



Date: 15/02/2021

By email to: Julian Light (fyi-request-14398-f1b6b543@requests.fyi.org.nz).

Dear Julian,

On 4 January 2021, you contacted the Electoral Commission with an Official Information Request on election costs:

I would like to request a full breakdown of the costs of the last election (2020). I would like to know exactly what the cost to the taxpayer is for holding elections, i.e. costs of running polling booths, what amount is contributed to the campaigns, marketing material, and advertising for enrolling to vote.

Do you have any explanation as to why the costs have doubled since the last election (2017)?

Can you also provide any advice, policy work or correspondence around a four-year term?

Please find our response as follows,

Overall election costs

The Electoral Commission is still in the process of finalising actual costs for the 2020 General Election and will be able to provide updated cost information once complete. We can, however, provide the budget allocations for the 2020 election.

The three-year budget for the conduct of Election 2020 was approximately \$99m (excluding referendums, COVID-19 and the change of election date funding) compared with \$49m in 2017 and \$39m in 2014.

Cost Pressures

There are a number of reasons for the budgeted difference between this election and the costs of the previous elections. These include growth factors such as population increases and the creation of two new electorates, but also fundamental shifts in voter behaviour and expectations that have changed significantly how we need to deliver our services (for example the increase in advance voting).

The national and international security environment (both physical and cyber) has also changed over recent elections and required significant risk mitigation and preparation.

Like other established democracies New Zealand has seen voter participation dropping in the recent past, and the Electoral Commission has introduced a range of approaches to encourage and help New Zealanders to enrol and vote. These include the development and implementation of digital enrolment (which has been very successful), increased engagement with people in their own communities, targeted communication for those groups less likely to participate e.g. including youth, Māori, Pacific peoples, people with a disability and new New Zealanders, and greater numbers of voting places in locations where people live and work to support access and meet the increased demand for advance voting.

The delivery of an election is also highly prescribed by the NZ Electoral Act, and relies a great deal on physical elements such as post and freight (e.g. 3.2 million enrolment-update letters sent out to electors), an army of election period staff (~25,000 personnel at GE2020) and a nationwide network of properties for electorate headquarters (>39,000m² for GE2020) and voting places. These elements have all increased significantly in cost over the last three years.

Costs rose for staffing from \$17.9m for GE2017 to a budgeted cost of \$34.1m for GE2020, attributable to the increase from the 2017 minimum wage to at least Living Wage in 2020, and the increased numbers of staff needed for this election to support growth in advance voting and to support election day enrolment (introduced as a result of a law change).

In addition, for 2020 the Commission had a budget of \$18.4m for the conduct of the two referendums, \$28.7m for additional measures for COVID-19, and \$13.5m for costs resulting from the change of election date.

Regarding your question on travel, in each electorate we employ local people to work in our enrolment teams and voting places, which keeps down travel and accommodation costs.

The following breakdown of budgeted costs for GE2020 shows how the budget is distributed.

Expenditure categories	2020 Budgeted cost \$m
65 Electorate Headquarters & Voting Place property costs	11.8
Staffing costs – Electorate Headquarters, Voting Places	34.1
Office equipment	2.6
Supplies (e.g. ballot papers, ballot boxes, voting screens etc), postage and distribution	20.8
Telecommunications	0.6
Specialist services/vendor services e.g. advertising, communication and research services, software and technology support	16.4
Training	1.1
Risk mitigation/security/cybersecurity	11.9
Total direct conduct costs for the election over 3 year cycle	99.4
2020 referendums on end of life choice and cannabis	18.4
2020 COVID-19 measures	28.7
Change of election date	13.5

NB: The 2020 budgeted costs for GE2020 will change as actual costs are finalised

Advertising costs

Specifically, you have asked for advertising and marketing costs encouraging New Zealanders to vote. The Electoral Commission's initial budget for advertising for the 2020 General Election was \$6.9m. It is a similar budget to the last two elections - \$6.1m in 2014 and \$6.35m in 2017.

In 2020, additional funding was allocated for the following advertising:

- \$2.6m for both referendums to raise awareness that the referendums were taking place, what the questions were, and how to take part
- \$3.5m for COVID-19 to inform the public of the safety measures at voting places and how people could vote if they could not go to a voting place
- \$1.5m following the change of election date to inform people of the change in date and extend transactional and motivational advertising campaigns for another month.

Advice, policy work and correspondence on the Four-Year Term

Your request is refused under Section 18(e) of the Act because the Commission does not have any documents and has not provided advice, policy work or correspondence on this.

I trust this answers your request. You have the right under section 28(3) of the Act to complain to the Ombudsman if you are not satisfied with the response to your request.

Your sincerely



Elizabeth Lowndes
Manager, Corporate Services

