

20 December 2018

Formality Strategy

Introduction

Voting in Australian elections is a process with multiple steps. At its simplest, voting requires the elector to be enrolled, attend a polling place or use some other channel to cast a vote, and for the vote to be formal. Only if all three criteria are met can an elector have a say in determining an election result.

Informal voting is a complex issue, with many contributing factors. But regardless of the factors, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has a role in helping electors to cast formal votes.

This Formality Strategy outlines the measures which the AEC has adopted, or plans to adopt, for the next federal election to support voters to formally complete a ballot paper. The Strategy draws heavily on the AEC's Informal Ballot Paper Study conducted in respect of the 2016 House of Representatives elections.

Background

Following each general election for the House of Representatives, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) undertakes an Informal Ballot Paper Study (IBPS) to analyse the levels and types of informal voting in the HoR. Research based on the IBPS is fundamental to the AEC's role in supporting electoral integrity by:

- Informing education and information strategies to reduce informal voting, including through the provision of robust information at the polling place level.
- Providing an evidence base for reforms to the electoral system, for example, by enabling analysis of:
 - the impact of Optional Preferential Voting, and
 - aligning savings provisions between the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The 2016 election saw a change from previous formality trends. Since the mid-1990s, House of Representatives (HoR) informality rates had been rising (other than in 2007) and Senate informality rates had been comparatively stable (and low). However in 2016 the HoR informality rate fell (5.1 per cent in 2016 compared to 5.9 per cent in 2013), and the Senate informality rate rose (3.9 per cent in 2016 compared to 3.0 per cent in 2013).

In addition to the break in historical trends, the 2016 IBPS had a number of unusual findings.

- For the first time, assumed intentional informality was higher than assumed unintentional informality.

- However, among the ten divisions with the highest rates of informal voting, more than half of all informal ballot papers cast were assumed to be unintentionally informal, and assumed unintentional informality was a highly significant predictor of the total informality rate.
- For the first time since 2001, the ten divisions with the highest informality were not all in Sydney; with one in Victoria, and another in Queensland.

Analysis suggested that informality among the three divisions new to the ‘top ten’ listing (Lindsay in Sydney, Murray in Victoria and Longman in Queensland) is likely to have increased due to the high numbers of candidates on each ballot paper, as well as voter confusion about the differing numbering requirements between HoR and Senate ballot papers.

- This apparent voter confusion is evidenced by substantial numbers of HoR ballot papers being numbered from 1 to 6 only (that is, in line with the ‘above the line’ requirements for Senate ballot papers). There were 16 divisions where ballots numbered 1 to 6 only accounted for more than a fifth of all informal ballots cast, and four divisions where they accounted for more than a quarter of all informal ballots cast.

Factors influencing informal voting

AEC analysis of House of Representatives informal voting at the 2016 and previous federal elections has indicated that the following factors influence informal voting in Australian federal elections:

- A wide range of socio-demographic and socio-economic factors are associated with geographic areas recording higher informality. When taken together, these could be associated with higher levels of social exclusion or disadvantage (for example, due to poor English language skills or a lack of education).
- A change in the number of candidates between elections is a significant predictor of changes in informal voting.
- Voter confusion about the differences between state and federal voting systems may influence the number of ballots with incomplete numbering or ticks and crosses in some states and territories. That is, states or territories where optional preferential voting methods apply in lower house elections, or where ticks or crosses are accepted as a valid first preference mark appear to show higher proportions of informal ballots with such characteristics at House of Representatives elections.
- Voter confusion about the differences between requirements for House of Representatives and Senate ballot papers in 2016 also appears to have contributed to increases in the number of ballots with incomplete numbering (particularly those numbered from 1 to 6 only).

- As an intentionally informal vote represents a deliberate choice, voters' attitudes to and opinions of the electoral system or politics in general may contribute to (or even override) any of the other factors influencing informality.

Addressing the factors influencing formality

There are two primary types of informal ballots – those that are assumed to be intentionally informal (that is, they do not have a clear first preference) and those that are assumed to be unintentionally informal (that is, they have a clear first preference).¹

Intentional informal voting can be the result of a deeply held conviction, a product of voter disenchantment, or a product of electors not taking elections seriously. It is a complex issue to address, partly because in all but the most extreme cases² the AEC cannot know who casts such a vote. The AEC addresses this issue, and the issue of non-voting, by providing information about elections, and by emphasising the value of voting.

Unintentional informality can be more readily addressed through voter education and providing information at the point of voting. These are the primary means through which the AEC addresses unintentional informal voting.

In relation to the specific factors the AEC has identified as likely to be influencing informality:

- Some socio-demographic and socio-economic factors can be addressed through targeting education and information resources into areas of high informality.
- The AEC does not control the number of candidates who run for a given election, but it is one of the factors that feeds into resource allocation, allowing the AEC to respond accordingly.
- Differences between the federal and state voting systems are addressed through education activities, as well as polling place materials and staff.
- For the next election, AEC State Offices in Victoria and New South Wales will increase community engagement activities depending on the proximity of the state and federal elections (in conjunction with state counterparts).

¹ At this time there is no equivalent information for Senate informality, nor are there any detailed studies relating to informal voting at Senate elections.

² Such as an elector posting a picture or video that clearly identifies them, and clearly shows them casting an informal ballot paper.

- Confusion between HoR and Senate voting systems should reduce as familiarity with the new system increases, and as a result of continuing public information campaigns, education initiatives and the provision of information in polling places.

The specific elements, aims and methods of implementation of the strategy are discussed below.

Elements and aims of the strategy

The overall aim of the formality strategy is to reduce the level of informal voting at the next Federal election.

The primary elements of the strategy are:

- Communication and community engagement initiatives
- Staff training and deployment.

The aims of the elements are:

Communication and community engagement initiatives

- To minimise unintentional informal voting through increased voter understanding of how to vote correctly on both House of Representatives and Senate ballot papers.
- To inform target audiences of contact points for information and assistance about the voting system/process.
- To focus on high need areas (informed by data) with targeted engagement initiatives.

Staff training and deployment

- To use training to help minimise unintentional informal voting through:
 - The provision of guidance information for electors through polling place staff and materials
 - Assisting staff in the interpretation of ballot papers
 - To improve the use of Voter Information Officers (polling staff specifically employed to address formality issues in areas with high informality and Indigenous and CALD communities) so that they are deployed in a consistent and targeted manner, and are better integrated into polling place operations.

Achieving the aims of the strategy

Working in collaboration with the AEC Communities of Practice, the strategy will be delivered through the following initiatives:

- Communication and community engagement
- Voter Information Officers
- Staff training

The following is a brief description of what the initiatives will be delivering in respect to the aims of the strategy. More detail on the individual items is available in the appendix, or in the documentation of the initiatives.

Communication and community engagement initiatives

Information products

The AEC is updating the information products and guides that are made available to electors. These products include information on formality, and are either sent to all households that mail will reach, or are available on the AEC website (and therefore printable for use in community engagement activities). Existing materials include:

- The official guide to the federal election, including:
 - Translated versions in 29 languages
 - Accessible formats including audio, large print, e-text and braille for voters who are blind or experience low vision
- How to make your vote count factsheet – available to download from the AEC website, translated into 29 languages
- A guide to enrolling and voting – available to download from the AEC website, also translated into 29 languages

In addition to this existing material the following new initiatives are required to ensure the AEC meets its obligations to provide information in accessible formats, noting the people these products support tend to have higher levels of informality:

- Production of all materials made available in translated versions in Easy Read format. Easy Read is recognised as industry standard best practice and translation of products is a service the AEC can contract. Easy Read products address the information needs of many groups that tend to have higher informality: those from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD)

backgrounds, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, those who have poor literacy skills and those with an intellectual, cognitive or psycho-social disability.

- Production of all materials made available in translated versions in either an audio file or in an online format accessible by a screen reader. These formats support people who tend to have higher informality such as those with low literacy levels as well as people with a vision impairment including the elderly (pending funding and resource availability).
- Provision of key products in AUSLAN video format.
- Forward placement of special format materials through electronic provision to peak bodies nationally, and printing and direct provision of hard copies to selected community engagement partners. Placement on the AEC website does not provide the reach that peak and community organisations do.

Advertising

In 2016 the AEC mounted its biggest advertising and public relations campaign ever, with a total advertising (media placement) spend of \$47 million in round terms. This was due to additional phases being added to the campaign to inform and educate electors on how to record a formal vote under the new Senate voting provisions.

The proposed media placement budget for the next federal election will return to expenditure on par with pre-2016 levels (approximately \$17 million). The campaign will have the three phases (close of rolls, voter services and formality), and is weighted significantly on formality which represents approximately half of the budget. The absence of the previous education phase dedicated to Senate changes will, by default, rebalance messages to have equal focus on House of Representatives and Senate formality.

Formality advertisements targeting CaLD audiences will be placed in appropriate and available ethnic media channels including:

- Newspapers in 21 languages
- Television advertising focused on formality, with in-language voice over and subtitles in 8 languages
- Digital display (online banners) and social media to reach up to 10 communities in 7 languages.

Polling place materials

A range of polling place collateral is produced for election day, to assist polling officials to provide appropriate information to voters.

Polling place materials produced include formality posters (for HoR and Senate) for display, and the 'How to vote' multilingual flip book. The flip book provides information on how to vote correctly in 29 languages other than English, for use by polling staff to assist CaLD voters. These materials will be distributed to each polling place via the bulk print pack being procured through the Supply Chain project.

Public relations

The AEC will be engaging in a range of public relations activities that will include formality messages, aimed to reach as broad a cross section of the public as possible. These activities include:

- PR intermediary outreach, promoting AEC messages through existing channels in tertiary education institutions, targeted workplaces and sporting organisations
- Media releases and tweets, highlighting formality rules and promoting the practise voting tool on the AEC website
- Localised public relations initiatives, run through various State Offices, including media stories, interviews and contact with community groups.

Community engagement

Mass media campaigns do not reach all Australian communities equally. In order to reach people in communities with participation barriers (due to lack of accessible information and/or socio-demographic and economic factors), the AEC conducts community engagement programs through the Roll Management and Community Engagement Branch (RMCEB), the Indigenous Electoral Participation Program (IEPP) specialists in that branch, and State Community Engagement Officers.

For the next electoral event, the AEC will move toward a more professionalised community engagement model, identifying key partners to work with in promoting enrolment, turnout and formality. These partners will generally require a level of funding (although this will usually be modest) and have activities and obligations captured through MOUs. The direct community engagement previously undertaken by network staff will be realigned to focus on appropriate training for partner organisations to facilitate greater reach of our key messages.

The proposed delivery mechanism for this approach is captured in various communications and community engagement informality plans. If endorsed, the Community Engagement Community of Practice (operating under the guidance of the National Operations Network) will carry responsibility for national implementation. This will include identification of key partners and the establishment and development of local relationships. In turn, these key partners will be utilised to forward-place information resources at the time of an event.

Of particular note in relation to voter confusion, the Victorian and New South Wales State Offices are including additional community engagement and public relations in the event that a federal election occurs shortly after either November 2018 (Victoria) or March 2019 (New South Wales) state elections.

Staff training and deployment

Training

The AEC has increased the level of formality training received by both temporary and polling staff. This enables staff to provide better advice to voters, and to make better decisions regarding the formality of ballot papers. Specifically in this election cycle the AEC has:

- Updated the formality component of the Temporary Election Workforce training (both documents and just-in-time training videos)
- Rolled out a substantial formality component in the Election Readiness Training, which is given to on-going staff engaged in operational work during an election.

Staff deployment

The Metrics project

In 2017 the AEC conducted the *Modelling Key Election Metrics* project in conjunction with Deakin University. The project gathered data on a range of polling day activities, including data on delays in queuing. The project also noted that as queues started to form in polling places, or as polling officials started to become tired, there was a tendency for instructions provided to electors to be truncated. These instructions include those around the casting of a formal vote.

In response to the project's findings, a trial was conducted at the 2018 Fremantle by-election whereby 10 polling places used an alternate method of delivering instructions to voters. In these polling places an extra staff member was placed near the voting screens to provide assistance as requested by electors. Issuing point officers advised electors that the instructions were at the top of the ballot paper and that questions could be directed to the staff member near the voting screens.

While other factors at the Fremantle election made it difficult to test the effect on queuing times, there was a small but statistically significant increase in informality in the trial polling places, compared to the rest of the division. While another trial may be conducted in the future, this approach will not be implemented at the next election.

Voter Information Officers

Voter Information Officers (VIOs) are polling staff specifically employed to address formality issues. While the position of VIO has been in use for some time, for the next federal election a series of changes will be put in place. These include:

- Improving the deployment of the VIOs by better targeting polling places
- Integrating the concept of a VIO within standard polling place staffing, managed through the AEC's election management system, ELMS
- Integrate the position into a polling place for the entire working day.

By using information from the IBPS for the previous event, VIOs can be consistently deployed to the polling places more likely to benefit from their presence. This deployment will be easier to implement with VIOs integrated into the standard staffing and materials estimates in ELMS. And finally, by having the VIOs present throughout the polling day, targeted polling places will have an additional staff member for the scrutiny process, who has received additional training in informality.

Appendix – Table of activities and products

Activity /Product	Detail	Timing	Responsibility
Voter information products			
Official guide to the federal election	Delivered to households to coincide with the early voting period.	Day 14	NO – Comms team
Official guide to the federal election – translated versions	<p>The guide will be translated into 29 languages and made available to download for the AEC website from the Tuesday that early voting commences.</p> <p>The availability of the guide in languages other than English is promoted within the English version of the guide delivered to households.</p>	Day 14	NO – Comms team
Official guide to the federal election – accessible versions	<p>The guide will be produced in alternative, accessible versions for voters who are blind or have low vision. Alternative versions are made available via the AEC website, and Braille copies can be ordered on request.</p> <p>The availability of accessible versions of the guide is promoted within the guide delivered to households.</p>	Day 14	NO – Comms team
Advertising			
Formality phase – advertising across television, cinema, press, radio for the print handicapped, and digital channels (display, social and search).	<p>Suite of formality advertisements based on the 2016 campaign concept and materials. All materials have been market tested with target audiences.</p> <p>Minor changes were made to remove reference to the 2016 Senate voting changes. Press layout has also been reworked to balance the HoR and Senate content.</p> <p>Advertising materials will be approved, authorised and certified by the EC in line with required campaign review protocols.</p>	From Day 16	NO – Comms team

Activity /Product	Detail	Timing	Responsibility
	<p>Commences two weeks prior to election day (digital and online TV), weighted towards the week prior to election day, with the TVC appearing from Day 22.</p> <p>All major metropolitan newspapers, regional and rural press, as well as local community newspapers will carry a formality press advertisement in the week leading up to election day.</p>		
Formality advertising – CALD audiences	<p>Utilising data from Roll Management Community Engagement Branch, development of translated digital display and social media ads in up to 7 languages.</p> <p>Press advertisements translated into 21 languages for placement in key ethnic print titles.</p> <p>TVC translated voice over and subtitles in up to 8 languages for placement on SBS and other available in-language television channels.</p>	<p>From Day 16</p> <p>From Day 22</p>	NO – Comms team
Formality advertising – Indigenous audiences	<p>Utilising data from Roll Management Community Engagement Branch, development of digital display and social media ads.</p> <p>TVC appearing on NITV, Indigenous Community Television, Aboriginal Television Darwin, and Goolari TV Broome.</p> <p>Press advertisement placed in Indigenous press titles including the Koori Mail.</p> <p><i>Note: Indigenous audiences also reached through mainstream media channels.</i></p>	<p>From Day 16</p> <p>From Day 22</p> <p>Around Day 30</p>	NO – Comms team
Polling place materials			
Formality posters – House of Representatives and Senate	<p>Large A1 size printed posters are provided to every polling place to display.</p> <p>These posters and formality messages have been market tested with target audiences to ensure clarity of message.</p> <p>Artwork for posters has been approved by the EC for use at the next federal election.</p>		NO – Comms team

Activity /Product	Detail	Timing	Responsibility
How to vote guide – multilingual flip book	Information about how to make your vote count, covering the HoR and Senate. Translated into 29 languages and produced as a 'flip book' for use by Voter Information Officers/Polling Officials to assist non-English speaking voters with voting information. An individual PDF file for each language is also made available on the AEC website for reference/download/print outs.		NO – Comms team
Public relations			
PR Intermediary outreach	Distribution of pre-prepared AEC turnout/formality messages to intermediaries (tertiary education institutions, targeted workplaces and sporting organisations). Designed for intermediaries to share AEC messages on their existing channels.	Day 28	Horizon (contracted provider)
Media release/tweet – How to vote	This media release will be distributed nationally to highlight formality rules and the practice voting tool.	Day 30	AEC national office
Community engagement (Evidence provided by RMCEB will assist in identifying priority locations with high informality rates.)			
Meet with influential Community Leaders	Through established relationships with community organisations identify and meet with key community leaders to understand electoral participation barriers and work with community leaders to address those issues.	Ongoing	NO and relevant State representative
Community Electoral Education Kit – Youth, Indigenous Australians, People with Disability, Homeless and CaLD	Simple electoral information in a PowerPoint presentation, along with speaking notes which can be used by any group wishing to conduct an education session. Available on the AEC website.	Ongoing	NO and States
National Peak Body contact	Contact national organisations and community groups to raise awareness of the community education kit and encourage electoral awareness sessions	Ongoing	NO

Activity /Product	Detail	Timing	Responsibility
Translation of Easy Read Guides	Translated version of three guides in up to 21 languages to be developed to provide information on enrolling, participation and formality.	Ongoing	NO with the assistances of States to distribute
Electoral Information Sessions – Indigenous	Deliver electoral information sessions through community partners and/or IEPP staff to Indigenous Australians at key community events, meetings, conferences and forums.	Ongoing	IEPP
Electoral Information Sessions – CaLD	Utilising established relationships with multicultural and other relevant organisations to deliver education sessions in languages other than English in key locations. In partnership with the Ethnic Communities' Council of NSW deliver the Speak My Language program. The program includes an on-air discussion about the electoral process in over 25 languages across 80 ethnic radio stations, throughout NSW, Victoria and Queensland.	Ongoing	NO and States
Electoral Information Sessions – Disability	Through the Disability Advisory Committee and other relevant organisations promote the community education kit and where possible deliver electoral education sessions.	Ongoing	NO and States
Electoral Information – Homelessness and Itinerant	Through established partnerships with Orange Sky Australia and the Big Issue increase frequency of: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • electoral education resources being available to homeless and itinerant people using Orange Sky electronic tablets. • delivery of electoral education sessions at the Big Issue vendor breakfast which are held every second Friday in all capital cities – 500 people attend nationally. • Through the Big Issue Street Soccer Program deliver electoral education sessions at weekly training sessions in the following locations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Canberra ○ Sydney (the Rocks) ○ Parramatta 	Ongoing	NO and States

Activity /Product	Detail	Timing	Responsibility
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Newcastle ○ Alice Springs ○ Brisbane (New Farm) ○ Townsville ○ Adelaide (CBD) ○ Hobart (New Town) ○ Dandenong ○ North Melbourne ○ Ballart ○ Geelong ○ Morwell Perth (CBD)		
Training of staff			
Improvement of formality component of the Temporary Election Workforce training documents	The Temporary Election Workforce training documents have been updated to include a broader range of informal ballot paper examples to better illustrate the formality principles. These examples are drawn from the 2008 Review of Ballot Paper Formality Guidelines and Recount Policy, updated to account for subsequent legislative change.	Complete	NO – NTEU
Improvement of formality component of the Temporary Election Workforce training videos	Training videos have been created to aid face to face training sessions, and to provide just-in-time training delivery through YouTube. They include the script for issuing officers (which includes instructions for filling out the ballot paper), the initial and fresh scrutines of HoR ballot papers (when formality is examined) and the Senate count.	Complete	NO – NTEU
Election Readiness Program training modules to incorporate formality training	Module 9 (Election Day/Night) of the Election Readiness Program training includes a 45 minute session on formality for HoR ballot papers. The session includes a practical component on making formality decisions, along with tests, principles and guidelines. This material is reinforced in later modules.	Training incorporated, delivery ongoing	NO – NTEU

Activity /Product	Detail	Timing	Responsibility
Changes in polling place staff deployment			
Ensure consistent and targeted deployment of Voter Information Officers	Voter Information Officers (VIOs) are specifically employed to address formality issues. As of the next full federal election, VIOs will be integrated into standard staffing, and their materials into standard materials estimates and distribution. Placement of VIOs will be targeted to areas of high informality, based on previous electoral events.	The next full federal election polling day	NO – Elections Branch