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Electorally Engaging the Homeless

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Joint Project

This project is a result of a strategic partnership between the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and Swinburne University. In 2003, the AEC and Swinburne University entered into a strategic partnership to study the homeless cohort and their attitudes towards the electoral system. The result was two publications, the first being this paper published by the AEC.

A second paper written by Swinburne University is an abridged form of this paper but also contains some views, which do not necessarily reflect the views of the AEC, a point acknowledged in the Swinburne paper. The Swinburne paper has been forwarded to the 2005 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM).

Enquiries

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Summary

Homelessness is a complicated social problem with few studies that examine its impact on voting and civic engagement. In the 2003 Report of the Inquiry into the 2001 Federal Election, the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) indicated its interest in the issue of homeless voters by recommending the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC):

- Amend existing itinerant elector provisions to make their applicability to homeless persons clear;
- Continue its efforts to simplify the itinerant elector application form and ensure its applicability to homeless persons is made apparent; and
- Target homeless persons in its next public awareness campaign, informing them about itinerant elector enrolment.

In response to the JSCEM recommendations, the AEC has identified several areas which can be explored to engage this population to overcome the impediments to enrolment and voting which perpetuate a sense of disconnectedness to government and society. While a certain percentage of Australia's homeless population may prefer to be disengaged from any political processes or civic involvement, a significant percentage of people experiencing homelessness are interested in participation and could be engaged through civic awareness programs, a better understanding of itinerant voter procedures, and the availability of resources that neutralize hurdles that prevent them from participating in the electoral process.

Background

Australia is regarded as a highly inclusive and representative democracy. Universal adult suffrage was achieved for most Australians several generations ago while enrolling to vote has been compulsory for all Australians, excluding indigenous Australians, since 1911. Compulsory voting was introduced in 1924 and has since become an accepted part of Australia's political landscape. Reforms to extend the same franchise rights enjoyed by the majority of Australians to indigenous Australians occurred in 1983 and since this time Australia has worked to operate an open electoral system with minimal hurdles to both enrolling and voting. To achieve this goal, Federal, State and Territory Electoral Commissions have expended considerable effort to ensure all Australians have adequate access to the ballot.

In 2002, the Council to Homeless Persons, the *Big Issue*¹ and the Public Interest Law Clearing House (PILCH) raised concerns that existing enrolment and voting procedures effectively were disenfranchising homeless Australians. Concern centred on the fact that homelessness in itself excluded these individuals from exercising the same democratic rights as other Australians. It was argued that the lack of a permanent residential address should not of itself disenfranchise a significant, and already severely disadvantaged group of Australians, if strong claims for representative democracy in Australia are to ring true.

As the JSCEM submissions and recommendations indicate, making enrolment and voting more accessible to homeless people is an important first step. But unless people experiencing homelessness believe voting is worthwhile and relevant to their circumstances, it is likely that they will not exercise their right.

For the purposes of this project the ABS three-category definition of homelessness was adopted. Homelessness encompasses :

- Primary homelessness – those people without conventional accommodation namely those living on the streets, sleeping in parks, or squatting in derelict buildings;
- Secondary homelessness - those who move frequently from one form of temporary shelter to another and covers those who use emergency accommodation (eg hostels or night shelters), teenagers staying in refuges, women and children escaping domestic violence, people residing temporarily with other families and those who use boarding houses on an occasional or intermittent basis;
- Tertiary homelessness – those people who live in boarding houses, on a medium to long term basis, where they do not have a separate bedroom and living room, kitchen or bathroom facilities of their own and do not have the security of tenure provided by a lease.

Research Projects

In 2004, the AEC joined with the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University to undertake a research project *Bringing Democracy Home - Enfranchising Australia's Homeless*. The methodology for the project and statistical breakdown of results is listed in Attachment A. The research aimed to develop a better understanding of voting behaviour of the homeless population as a distinct social group. The study found that about one half of

¹ *The Big Issue* Magazine is an independent magazine published in Australia on behalf of and sold by people experiencing homelessness.

participants experiencing homelessness had never voted or stated they did not ever intend to vote again.² Another study was done in 2004 through Queensland University: *Improving Access to Voting Rights Amongst the Homeless in Brisbane*³, which set out to identify barriers and disincentives homeless individuals face, and to identify ways of facilitating the exercise of voting rights amongst homeless persons in Brisbane. Focus groups containing participants across the spectrum of homelessness were conducted to identify barriers that inhibited homeless people when voting.

The studies indicate that barriers to participation in the electoral process could be described as more social than mechanical in nature, and it is unlikely that changes in current electoral law or civic education campaigns will engage them. However both the Swinburne and Queensland studies have also indicated that there are mechanical, social and ideological hurdles the Australian Government *can* address to enfranchise a significant portion of the homeless population who have either voted in the past and/or have expressed a desire to vote in the future. Some impediments that prevent them from engaging include: a too narrow understanding of what constitutes a ‘current address’ under the Act, a lack of understanding of itinerant voting and silent enrolment provisions, lack of transportation to, or location of, polling stations, a lack of awareness that it is permissible, in certain circumstances, for third parties to assist in the process of enrolment and voting, fear of becoming visible to government agencies (other than the AEC) on publicised lists, complexity of enrolment process and forms, overall lack of faith in the political system, fear of [especially retrospective] fines for failing to enrol or vote when eligible, etc.

Bringing Democracy Home: Swinburne University

The Swinburne project canvassed opinions from two key groups:

- Agencies working with people experiencing homelessness
- Homeless people and people who have been homeless

The first phase involved a call for submissions from agencies, politicians, academics and other interested parties via a purpose built website hosted by Swinburne University or through direct

² Thompson, J. (2004) *Voting & Homelessness in the Australian Context: Qualitative Research Exploring Homeless People's Voting Attitudes and Behaviour*, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

³ Guerra, A. and Lester, N. (2004) *Improving Access to Voting Rights Amongst the Homeless in Brisbane*. University of Queensland, Brisbane.

telephone discussions with the research team. The second phase involved a series of interviews with people experiencing homelessness. This second approach, although accessing fewer people, provided a significant body of qualitative data that will inform further work with this cohort.

The research work confirmed that the reasons why homeless people do not enrol and vote are complex and frequently situation-specific. According to those who work with homeless people, the main barrier to enrolling and voting was the lack of a permanent address. Many of the responses from agencies cited the transience of homelessness as the key difficulty to enrolling. However, it was not always understood that, for the purposes of enrolment, 'permanent' means residing at a current address for at least one month. Other factors emphasised included insecure living conditions and disengagement from mainstream society. Frequently workers pointed to other, more pressing concerns of the homeless such as finding food and shelter on election day, over-riding an individual's desire to participate in the democratic process. Other concerns cited included:

- identifying the electoral roll with 'government' and an associated unwillingness to engage with the bureaucracy by providing their personal details to the government;
- a fear that providing personal information would lead to negative consequences, either being traced, denied welfare benefits or fined.

However, the interviews with homeless people (as distinct from agency workers) did not fully support all these hypotheses. Some of the people who fitted the ABS definition of homelessness did not identify as homeless, and did not cite their lack of a 'permanent address' as the primary barrier to enrolling and voting. Those who *were* engaged with the political process saw voting as either an obligation or as a right and did not generally regard their current circumstances as a barrier to participation. Most in this group also admitted they voted because of compulsion and 'big fines' associated with failing to vote, or because they wanted to have a say in who formed government. However there were many in this group who indicated that they regularly voted and intended to vote again at the 2004 election.

Although some interviewees were aware that their enrolment details may have been out of date, most expressed an intention to update their details prior to the election. Others merely hoped that they would be able to vote at a polling place on the day. Slightly over half of the participants (54%) considered themselves to be regular or intermittent voters. It should also be noted that most participants were not aware that voters listed as itinerant are, in fact, not

penalised, only removed from the electoral roll if they fail to vote in an election. This underscores the need for the AEC to increase information campaigns regarding the itinerant voter provision in the Electoral Act and the conditions under which certain people may be eligible.

At the same time, it must be recognised that recourse to Section 96 of the Act, even if amended, is not a panacea to the problems of enrolment and voting of Australia's homeless citizens. The majority of the homeless are not 'itinerant' in the terms of Section 96. Most have addresses, of varying degrees of permanence, in the form of boarding houses, shelters, supported accommodation, refuges etc. with less than 15 percent experiencing tertiary homelessness.⁴

For those who were not engaged with the electoral process, the key barrier identified was not lack of opportunity to enrol but rather an unwillingness to enrol because of alienation and/or hostility to the political process. When asked whether he thought voting was important, 'Doug' (43 years old and living in transitional accommodation) replied:

Yes and no. The way I look at it, it comes back to honesty - [honesty from the] politicians. There's a lot of bullshitting around and pulling the wool over people's eyes and contradicting themselves and doing all that wonderful crap ... and that's exactly why I don't vote.⁵

Slightly less than half of the respondents were in this category. The average voter turnout at Australian elections is 94%. If this is compared with a self-declared participation rate of 54% for the cohort homeless group interviewed, this is a section of the population that could be reasonably assumed to be severely under-represented in overall turnout figures, thus indicating a need to work directly with this group to develop a better understanding of their disillusion and disaffection and thus their participation choices.

The clearest message coming from the homeless people interviewed in this study was a lack of civic engagement, and to some extent a lack of civic competence, which prevented them from voting. Many of those who indicated they did vote explained voting as a matter of 'ticking the box' or 'placing a cross next to the one you want'. This cohort of voters is unintentionally voting informally and in doing so are having as little impact on the electoral process as those who choose not to enrol or not to vote. The issue of democratic literacy is therefore an

⁴ Chamberlain, C. and D. Mackenzie (2003) *Counting The Homeless 2001*, Canberra, ACT: Australia Bureau of Statistics, Cat No.2050.0

⁵ Johnson, 2004, chapter 6, p33

important one to pursue by way of non-partisan voter awareness programs directed at both the homeless and agency workers. Additionally, specific education programs need to be directed to AEC employees, particularly at the coalface of Divisional Returning Offices. One agency surveyed commented:

Also the discourse and language of bureaucracy is hardly endearing to people who are homeless. Whilst it is important for the homeless population to become aware of their voting rights, it is equally important that the AEC become attuned to the sensitivities of the homeless population. They are generally wary of bureaucracy,...⁶

Overall, the Swinburne study found that it is homeless people's attitudes and not their homelessness that is mainly responsible for non-voting of almost 50% of the participants. However, 64% of the participants expressed a desire to vote, indicating that they did not do so because they did not know how to engage with the system and therefore found it easier to stay off the electoral roll. An improved awareness of how to enrol and to vote may assist this group to participate. Additionally an improved understanding of how enrolment processes are modified to assist homeless people, most particularly the provisions for itinerant voters under section 96 of the Commonwealth Electoral Act of 1918 is desirable. These include the capacity for homeless people to enrol using an enrolment form specifically designed for people with no fixed address and the fact that an itinerant voter is not penalised if they fail to vote at an election. An increased awareness of these provisions may increase the willingness of this group to directly engage with government.

The current forms *Information on Enrolling as an Itinerant Elector* and *Application for Enrolment as an Itinerant Elector* were almost universally regarded by the homeless and agency workers as poorly designed and not reader friendly. Also such views were strongly expressed by those who attended the *Homeless Electors Workshop* held at the Melbourne Town Hall on Thursday 29 July 2004—especially when contrasted with the United Kingdom's Voter registration form for Homeless people.

Queensland University Study

The Queensland University Study, *Improving Access to Voting Rights Amongst the Homeless in Brisbane*, was completed in 2004, and involved the conduct of focus groups containing participants across the spectrum of homelessness to identify barriers that inhibited homeless people when voting. This study found that access to information (or lack of information) is one of the most important practical barriers to voting that affects homeless at all stages of

⁶ David Griffith, Phone Survey of Welfare Agencies, 23 July 2004, p4.

political involvement. The Queensland University study also corroborated Swinburne University's finding that the main factors that discourage homeless people from voting are an exclusion from social life, disillusionment with the government, and a lack of resources for anything but basic needs.

Transport was another issue raised by participants in the focus groups, given that a combination of poor access to information, transience, and a narrow timeframe for updating enrolment once an election has been called often means that homeless voters are often far from the electorate in which they are enrolled on election day with limited means with which to get there. Focus group participants generally agreed that homeless people staying in temporary accommodation will frequently stay for more than one month at a time thereby restricting their eligibility for itinerant elector status.

Conclusions

There are several groups of people who tend to feel disengaged from society and are known to be susceptible to civic abstention: young people; the less well educated; the socially isolated (for example, those living alone and newly arrived migrants); the homeless; and, the unemployed to name a few.⁷ Any democratic literacy program should be approached as part of a broader social program of civic engagement with the ultimate aim of ending not only the political, but also the social isolation of those experiencing homelessness and other civically disenfranchised groups.

As a small percentage of the population, approximately 100,000 people were estimated to be homeless in the 2001 census⁸. A more complex strategy will be required to politically engage the homeless and civic and education campaigns could be refined to address not only itinerant enrolment procedures but also the pertinence of civic engagement and understanding of Australia's democratic processes. These initiatives could also be further complemented by addressing other mechanical hurdles aside from lack of address that prevent civic engagement by people experiencing homelessness.

Furthermore, while the AEC can be expected to take responsibility for voter education, political parties can also contribute to civic campaigns and initiatives with disenfranchised groups such as the homeless. While some of the abstention from this group may be attributed

⁷ Hill, L. (2000), 'Compulsory voting, political shyness and welfare outcomes', *Journal of Sociology*, Vol.36, No.1. pp.35-41

to lack of knowledge concerning voting and registration policies and procedures, part of their non-participation might be attributed to political apathy, distrust and general feelings of disconnectedness with the politicians and the political system in general.

⁸ Chamberlain, C. and D. Mackenzie (2003).

Annex A.

Methodology for Interviews: Voting and Homeless in the Australian Context: Qualitative Research Exploring Homeless People's Voting Attitudes and Behaviours.

A copy of the paper and the original interview transcripts can be provided upon request.

Permission to interview clients was sought from all agencies at the outset. Participants were then approached, briefed verbally as to the nature of the study, and informed that all information would be held in confidence, and that they could withdraw at any time. Informed consent was normally given verbally, and in some cases some service providers asked that participants sign a consent form. Many individuals approached declined to participate because financial remuneration was not provided; many agencies confirmed that it common practice to provide financial incentives.

Homeless person's agencies in and around the Melbourne metropolitan area were contacted to assist in identifying individuals willing to participate in interviews for the project. Participants experiencing all of the three types of homelessness were recruited from a total of nine different centres across Melbourne. The centres either provide crisis accommodation for specific groups of people (e.g. women escaping domestic violence) or services for people experiencing homelessness (e.g. meals, counselling).

Interviews were conducted between July and August 2004 at a total of nine locations. The goal was to interview a representative sample of both men and women experiencing homelessness, accepting limitations in identifying a true sample given that all participants were recruited through homeless agencies. Interviews were conducted one on one, tape recorded, and transcribed. Tapes were destroyed upon completion of the project. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to go through a series of questions to address participants' voting attitudes, past and intended behaviours, and experiences with the electoral system and voting.

<u>Summary of Outcomes of Interviews⁹:</u>	
Profile of Participants	
Total Number of Participants: (female)	39 (25 male, 14 female)
Average Age:	33 (range: 19-47)
Voting Behaviours of Participants	
Number of participants:	
Percent of regular voters:	28%
Percent of intermittent voters:	26%
Percent of discouraged voters (have voted but no longer interested in voting; state they will not vote again; last voted over 10 years ago)	13%
Percent that stated they had never voted:	33%
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<i>Total percent of non-active voters:</i>	46%
Voting intentions of participants for 2004 Federal Election	
Percent stating desire to vote:	64%
Percent stating desire not to vote:	27%
Percent unsure:	9%
Enrolment of participants	
Percent enrolled (only 1 participant at correct address):	62%
Percent not enrolled:	36%

⁹ Thompson, J. (2004)

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