (55.1)	1,513,071 (39)
Early voting	1,328,419 (35.6)	1,854,736 (47.8)
Postal voting	281,823 (7.5)	404,850 (10.4)
Mobile voting	54,788 (1.5)	46,737 (1.2)
Telephone assisted voting	1,199 (.03)	5,518 (0.14)
Interstate voting	3,160 (.08)	3,360 (.08)
Overseas attendance voting	4,173 (0.11)	n/a
Drive-through voting (Covid-19 positive voters)	n/a	519 (0.01)
Enrolled voters	4,139,326	4,394,465
Total votes counted	3,732,068	3,877,213
Informal voting	217,592	214,410

Sources: VEC (various); ABC News, 'Victorian leaders Daniel Andrews, Matthew Guy make final pitches as election day nears', 24 November 2022, <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-11-25/daniel-andrews-votes-early-as-victorian-election-day-nears/101696934>>, accessed 30 May 2023; AAP/SBS News, 'Almost half of Victorians have voted early', 23 November 2018, <<https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/almost-half-of-victorians-have-voted-early/hl0f2e005>>, accessed 30 May 2023.

¹ Some final statistical confirmations are still underway at the time of writing. However, the numbers can be taken as being as accurate as possible. Interstate voting is available for Victorians outside the state, who vote at an interstate voting centre. Drive-through voting was available in 2022 to those with a positive RAT test for Covid-19. For overseas voters in 2022 only postal vote drop-off was available, which is captured through postal voting total.

time the citizen changes residence, it must be communicated to the electoral commission, as it is likely that the citizen moves to a different district.

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Overall, voter turnout was lower in 2022 (88.2 per cent) compared with 2018 (90.2 per cent). A decline of 2 percentage points does not seem much. But a comparison between the districts that were flooded and those that were not, shows an interesting pattern: the decline was significantly higher in those districts that were flooded. Specifically, within the unflooded districts turnout declined an average of 1.4 percentage points (ranging from -1.78 to -1.05 points) while within the flooded districts the average decline was -2.1 percentage points (ranging between -2.3 and -1.83). Certainly, this association cannot be taken as definitive as some electoral boundaries were rewritten, as mentioned above.

In compulsory voting settings, invalid or informal voting is usually higher than in voluntary voting settings (Martinez i Coma and Werner 2019). Across districts there was a 5.4 per cent average of spoiled ballots. The average in

non-flooded districts was 4.8 per cent (ranging from 4.1 to 5.4 per cent); in districts that were affected by floods, the average was 5.7 per cent (ranging from 5.2 to 6.2 per cent). Although the differences are not statistically significant, there were thus slightly higher rates of spoiled ballots in flood-affected districts.

INTER-AGENCY COLLABORATION

Emergency Management Victoria (EMV), established in 2014, is a state government statutory authority responsible for leading emergency response. The agency works with all the emergency services in the state in a coordination and information sharing role. The VEC's crisis management approach is aligned with this agency. The VEC is in regular contact with EMV and when the elections get closer, contacts intensify to the point that the Electoral Commissioner is represented at all State Emergency Management Team (SEMT) meetings. This approach started in 2018, and by building relationships with the emergency sector, the VEC 'works not in a vacuum but in cooperation' (Doyle 2023). By liaising closely, EMV is provided with information on where all the election sites are, while the VEC receives information on for example, 'natural disasters, security threats, and other sorts of information that might impact on the delivery of [the] election. So, [the VEC takes] advice and information from them' (Benjaminsen 2022).

The institutional relationship between the two agencies has been built progressively and has translated into sharing resources. For example, the GIS (Geographic Information System) mapping teams of both organizations collaborate and share data. By using emergency response maps, the VEC could overlap theirs to detect the electoral districts with the most flood-affected people. In short, the VEC was receiving specific information on the weather for each of the districts and the degree of coordination was important. As approximately 50 per cent of those on the Victorian electoral roll have provided email addresses and/or mobile phones to the VEC, the latter could identify flood-affected voters and message them with reminders of the voting options available (Doyle 2023). That could be a factor in explaining why the proportion of early voters was very similar between flooded and non-flooded districts.

In the interview with Doyle, the author asked about how she thought the election would have gone without EMV's coordination. Although a counterfactual, her response was clear: the VEC would have managed, because of the timing and the skills. But the process would have been much more stressful and less efficient.

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By using emergency response maps, the VEC could overlap theirs to detect the electoral districts with the most flood-affected people.

RISK MANAGEMENT

Risk management⁴ is ‘appropriate for identifying and preventing risks from materializing or avoiding them’ (Alihodžić 2023: 2). There are many ways in which risk management processes can be organized; common denominators usually include risk identification, assessment, analysis and evaluation, communication and treatment (Alihodžić 2023: 5). In order to identify whether the emergent event is an ‘issue’ or ‘crisis’, internally, the VEC uses established plans to follow a decision-making process combining six risk themes—onset, urgency, threat of escalation, predictability, electoral integrity and finance—with seven event characteristics: human resources, legal and governance, reputation, service quality, operations, regulatory compliance, and management (Tables 3 and 4). Depending on each of these themes and characteristics, the event is considered either an ‘issue’ or a ‘crisis’, and the response is configured accordingly.

One of the main features of this approach is that it is consequence led. This means that, regardless of whether a voting centre is lost to a flood or a fire, for example, the plan is set in case of a lost centre. More generally, there are different response approaches according to whether the issue is classified as a ‘problem’, ‘issue’ or ‘crisis’ for each of the categories. For example, when facing an issue, staff pay extra attention by perhaps bringing people together or changing part of the processes. In contrast, if there is a ‘major event that can really heavily impact on the VEC’, there is ‘a specific crisis management plan’ (Doyle 2023).

Overall, if the institutionalization of risk management by an electoral commission ‘must be supported by the leadership, build on processes and resources that already exist, and include collaboration with other state and non-state agencies once risk management is established’ (Alihodžić 2023: 5), it seems that VEC conforms to this understanding both internally and externally, in its partnership with EMV.

CONCLUSION AND LESSONS LEARNED

In closing this case study, there are some lessons and reflections to keep in mind when organizing elections affected by natural events, such as floods. From the analysis of the available documentation and the interviews carried out, the lessons appear to be:

⁴ In practical terms, the boundary between ‘risk management’ and ‘resilience building’—which is about strengthening electoral processes’ ability to sustain stresses and shocks from risks that materialize’ (Alihodžić 2021: 2)—can be blurred, especially when considering measures implemented. Expanding eligibility for telephone voting to those affected in flooded areas, for example, could be classified under both concepts.

1. Establish and maintain ongoing communication and cooperation with the emergency management sector. Keep the relationship active even when there are no elections in the near-term.
2. Prepare, establish and issue a risk management process (as exemplified by Tables 3 and 4).
3. Allow for flexible legal framework arrangements to expand on special voting arrangements (SVAs) such as telephone voting.
4. Plan for targeted communication about the election for those affected by the hazard/flood.

Table 3. Victorian Election Commission's six risk themes

Risk themes	Problem	Issue	Crisis
1. Onset	Short-notice, gradual disruptive events	No notice, disruptive events	Sudden, unforeseen, escalating with strategic implications
2. Urgency	Response over short time frame, resolved before long-term/permanent impacts	High urgency over a short time frame	High urgency over long time frame
3. Threat of escalation	Minimal	Possible	Significant
4. Predictability	Generally foreseeable, but timing/nature unpredictable	Unforeseen but manageable	Rare, unforeseen, poorly managed
5. Electoral integrity	Adverse event, operational error, omission, or noncompliance with statutory obligations that is understood and can be addressed within the existing capacity of the elections team without any potential impact on the integrity of an election.	Adverse event, operational error, omission, or noncompliance with statutory obligations requiring an immediate coordinated response and management oversight to ensure election integrity is protected.	Adverse event, operational error, omission, or noncompliance with statutory obligations that is an immediate threat to the successful execution of an election in whole or in part, or where legislated timelines for election delivery are not met. Challenge to an election due to VEC failure.
6. Finance	Potential additional costs can be absorbed within the normal budget.	Manageable impact to funding outside of the current budget.	Expenditure levels require additional funding. Reduction in operating baseline funding.

Source: Victorian Election Commission.

Table 4. Victorian Election Commissions' seven event characteristics

Event characteristics	Problem	Issue	Crisis
7. Human resources	Minor impact to staff numbers. Easily managed.	Minor injuries, potential loss of 10 per cent of the workforce.	Death or serious injury. More than 10 per cent loss of senior election staff after opening of election office and until close of an election.
8. Legal and governance	Fines and remediation manageable within branch authority. No breach of any standing directions, legal, professional or regulatory requirements. No reported internal fraud, collusion or theft. And the problem is a non-reportable incident to the Office of the Victorian Information Commissioner (OVIC).	Fines and remediation manageable within the VEC authority. Possible breach of any standing directions, legal, professional and regulatory requirements. No reported internal fraud, collusion or theft. And the problem is a non-reportable incident to OVIC.	Legal action, fines, or remediation costs within or exceeding the VEC's legal exposure. Confirmed breach of standing directions, legal, professional or regulatory requirements. Reported internal fraud, collusion or theft. And the problem is a reportable incident to OVIC. The accountable officer faces criminal action.
9. Reputation	Minor or external stakeholder reaction, news coverage and/or social media chatter.	Stakeholder complaints and dissatisfaction and/or high-profile news coverage and/or social media chatter. Growing negative social media chatter.	Sustained high-profile news coverage and/or majority of stakeholders dissatisfied, complaints from candidates or electors who are adversely impacted, loss of credibility and public trust. Significant negative social media chatter.
10. Service quality	Adverse events that are understood and addressable via predefined response. No impact on post-election survey results for: 1. Customer satisfaction survey; 2. People Matters Survey; and 3. Reputation survey index.	Adverse events that require a coordinated response and management oversight. No impact on post-election survey results for: 1. Customer satisfaction survey; 2. People Matters Survey and 3. Reputation survey index.	Complex and uncertain, affects entire organization. Critical resources and functions are affected. Possible impact on post-election survey results for: 1. Customer satisfaction survey; 2. People Matters Survey; and 3. Reputation survey index.
11. Operations/facilities issue not related to the execution of an election	Adverse events that are understood and addressable via predefined response. Low value property damage.	Adverse events that require a coordinated response and management oversight. Low value property damage, some critical resources affected.	Complex and uncertain, affects entire organization. High value property damage or denial of access. Critical resources affected.

Table 4. Victorian Election Commissions' seven event characteristics (cont.)

Event characteristics	Problem	Issue	Crisis
12. Regulatory compliance (not related to election execution)	Fines and remediation manageable within branch authority.	Legal action, fines, or remediation costs of up to AUD 500,000.	Legal action, fines, or remediation costs exceed AUD 500,000. The accountable officer faces criminal action.
13. Managed through established plans	Resolution known to work well.	Resolution may not be fully proven to address all aspects of the issue.	Inherent uncertainty, potential scale, and extended duration requires flexibility, creativity and clarity of corporate values.

Source: Victorian Election Commission.

5. Have a GIS team ready to detect and forecast how natural hazards may impact the election. Such effects could take multiple forms: from the distribution of voting centres, to losing some of them.

As can be seen, much of the outlined lessons are about preparation, implying that the main efforts should be carried out well in advance of the election taking place.

Victoria's 2022 experiences also prompt some general reflections that go well beyond the particular case, which are relevant to elections—and other workings of democracy—in strained situations:

1. *Special voting arrangements.* It is imperative to anticipate and plan for the impact of extreme weather events on early voting, as these condition not only its availability but also increase the costs of delivery if early voting centres are affected. This can be especially relevant in lower income contexts.
2. *Voter participation.* The correlations between Victoria's floods, turnout and rates of invalid voting do not prove causality, but may be worth exploring in more detail. If participation is lower in flooded areas and invalid votes seem to be higher, specific outreach efforts might be considered—especially if, as is the case in Australia (and many other countries), those most affected by the floods are the most disadvantaged.
3. *Campaigning.* Candidates who are MPs or other incumbents in elected office must balance addressing the urgent problems their constituents may have, against their own need to campaign. As well as being the right thing to do, being sufficiently active and effective on the former may confer media exposure and voter approval on the incumbent—in ways unavailable to challengers. Conversely, if MPs are effectively unable to campaign when other candidates are doing so, this may be a disadvantage. Independent candidates may also confront tougher choices than candidates of

institutionalized parties, which are usually better resourced (Kefford 2020) and, at least in theory, better able to respond to emergency conditions. While the issue of a 'level playing field' in emergencies is a matter of a country's decisions on legal and institutional design, the reputational and ethical position of incumbents touch upon an inherent democratic tension that is worth analysing further.

4. *Public health and Covid-19.* When the floods arrived in October 2022, Covid-19 had not been eradicated in Victoria. Although neither disasters were at their peaks during this election, a convergence between the pandemic and extreme weather events would have compounded the complexity of electoral delivery. As other countries have demonstrated, compound disasters do occur and preparation is fundamental. A country's level of development is fundamental to assessing and planning for its electoral resourcing needs.

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ANNEX A

Questions for current and former MPs

1. Was campaigning conditioned by the floods? If so, how? How was campaigning possible?
2. What is your view of the work performed by the VEC?
3. In reputation terms, what does the Electoral Matters Committee (ECM) think about how the VEC managed the election in flooded areas?
4. The floods affected all the state. So is it right to assume that all parties were evenly affected?
5. Overall, and on reflection, what are the lessons learned from the floods as regards campaigning?

Questions for the VEC

On logistics:

1. Were the different modes of voting affected by the floods? Can you provide the figures for in-person voting, early voting, postal and phone voting for the 2022 and 2018 elections? This will be for comparison.
 - a. How many venues were available for election day? For the 2022 election, there were 155 early voting centres. Do you recall how many were there in 2018? And, more importantly, did you have to change/look for new early voting places due to the floods?
 - b. Did the floods take away voting sites as in other places (e.g. Lismore)? How did you sort out alternative polling places in such a short period of time?
 - c. Was mobile voting affected by the floods? If so, how?
 - d. Was campaigning conditioned by the floods? If so, how?
2. How many people did not vote in 2022? Which proportion of these do you think was due to the floods?
3. Did the floods affect VEC's budgeting for the election? If so, how? The annual report states that the funding received for 2021–22 was AUD 50.12 million. Did funding have to increase because of the floods? If so, by approximately how much?
4. Relatedly, how much did the election cost in 2022 per Victorian [per capita in the state]? And in 2018?

On the VEC organization:

5. The position of the Emergency Management Commissioner. Can you provide their features? What are their main roles? What support does the Commissioner have? What is the relationship with the VEC Commissioner? How to prioritize?
6. VEC had a very detailed organization-wide safety plan, especially in regards to the pandemic. But what about the floods?
7. Overall, do you think the VEC should/could have other abilities/powers to make their response more agile? Or, differently framed, how can VEC react to unexpected events?

On VEC and public relations:

8. How does the VEC manage stakeholder engagement (deliberations) with time pressures?
9. In reputation terms, how does the VEC think that it managed concerning the election in flooded areas?

10. How does the VEC achieve a positive election experience for citizens in those districts affected by floods?
11. How do you think that the floods impacted VEC's capability [in ways] that could impact the trust and confidence in democracy and electoral integrity?

On main impacts of floods:

12. Do you know whether the floods impacted the VEC' efforts regarding:
 - a. Media literacy campaign
 - b. Early voting
 - c. The location strategy
 - d. The tracking and handling of the ballot papers
 - e. Candidates' campaigning
 - f. Specific engagement campaigns aimed at young electors?

Overall, and on reflection, what are the lessons learned from the floods as regards organizing elections?

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