



Papua New Guinea's 2022 Redistricting Part 1: A Trojan Horse?

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With considerable fanfare, Papua New Guinea (PNG) entered the 2022 National General Election (NGE) with seven new electorates and eight newly defined electorates.¹ This was the first time since 1977 that the redistricting provisions foreseen in the Constitution and the Organic Law on National and Local-level Government Elections led to redrawing of open electorates. The new electorates and six more approved for creation ahead of the 2027 NGE were presented as addressing the malapportionment issues stemming from demographic shifts and an electoral map that had remained ostensibly static for 45 years.² The reform left much to be desired, creating some new electorates with populations well above or well below legislatively prescribed quotas.

There was more to this reform than is readily apparent. On 22 March 2022, the National Parliament of Papua New Guinea accepted the 2021 Electoral Boundaries Commission (EBC) report, recommendations and maps, and it turns out this act did much more than establishing 13 new electorates. The report included — without comment — a new set of electorate maps for the 96 proposed open electorates, redrawing open electorate boundaries in nearly every province. Apart from this lack of transparency, another issue is that the new maps are drawn from incompatible sources, creating conflicting open electorate boundaries and some open electorates that are inconsistent with provincial boundaries. This broader redistricting was neither discussed in the EBC report nor debated in parliament. The well-advertised creation of the new electorates concealed much more far-reaching changes.

Indeed, as the tabled report was not published with maps, we detected the issue by mapping the 2022 NGE polling schedule, which revealed extensive polling outside of the 1977 borders. It has long been known that in certain areas polling schedules are not in compliance with legally defined electorates. We found that the schedule as a rule follows the National Statistical Office of Papua New Guinea (NSO) map of 'statistical' district boundaries. As we explain in Part 2 of this In Brief series, although these NSO maps are widely used, they should not be used for electoral administration, as they do not show legally defined electorates or districts. Further investigation at the Parliamentary Library revealed that PNG's new electoral map was not what we, and countless others,

had thought it to be. Electorate maps supplied by the PNG Electoral Commission to observers in the 2022 NGE — which at first appeared to have been an inconsistent hotchpotch of 1977 electorates, NSO 'statistical districts' and maps from earlier, failed redistricting efforts — turn out to be the ones adopted by parliament. This has very serious implications.

An example of the issues involved is shown in the map below. We used the 2022 polling schedule to colour-code polling stations in West and East Sepik provinces according to the electorate in which they polled. The red lines depict the 1977 electorate boundaries as established by parliament, while the blue lines are the NSO 'statistical' district boundaries. Where these differ are zones of discrepancy, highlighted in yellow.

The map shows two discrete processes: *de facto* redistricting, where the polling schedule assigns stations to areas outside their electorates; and *de jure*, albeit not publicly advertised, redistricting stemming from the 2021 EBC report.

Telefomin Open Electorate is an example of *de jure*, unannounced change. It was established by parliament in 1977 as a C-shape incorporating a portion of what in 1997 was proclaimed to be Green River Local-level Government. This is the zone of discrepancy on the western end of the map, assigned by the NSO map to Vanimo-Green River 'district'. Citizens there polled in Vanimo-Green River Open, not Telefomin Open, in 2022.

Maps provided to us by the Papua New Guinea Electoral Commission in 2012 and 2017 show this to have been the case in those elections as well. In each of these earlier elections, no formal change had been made to the 1977 electoral boundaries at the time. Remarkably, such cases of stealth or *de facto* redistricting are widespread.

The 2022 NGE was conducted according to the maps accompanying the 2021 EBC report, which revised the electoral boundary between the Vanimo-Green River and Telefomin open electorates, effectively formalising long-established practices concerning the conduct of elections in West Sepik Province. The EBC report was silent on this change. While the 2021 EBC maps for the electorates in West Sepik are consistent with one another, this is not the case for East Sepik. Here, only Angoram Open was updated to match the NSO map. Citizens in the southern part of Wosera-Gawi Open, for example, polled in either Angoram Open or Ambunti-Dreikikier Open.

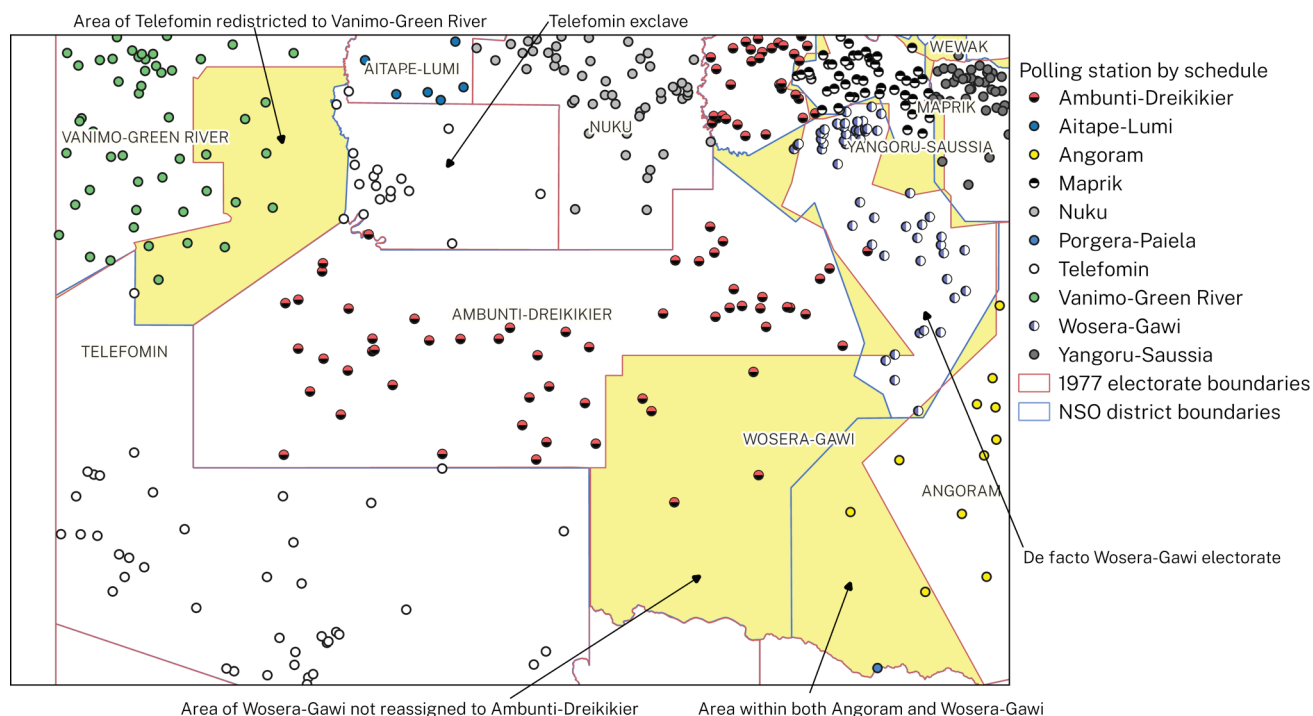


Figure 1: De facto and de jure unannounced changes in East and West Sepik provinces

Source: The authors; 1977 electorates layer prepared by CartoGIS Services, ANU.

The 2021 EBC maps have two different versions of the border between Wosera-Gawi and Angoram. One area, which the polling schedule assigns to Angoram, is shown in Angoram in one map, but is also within Wosera-Gawi in another. Both maps were accepted by parliament. Meanwhile, the Ambunti-Dreikikier boundary defined in 1977 remains, but the polling schedule assigns areas of Wosera-Gawi within the Ambunti-Dreikikier 'NSO district' to Ambunti-Dreikikier Open. Hence, by a combination of inconsistent, unannounced redistricting and scheduling of polling stations out of compliance with electorate maps, Wosera-Gawi is reduced to a de facto rump.

Similar inconsistencies are pervasive in the new map set. For a disturbingly large number of Papua New Guineans, there may be no definitive answer as to which electorate, if any, they reside in. Many more may find that their electorate has changed without a public debate. In part two of this In Brief series, we discuss how this startling state of affairs has come about, and its implications.

Author notes

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Endnotes

1. Six of the seven new electorates were created by simply splitting an existing electorate, and the creation of the seventh, Popondetta Open in PNG's Oro (Northern) Province, involved changes to the boundaries of both Ijivitari Open and Sohe Open.
2. Prior to the 2022 redistribution, which used the 2011 Census, 60% of all open electorates had populations exceeding the legislatively prescribed population tolerances.
3. Haley, N. and K. Zubrinich 2018. *2017 Papua New Guinea General Elections: Election Observation Report*. Canberra: ANU, 27–38. DOI:10.25911/5f1ffeff0e198.

Reference

EBC (Electoral Boundaries Commission) 2022. *2021 Reports and Recommendations of Electoral Boundaries Commission to National Parliament*. Port Moresby: National Parliament of Papua New Guinea.



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