



Remote Polling Booth Research

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Galiwin'ku Community Report

Research team: Stephen Dhamarrandji, Rosemary Gundjarranbuy, Anita Golun, Hazel Gondarra, Michaela Spencer

Report compiled by: Michaela Spencer and Michael Christie



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Key Insights

- Respondents generally spoke positively about the experience of voting, and an appreciation of being able to come together as a community on voting day.
- Many talked about struggling to manage the number of papers they were given at the booth, the numbering system on the ballot paper, and differentiating the candidates (without photos or other forms of visual guidance)
- The distinction between technical and political aspects of voting, as well as between candidates and election officials was frequently unclear to people arriving to vote.
- Some expressed frustration that the 'underneath story' of party policies and candidate affiliations could not be made clear to them on the day.
- The presence of local Yolŋu Voter Information Officers (VOIs) was frequently mentioned as providing critical support to voters at the booth.
- Social media and TV were listed as key information sources about voting and the election, as well as word-of-mouth within the community.
- When preferential treatment was offered to elder people waiting in line, this was recognised and valued as culturally appropriate practice.
- Teaching young people how and why to vote was articulated as a key concern, and priority for future engagement with the NTG and electoral commissions.

Summary:

This research was carried out as part of an NTG funded project Remote Engagement Coordination – Indigenous Evaluation Research (REC-IER) – Phase 2: Electoral Engagement and Education.

The research was led by a small team of staff from the Yolŋu research organisation Yalu' Marngithinyaraw, and involved speaking with Yolŋu voters outside the Galiwin'ku polling booth across two days of voting in the 2019 federal election. The local research team included senior researchers [Stephen Dhamarrandji](#) and [Rosemary Gundjarranbuy](#), and research mentorees [Anita Golun](#) and [Hazel Gondarra](#) (profiles can be accessed at <http://iri.cdu.edu.au>). This team also worked in collaboration with CDU researchers Michaela Spencer and Michael Christie.

The Yalu' research team developed a research questionnaire, worked with organisations in the community to source a BBQ, food, cooking utensils, and set up a shade area where Yolŋu could come to sit and talk about their experiences voting. Working in collaboration with CDU researchers, they also sought permission from appropriate government departments and electoral commissions for the research.

The purpose of conducting research at the polling booth was to capture the immediate responses of community members when they exited the booth after voting. The research team were careful not to speak to people before they went in to vote, or to discuss their

voting preferences and the content of their ballot papers. The focus of the research was to learn about why people came to vote, what was challenging or easy when they did, and ways that thing might be altered or improved in the future.

Across the two polling days, 58 Yolŋu sat down with the research team and completed questionnaires. Below we present a summary of these responses. This includes:

- A brief interpretation of the responses provided to each question
- A selection of quotes from participants (these quotes are meant to be indicative of the range of responses provided by all participants, rather than a complete list of responses)

Further insights and recommendations from the project as a whole will be available in the REC-IER Phase 2 final report. Further details of REC-IER Phase 1 can be accessed at <http://recier.cdu.edu.au>.

Research Findings:

1. How do you feel after voting?

None of the respondents found the voting a negative experience. Some were nervous, but others generally said the experience was good, and a good proportion made clear that voting made them feel part of Australian society, with the right to make a significant contribution to Australian democracy. They felt that voting made a difference, and with potential to contribute to a 'better future'. Several expressed confidence because they knew what to do at the polling booth, while some others spoke of nervousness and uncertainty because the process was unclear to them.

- Feeling excited
- Good – I went there and I knew exactly what to do
- Good but holding those three paper I wasn't sure how to vote, but only remembered from watching that iPad video, that helped a little bit
- I feel nervous when I first came to vote
- Good but I didn't know who to vote
- I felt good and confident because of the good thing that helps me and my community
- Good, I know the parties and the candidate and it was my first time
- Feel good, feel encouragement to support my centrelink
- I here at the voting had this opportunity for supporting and encouraging so I can learn more
- Feeling number 1. I sense it was good and it was reasonable for me to vote because I am Yolŋu
- I feel that I have a say in Australia
- Was good. Was just thinking who is going to win this next election
- Good. Better future Yolŋu and balanda, better place and better community

- Still thinking what I did and I've written
- I'm very confident for this election because I need to learn about how to live together in Australia
- I felt happy because it is good to me to be here to check and find out who the right people for us to help us

2. Why did you come to vote?

Some came because it was a community event, some had been told directly by employers or other agencies that they must vote, and they were very aware of the compulsory nature of voting and the danger of fines (or deductions from Centrelink). Others were clear on who they wanted to vote for and that their vote would make a difference and they would be interested in the result.

- I started to hear everyone talking about it and got interested
- To see everyone in this community, I started to hear people talking about it
- Because I heard about that law of voting where you come along and they won't charge you
- I heard this story on TV and radio because it was very important for all Australians
- To help me along with the CDP and participating with jobs (if you don't vote you'll get fined so think will probably be deducted from Centrelink pay, so I have to vote so my newstart continues)
- I came down here because my name was on the list and I am Yolngu local person so I can learn about the voting
- It's time for election so first think to vote
- Cause I'm Yolngu and for my money so they can help the community and also local development works through training
- To recognise Yolngu first and the generation and also to support our education and housing
- Cause I have the power to choose the right politician to create change for me
- Thinking about who will be offering Yolngu money in the future
- Because some people told me that when you don't vote you have to pay. That's what I was thinking.
- Support of young generation so they can have their say in the future
- To have my say and to community
- Boss told me from ALPA, RJCP to come and make sure you vote on election days
- I was enrolled when I was 18 years old and it's very good for everybody here in Galiwin'ku Elcho Island
- To make sure I am doing the right thing
- Cause it's a voting day
- To vote for my government who is the best government for Indigenous people. Try to vote for government that are working with Aboriginal people and see needs of first Australians to teach our young people what this vote is all about
- As long as they get our name beforehand then every year when it is voting time. I have to go voting because my name is there

- Heard from Yolŋu rumours going on but still confused. I try, I vote, just trying. Everytime I do this I'll ask. I am not very smart. Sometimes I end up voting for not good government.

3. Did you understand what to do?

Respondents ranged from knowing exactly what to do, to not really understanding at all. Some said that they understood the process, but weren't clear on the 'underlying' policies of the candidates. Assistance from people in the booth was appreciated, and seemed to make a considerable difference to people's voting experience. While there was an iPad video available to help people understand how to vote, it did not seem to make the same impact as face-to-face discussions. There was a clear difference in levels of confidence shown between people who had been through the experience before, and those who were voting for the first time.

- I know what to do
- A little bit – I had been before so I knew
- No, but I want to know/learn more
- Yes, only a little bit but I had to learn so in the future I need to pass it on
- Understand because someone there inside helped me
- All the boxes, no. Or where to put the number
- Little bit but not quite understood
- Through helping by balanda giving instructions
- Yes, easy. Knew what to do from last time
- Understood message from candidates that passing the words
- Yes, my mind is bright
- Balanda woman help me explain what to do
- Sometimes we need help from staffs and works with the partnership from voting members
- I did understand. I have been voting all my life, been voting all my life till death do us part. As long as I am voting for government that is supportive
- Yes they showed me the numbers and names
- Not sure, information officers helpful
- I do not understand what was all about
- We need to know deeper story of each bunguwa (boss) that comes for voting
- Understand but need help because in our way we want to get really good government. Want to check first which is good. We want to first check up for our children in future, not hurry and teach good one. If we can't teach the future is no good. We want to reach young people for the future.
- My wife helped with explanation outside, on my own inside. I know who I wanted to vote for
- This was my first time, so I wasn't really sure what to do
- I do understand a little bit because of the help of volunteers story about the election

4. What was confusing?

There was confusion produced by the number of papers people were given (how to vote cards *and* ballot papers) without an easy-to-follow process for filling out the papers. Some missed having photos of the candidates (as happens in council elections), and again, when faced with the decision, people felt they didn't have enough knowledge of the different policy positions of candidates. Others found the process clear because of the 'supporters there to help us through'. Some were disconcerted by the refusal of electoral officers to give advice as to who to vote for, and many struggled with the numbering system.

- They were giving us lots of papers, but they didn't have the full story
- Lots of papers but they don't tell you about what to do or who you are voting for
- How to vote and put the numbers and not picture display on the ballot paper
- All good, confident to vote
- The only thing that confused me was that there was no straight story and the story would be good if you told and what was the real understanding of what was spoken (instead of just vote for me, I'll give you...)
- I found it hard that the volunteers gave the paper that had names and different stories
- A lot of boxes, it made me confused
- One of the balanda told me straight how to do the voting but there was not enough explanation
- Not sure how to vote all numbers together
- No didn't need interpreter, I did it myself
- First when doing by myself I didn't think about what to write until one Yolŋu helped me and explained in Yolŋu language
- Vote paper has no picture only names
- The confusing was the numbers
- White paper was very confusing for me and balanda was helping me
- Different to leadership for Yolŋu, see how they carry that leadership. Carrying out leadership, whether is good or not
- They explain to me, what the white one is and green one is. I was asking them a question and they say we don't want to tell (pamphleteers)
- Bit confusing, but I try that I understand all of them
- The confusing part was when they didn't told the whole back stories about the election, and just to put 1-6 numbers on each electioneer

5. *Nhā nhokal manymakthin electionytja?* / What was good for you about the election?

People were excited that in the mixing up of all different people in the lines, they were coming together as a community, leaving behind for the moment all the ties to kin and totemic affiliation. "Support and encourage for community and individual person". They enjoyed learning about the voting experience, as well as the barbeque which they saw as a good contribution to the community and to democratic society on the part of the Yalu'

centre. Some respondents remarked on how the community excitement and the fact that everyone was participating, made them interested in the outcome of the election.

- Its something we do together. Its really lovely, Yolŋu and Balanda
- Yolŋu were there together
- Many Yolŋu went there, give excitement of people in line
- Encouraging lots of people that are enrolled
- Support and encourage for communities and individual person
- It is this election is good so that I will get more understand
- Good, but I found it hard. Maybe I need to learn more
- Its Yalu' preparing BBQ encourage the people
- Learning new things, what to do and how the system works through the voting (different o the system that Yolŋu have in the community or local Aboriginal in urban places. Just seeing how th structure works with the government)
- The volunteer inside that were helping (Yolŋu)
- I have the power to choose the right politician to create change for me (deliberate repeat)
- BBQ during election and many people give me interest of the election
- We are given our rights
- Was good to have choice and voice
- Feeling very happy all healthy all the time and its gives us family supplement bonus every financial year
- We can teach them, when they grow up want them to be able to vote, know the way
- Election was good everything and also supporting from Yalu and CDU

6. *Nha nhe gumurr-däl maŋŋ'maraŋal?* / What did you find hard?

The main problem people reported was not actually knowing who to vote for. A significant number of people clearly had not decided beforehand which way they would vote, and found that there was no useful information inside the booth to help them decide. For some, the refusal of electoral officers to discuss who to vote for, was experienced as a refusal to help. The lack of photos, and the large number of boxes on the ballot papers also made it difficult for some. A few people turned up to vote and found that they were not registered.

- Don't have enough of the true story to know when voting
- Not sure because the ballot paper had no pictures and no information
- Who to vote for a difficult decision to make on the day
- It was good, but a bit not sure and difficult to know who to vote for
- I found it too hard. Everyone we need to learn about the voting in the community and tell and help each other and support each other
- Found it hard because it was too hard for local Yolŋu mala
- Standing in the box feel me don't know what to do and where to put numbers into right boxes
- A lot of Yolŋu when they see a politician they think it is a power person but real power is with the people

- My name is not registered
- It was very hard that I find out because no explanation given to me properly
- No its very good and also its involved everybody in community here
- Hard to chose which to vote
- Who to vote that why I wasn't sure
- I am experienced. I know how to vote and who to vote for
- There nothing hard for me, I been going in voting for years
- Enrolling myself because it is my first time enrolling
- Nervous – everytime going into polling area
- It was good because I did find easy listening to the story about election
- So we don't understand which party is good because this is balanda idea and we want Yolŋu people to ask the question what they need. In your way you can't tell. We want to learn and teach our children for our future.

7. *Nhā nhe marŋgi mǎrrmaw partiesku?* / What do you know about the two parties?

Almost half of the respondents said that they know the parties' policies, and had decided who to vote for. About a third said that they really had no idea about the policies of the two parties. A few know the candidates, and some policy positions for example housing, others remarked that the system is a Balanda system, which doesn't acknowledge Yolŋu law. In conversation around the booth, there was considerable interest in the same colour coding used by candidates to differentiate their parties at the booth (e.g. red for Labor, orange for CLP) being extended to the ballot papers.

- Little bit
- No, I don't know
- No, need to learn and study which parties can listen to the community
- I'm not quite sure who are those two parties and what they are working for
- I don't really know about two parties beause I am Yolŋu person
- Yes, they have already told us who they are
- Australia is a democratic system. Some Yolŋu do understand democracy, some don't they want to recognise our culture first. We have democracy too but some Yolŋu don't understand western way yet.
- Yes – I did a training to be one of the voter information officers. They told us all about the parties, forms, what to say to people. I missed out on working because I went to Gove.
- Did not know about this but did the best I can
- I know the two parties but I don't really knows which the parties and want to vote
- I know a lot and see how they service Indigenous people. I see the parties before I vote and see who is supportive for homelands and community
- Who will understand our law and how we feel
- Giving us proper houses
- Yes, my father support me through this
- That Mr Snowden is adopted by Yolŋu

- I don't know I only know a little bit. I try my best when I vote.
- I know which one to vote for

8. *Njala nhe njakul wo nhäŋal wunjili mala (social media, TV, newspaper, familyŋur, communityŋur) / How did you learn about the parties – on social media tv, your family or community?*

A good majority had heard about the elections – either on TV, YouTube and in the community. They had seen candidates' posters in the community, and had talked about the election with their family. It is not clear whether they had learnt about the policy differences between the parties through these means, or just the fact of the upcoming election. Only a few claimed to have no idea about the election or about the candidates and their parties and policies, and a few were confident they knew the politicians and their policies.

- I heard from family/kin. They were talking about it, telling stories, and I started to get interested
- More information to come to the community that is in Yolŋu language
- Never heard of any of them until coming to vote
- Community – heard this from the community, pictures of the parties hanging on the trees
- Yolŋu staff and balanda told us to come down and vote
- I heard it on the TV and sometimes I heard it around my family's camp
- Saw it on the paper, and Facebook - Elcho notice board
- I learned from one of the workers who trained us came out here and teach us how to do this and that at birrkpirrk (CDP)
- Saw it community with image from two parties
- YouTube – Yolŋu matha translating
- I saw him today in person
- No we need media, TV, newspaper for more information
- Community and CDP participate told me about the polling
- I see them when there is a more particular party is supporting Indigenous people adapting their business to support Indigenous people and our young people that are literate. Very easy for young people. The aim and future is for young people to vote for right government.
- Talking to family and work area myself, my family and work area
- Social media, tv and family member
- Conversation – we don't have TV at home

9. *Nhä nhe marŋgi candidatekuny? / What do you know about the candidates?*

Very few respondents were confident that they knew who the candidates were, and what they represented. The majority sit seems, didn't know the word candidate, or did not distinguish between the candidates and the election officials. Many said that they should and would like to know more about the candidates.

- Don't know them

- Don't know, but some candidates are local people
- Some of the local people were working on this day to make it easy to understand but most of the candidates were not helpful
- Yes, cause some of the people that was working at the polling was local volunteer people but wasn't sure about the representatives
- Really I don't know what is candidate means
- Only know certain people, names from the people. I know I need to learn more about the candidtes
- I know the candidate but not really what they are here for
- Saw them on the election posters
- Federal, all departments, different parties. Everybody has to vote. Difference between federal and territory is clear
- I knew all the candidates
- All of them, but little bit
- Candidates are people who are involved in the election
- I don't really know but I need to know
- Wasn't sure
- If you want balanda to adopt into our family be honest to us. Show that respect and teach true story. Not just sit and get money.
- Yes I'll tell because I know about candidates there were few to give us instructions what to do

10. Is there anything else you would like to tell the government about voting and elections?

Most of the responses to this question were do to with what people thought the government ought to be doing – caring for Yolju people, land, and languages, supporting Yolju governance, real jobs, education.

There is a sense that the individual confidential system of voting undermines the collective face-to-face negotiations with government which Yolju frequently demand. It seemed not to be clear that elections are the process for choosing government who then may or may not sit down and negotiate with community.

Again people answered the question in terms of future generations and the governments' role in helping young people take part in democratic life. Many people said teaching young people how and why to vote is a key concern.

- We want them to tell the true story of why they don't take care of Yolju, of black people
- We want support in our laws – in the land and in the sea and in our homelands
- Work together hand to hand
- Give us proper wages work, not just voting and pretending
- Tell them to give us a pay rise, proper wages job
- I want all Australian people to encourage and support each other for our generation to come and their generation
- They need to tell us so we can understand the ways of the voting is run

- If need to do election to work with community
- If indigenous culture, law and practice was in Australian constitution would be a different story.
- Yalu' is providing good way for people to learn about elections with Yalu people will understand it is not about the policies, it is about the people
- More school, more building for school, need a college. Little uni for Yolngu people and Yolngu language. Because many houses and children growing. We need to know first which party is doing the right thing for the community.
- More work, we need more work here, more houses
- Listen to community what we need and how will organise together not individual with government ways
- They don't tell us the truth about what is underneath
- I would like to say thanks you much
- Tell story about voting make it clearer
- Some people don't go to voting at the age of 18 up to 20
- Yes, come to voting and learn more about it
- Need local candidate and interpreter to explain
- Make two parliament together, Balanda and Yolngu. Based in the community and way Yolngu is voting for party. Yolngu is doing our best to get not only promises but good services that is encouraging. Support Indigenous people. Two people work hand in hand to achieve something together, to walk together and look after. Not pressing down, encouraging each other to walk in both worlds.
- Please explain this in proper way
- I'm just a worker, following the rules. No other ideas
- Family practice – education now to vote one month ahead – more information.
- It will be very good if they are here beforehand for 2-3 days. Sit and talk, get people to have meeting, tell us there will be voting coming up. We actually know the inside story of who is voting, to see if it is appropriate for Yolngu people
- This is not for myself. This is for the children. I come every 4 years. Still finding out for the benefit of the children. Sometimes Yolngu have no trust in the future for our children, but we are trying.
- Voting is manymak to me. Those parties are searching. In balanda way you don't want to share this. In Yolngu way we don't trust the person who doesn't tell story. No forcing, just choice for person. Its in our choice to find the good way.
- Community based – illiterate people need explanation first before they vote so they know the best person or party
- I want everyone Yolngu local people from the community, we need to come together and discuss and make a point how to vote in this community so that the new generation or younger people coming in and turning 18 we need that information to be here once they grow up or turn 18 then will pass that same message, for the story to the generation so they can learn and know about the representative who to vote for