

Early Voting in Australian Federal Elections: Causes and Consequences¹

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Abstract

The research examined who is likely to vote early and why they do so. Correlation analysis at the Commonwealth electoral division level shows that age, income and education are associated with the type of early vote (pre-poll or postal votes) voters are more likely to cast. The analysis suggests that the largest numbers of early votes, in the form of pre-poll votes, are cast by middle age and older Australians with average incomes and lower levels of education. “Convenience” is the main reason given by Australians to vote early but this is not among the allowed reasons listed by *the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*.

Keywords: elections, early voting, pre-poll voting, postal voting, demographics, convenience.

Introduction

Early voting, either through pre-poll or postal votes, has become an institutionalised part of Australian electoral participation. Far from being surprising, the increases in early voting in recent elections have been the continuation of a long-running trend. Much like picking up a How To Vote card from party workers outside the polling place or patronising the primary school sausage sizzle, early voting has become part of how Australians expect to vote.

At the 2013 federal election about one in four (26.4 per cent) votes were cast early. The vast majority of these, and the fastest growing category, were early votes cast in person at pre-poll polling places. The AEC refers to these votes as “pre poll ordinary” votes, in contrast to “pre-poll declaration votes”, as they are placed directly into a ballot box,

¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect an official view of the Australian Electoral Commission or the Australian Government.

without requiring a declaration envelope. Postal votes are also continuing to increase in number, although not so rapidly as pre-poll ordinary votes (Figure 1).

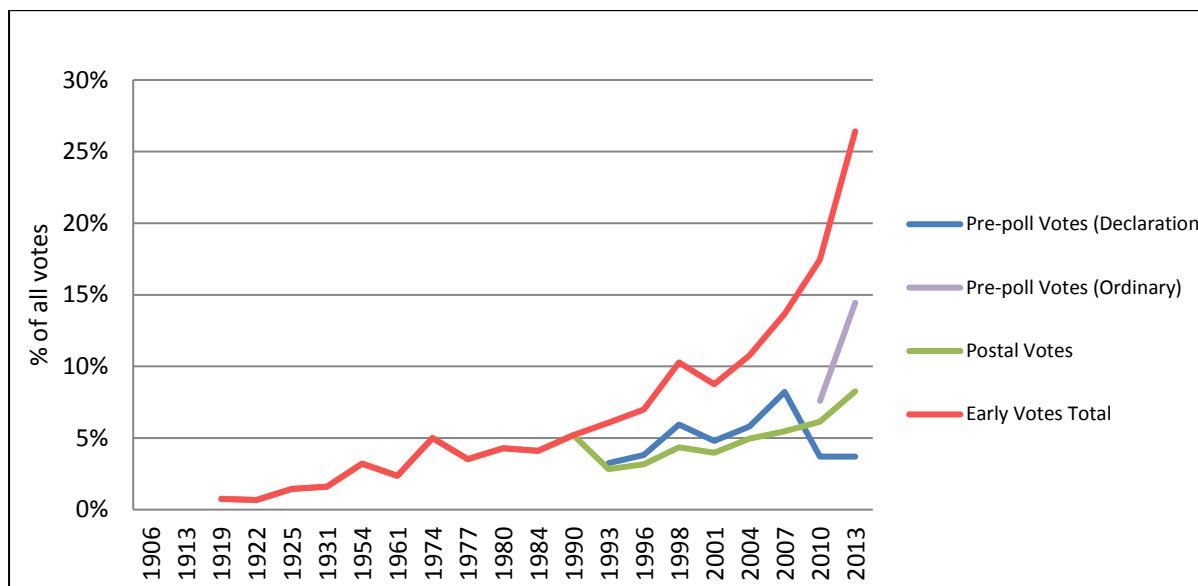


Figure 1: Early votes in Australian federal elections over time by type of vote (Source: AEC data).

Scholars and commentators have researched and speculated upon the impact of early voting on the democratic process; however these discussions are not covered in this paper. At a more practical level, the increase in early voting has substantial impacts on the logistics of running an election. As a case in point, the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Act) was changed in 2010 in response to the increase in early votes. *The Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Pre-poll Voting and Other Measures) Act 2010* amended the Act to allow in-division early votes to be cast (and counted) as ordinary votes. This change explains the decline in declaration votes in 2010. The change stemmed from a concern that the increase in early votes, combined with the time-consuming preliminary scrutiny process for declaration votes required by the Act, would eventually delay the count substantially and prevent the declaration of the results on election night (Grey 2010).

At a logistical level, the allocation of resources, securing appropriate premises, and sufficiently anticipating demand are all important issues for electoral management bodies. These issues can be supported by research into early voting, particularly who is voting early, where they are voting and why they are voting early.

Most of the analysis of early voting and age categories in this paper utilises AEC administrative data. Census data have also been incorporated to explore relationships with socio-demographic variables such as education and income. Given that Census data

are based on the total population in specific geographical areas and AEC data are based on the total number of voters by similar geography sets (Commonwealth electoral divisions), patterns across AEC and Census data can be explored. However, inferences in this paper must be treated with appropriate caution. Data points do not represent individuals, but rather an aggregate of people per Commonwealth electoral division for both voting behaviour and demographic characteristics. As such, there are limits to what can be concluded and incorrect inferences at the individual-level (ecological fallacy) may emerge from this type of analysis (Brewer 2014).

Due to the small number of pre-poll polling places and the nature of postal voting, early voting is difficult to examine at any geographically smaller level than Commonwealth electoral divisions. This is in contrast to election day votes, where catchment areas for the almost 8 000 polling places can be derived and the characteristics of these much smaller areas can be compared using census data.

The rapid and continuing increase in early voting suggests that prediction of early voting levels by geography will be important in meeting early voting demand. Consequently, any prediction of these levels based on factors such as demographic shifts are important to explore and understand in order to deliver the franchise and meet the changing needs of Australian voters. This represents a logistical challenge for electoral management bodies in terms of making it possible for everyone to exercise their right to vote given increasing demand.

Who is voting early?

Early voting is increasing at different rates across electoral divisions, states and demographic categories. With the exception of the 2010 election, the ACT had the highest levels of early voting of any state or territory between the 2001 and 2013 federal elections (the NT edged slightly higher in 2010). Early voting rates in NT were also among the highest in the country from 2001 to 2010. However, this changed in 2013 when Victoria and Queensland ranked for the first time higher than NT, although they remained lower than ACT. Moreover, in the 2013 federal election NSW had early voting rate close to those of the NT.

In 2013, the demographically dissimilar divisions of Indi (Victoria), Fairfax (Queensland) and Fraser (ACT) recorded the highest rates of early voting (43.8 per cent, 40.1 per cent and 39.7 per cent respectively). The divisions of Wakefield (12.7 per cent) and Port Adelaide (14.6 per cent) in South Australia had the lowest rates of early voting in both the 2010 and 2013 elections. The rural areas of the east coast have had relatively high levels of early voting since 2001, as can be seen for 2013 in Figure 2. However, there are no particular patterns among rural, outer and inner metro areas evident across Australia.

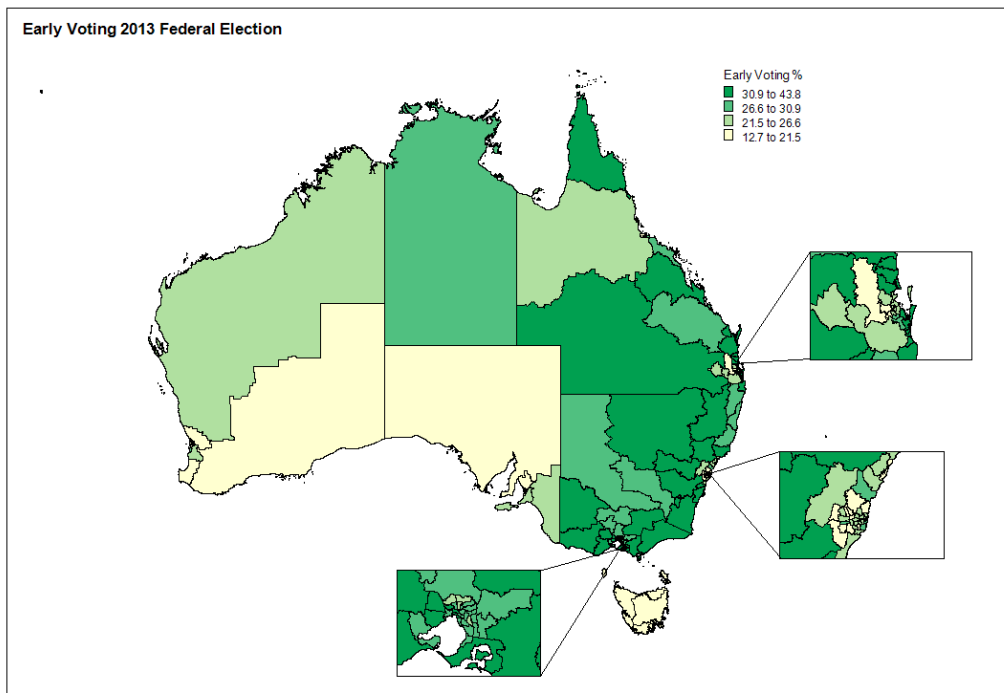


Figure 2: Early voting rates from the 2013 federal election by commonwealth electoral division (Source: AEC data).

Age

An examination of the enrolment records of those voters who voted early in the 2013 federal election shows distinct age patterns between the different types of early voting. In general, the age distributions skew youngest for pre-poll declaration votes, somewhat older for pre-poll ordinary votes and oldest for postal votes (Figure 3).

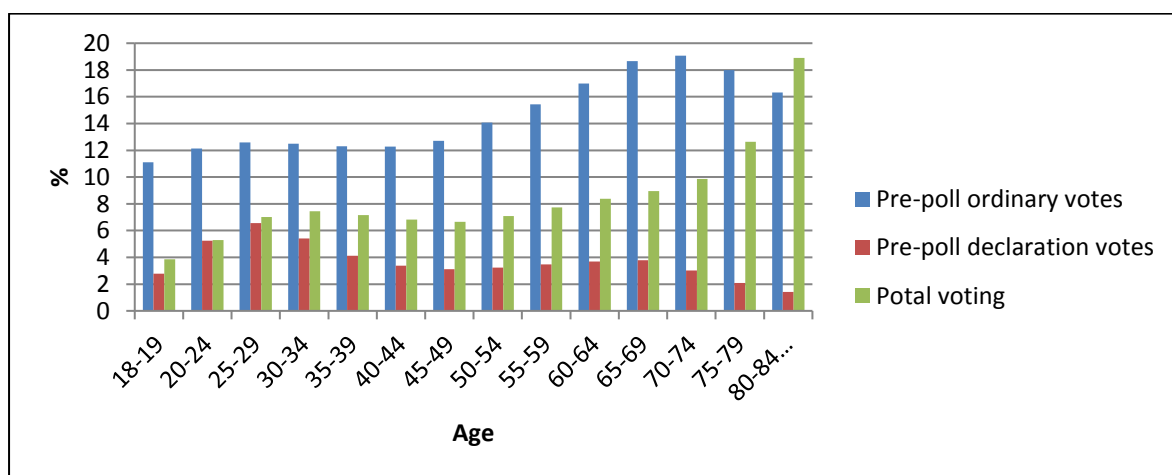


Figure 3: AEC enrolment records, age specific rates of pre-poll ordinary, pre-poll declaration and postal voting 2013 as a proportion of all votes in the age group (Source: AEC data).

Similar patterns for postal voting and age are found in other international jurisdictions. For example, research conducted by the California Civic Engagement Project shows that in California the oldest voters are more likely to cast postal votes than the youngest (Pew 2014).

A logistic regression analysis was carried out to look at what demographic factors were associated with electoral divisions having high (above average) levels of early voting. Divisions which had very high (more than one standard deviation above the mean) proportions of population aged 60 and above were 7.6 times more likely in 2010 and 6.6 times more likely in 2013 to have high levels of pre-poll ordinary votes, which is consistent with the figures presented above. Age distribution is amongst the easiest of demographic trends to model, and so potentially has significant utility for predicting future early voting demand.

Education

Statistical analysis shows that education has an impact on the type of early vote people are more likely to cast. A correlation analysis at the division level between early voting and education levels shows that divisions with a higher proportion of people with high levels of education (a diploma or higher level of education), as recorded at the 2011 Census, had more pre-poll declaration votes ($r = .431, p < .05$) and postal votes ($r = .335, p < .05$) cast, but fewer pre-poll ordinary votes ($r = -.239, p < .05$). Conversely, divisions with low levels of education were more likely to have higher numbers of pre-poll ordinary votes ($r = .3, p < .05$) but fewer pre-poll declaration ($r = -.5, p < .05$) and postal votes ($r = -.3, p < .05$).

Income

There is also evidence that the early voting preferences of high income earners are different to low income earners. Divisions with high incomes were more likely to cast pre-poll declaration votes ($r = .404, p < .05$) but less likely to cast pre-poll ordinary votes ($r = -.310, p < .05$). By contrast, people in the \$28,800 to \$41,599 income bracket (which includes the Australian median income) were more likely to cast pre-poll ordinary votes ($r = .235, p < .05$) but less likely to cast pre-poll declaration votes ($r = -.385, p < .05$). The logistic regression analysis shows a similar pattern. Divisions with a very high percentage of people earning around the median income were 3.6 times more likely in the 2010 federal election, and 4 times more likely in the 2013 federal election to have high percentages of pre-poll ordinary votes.

To contextualise the above demographic analysis, it should be noted that pre-poll declaration votes constitute a small proportion of all early votes in recent elections. Pre-poll ordinary votes, in contrast, constitute the largest proportion and are more likely to be cast by middle aged and older voters with average incomes and lower levels of education. This suggests that the majority of early voters are not a specific sub-set of voters who are

voting early for a specific reason, as may be the case for pre-poll declaration and postal voters.

Additionally, there is also some evidence that early voting might be habit forming. An examination of voting records at federal elections from 1998 to 2013 showed that the more times a voter had voted early in the past, the more likely they were to vote early in the future. So, for example, if an individual had voted early four consecutive elections, the chance of them voting early in the subsequent election was almost 90 per cent (Figure 4). These data do not reveal why people voted early, but the strong upward trend suggests it is a voting option that is valued highly by an increasing number and proportion of people.

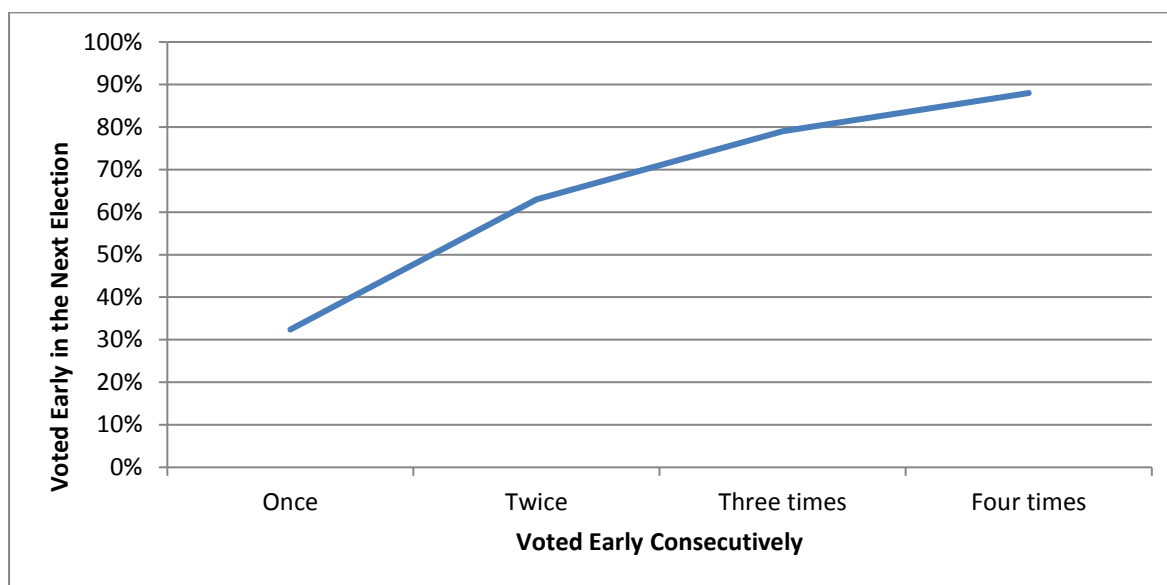


Figure 4: The likelihood of voting early at a federal election given the number of times the elector has previously voted at one or more federal elections (Source: AEC data).

Why are people voting early?

While knowing who is voting early is of interest, the demographic correlates do not suggest any particular recommendations for AEC operations. Knowing why people are voting early may have more direct implications for this purpose.

The AEC conducted research on electors at both the 2010 and 2013 federal elections, including exit polls at certain polling places and nationally representative phone surveys. At each of these elections voters were asked whether they voted early and, if so, why.

Schedule 2 of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* outlines the acceptable reasons for casting an early vote at a federal election. Importantly, convenience is not among the reasons listed. However, perhaps unsurprisingly, convenience was consistently listed as being the main reason for voting early by those surveyed (Figure 5). The reason of “convenience” is, however, somewhat ambiguous as it can cover circumstances that

present vastly different levels of difficulty. Further, some respondents may have stated convenience as a reason even though their circumstances were amongst those allowed in the Act. For example, a voter who knows they will be travelling on election day may be able to cast a postal or an absent vote (a vote at a polling place outside of their own division), but it may be more convenient for them to cast their vote prior to travelling at a pre-poll polling place in their own division. To better understand this issue, in 2013 respondents were asked whether they would have been able to cast a vote on election day had early voting not been available. More than three quarters (77 per cent) said they could have but no information is available about how easy or difficult it would have been to do so.

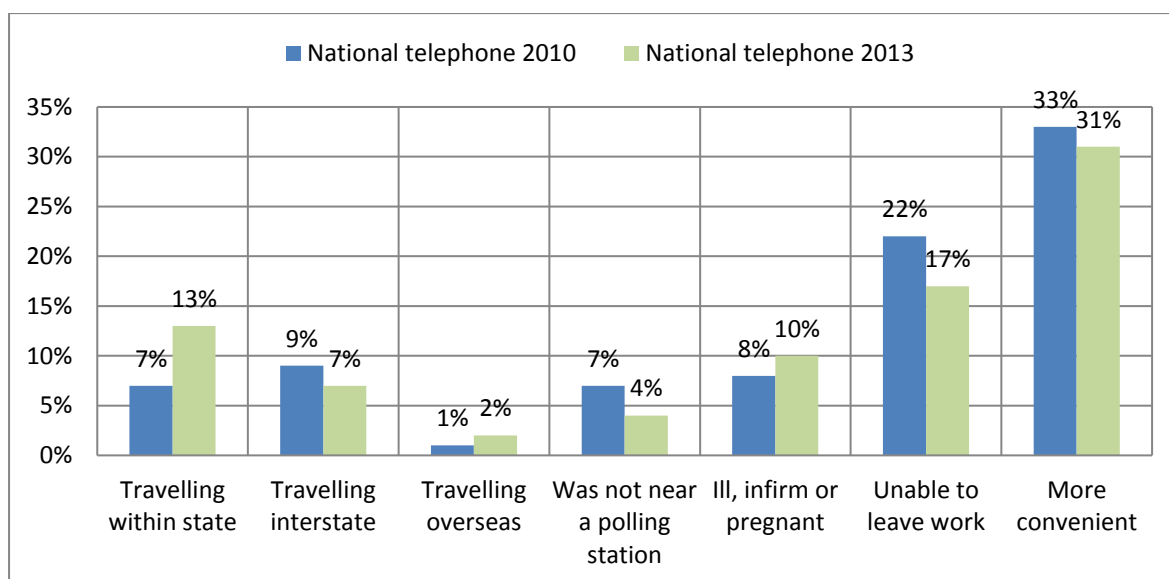


Figure 5: Reasons given by survey respondents for early voting at the 2010 and 2013 federal elections (Unprompted answers) (Source: AEC data).

Australian elections, held on a Saturday, are often considered to be more convenient than the national elections of other countries which are held on a week day, such as on a Tuesday in the United States. However voting on a Saturday has become more difficult for many people with changes in patterns of time use in Australia. Previously standard Monday to Friday jobs are becoming less common, and those working in retail, in hospitality, or with child caring responsibilities may not find voting on Saturday particularly convenient (ABS 2009).

One of the activity patterns which is likely to be related to early voting is the increase in outbound trips by Australians. Statistics indicate that outbound travel by Australians started to increase substantially between 2001 and 2004 and has been growing since (See Figure 6). Although the number of outbound travellers is substantially increasing,

only a small proportion of voters report outbound travel as their reason for voting early. Internal AEC research on electors shows that just one per cent and two per cent of voters in the 2010 and 2013 elections respectively mentioned “travelling overseas” as reason for casting an early vote. Thus, the increasing trend of travelling overseas has at most a small impact on the increasing trend of early voting.

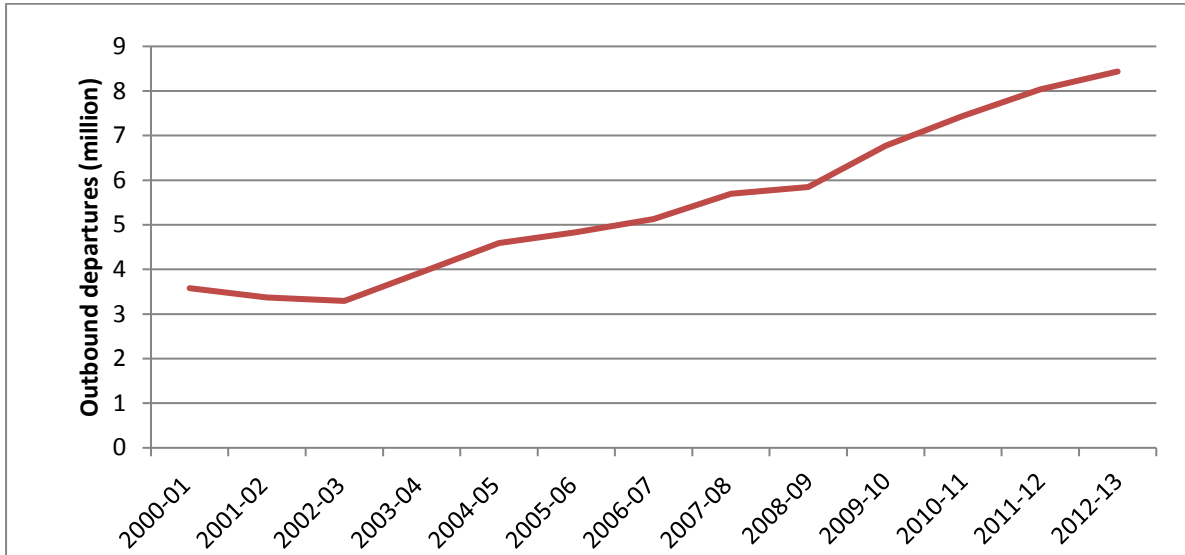


Figure 6: Outbound travel trends (Source: TRA)

In 2010 a question was asked by the Australian Election Study (McAllister & Cameron 2014) on the ease of voting over different periods. While the most common response was that it made no difference, a substantial proportion of people, more than one in three, reported that voting would be somewhat or much easier if voting was held over a weekend or over a one week period (Figure 7). These results suggest that there is a genuine desire for flexible voting options among Australian voters.

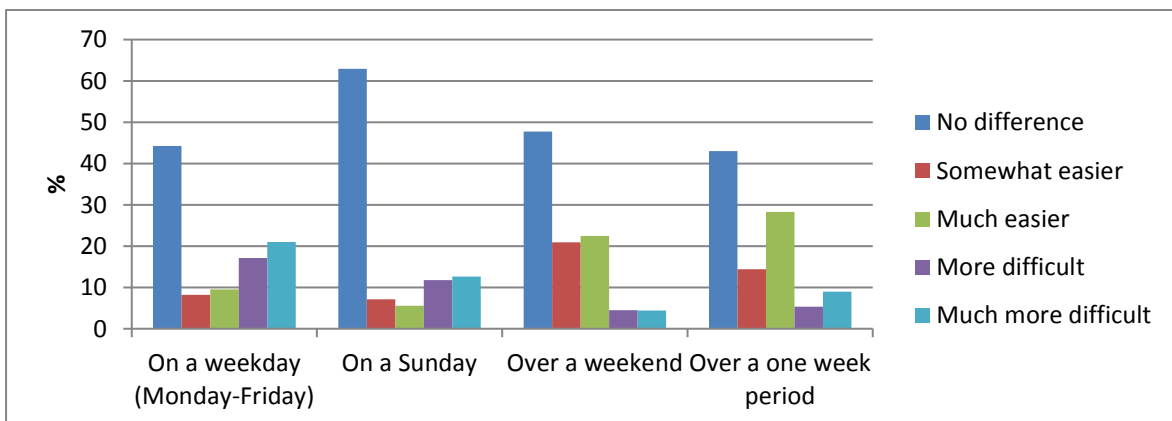


Figure 7: Responses to question of whether voting would be easier if held over different time periods (McAllister, I. & et al. 2011).

The low number of demographic correlates of early voting may be due to the dilution of statistical significance associated with large within-group demographic statistical variance. However, it may also be the case that early voting has essentially become normalised. The reasons that people vote early, particularly reasons of convenience, their jobs or travel, are not tied to any particular demographic. If current trends continue then voting on election day will eventually become the exception, rather than the norm.

Consequences of Early Voting

Australians are generally happy to comply with their obligation to vote. Research has consistently shown that high proportions of Australians report they would vote even if it was not compulsory (Figure 8). It has been proposed by McAllister (2011) that our compulsory voting system has led to a higher level of democratic engagement than is seen in other similar western democracies.

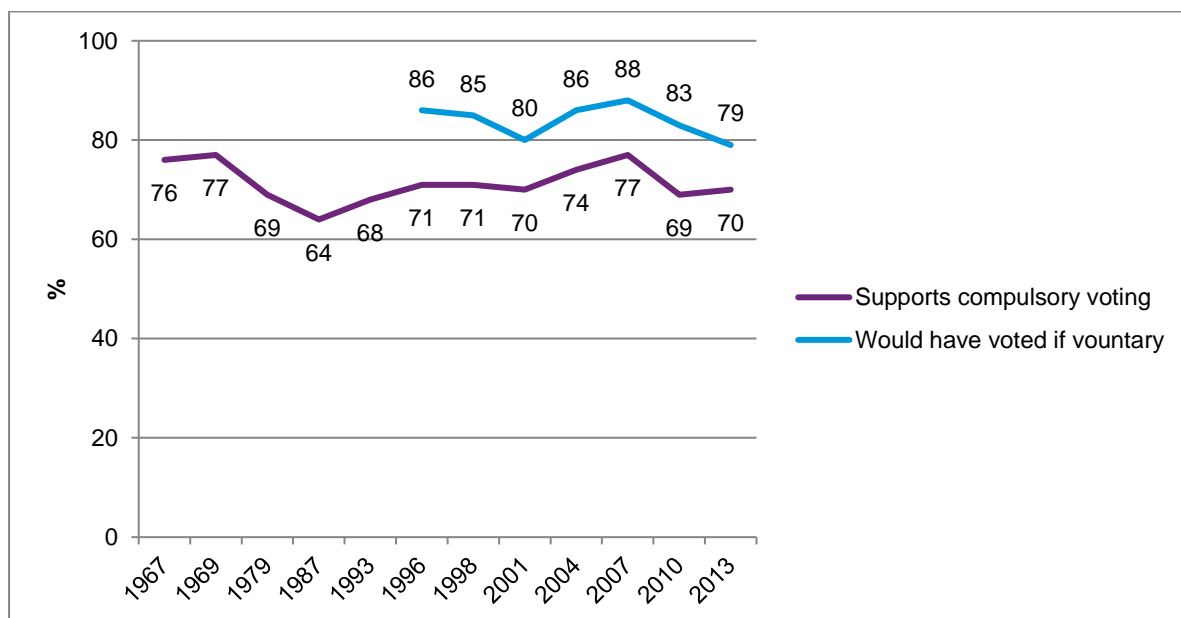


Figure 8: Compulsory voting and likelihood of voting if voluntary (McAllister & Cameron 2014, p. 33)

The legal obligation to vote may result in the state, through election management bodies such as the AEC, making greater efforts to ensure that all eligible voters can cast a vote (see, for example, Hill 2004). In the case of Australia, this means that Australians overseas (including in Antarctica), in remote communities, in hospitals or nursing homes, who live long distances from polling places, who are not able to read a ballot paper due to vision impairment, or who are unable to attend a polling place are all able to exercise their franchise and have their vote counted.

Due to the almost unique nature of the Australian electoral context, international research offers little insight into the potential effects of increased early voting. The effect on the political process of early voting is beyond the remit of the AEC, however, where early voting impacts on measures of democratic health such as turnout, enrolment and formality is of direct interest to the AEC.

An analysis of enrolment records at federal elections shows that early voters may be slightly less engaged in the electoral process than election day voters, with those who historically voted early slightly less likely to vote in their next election. For example, between 1998 and 2013, of the voters who had regularly voted early (at least four times) 4.1 per cent did not vote in the subsequent election. Of the voters who had regularly voted on election day (at least four times) only 2.4 per cent did not vote in the subsequent election (Figure 9). While this difference is small, the rate of non-voting is consistently higher for those who have historically voted early.

It is not clear from these data whether early voting makes people less electorally engaged, (potentially through early voting reducing the significance of the election day experience) or whether those voters who are less electorally engaged to start with (and therefore less likely to vote) will take the more convenient option of voting early. This is an area which could be examined in more detail in the future.

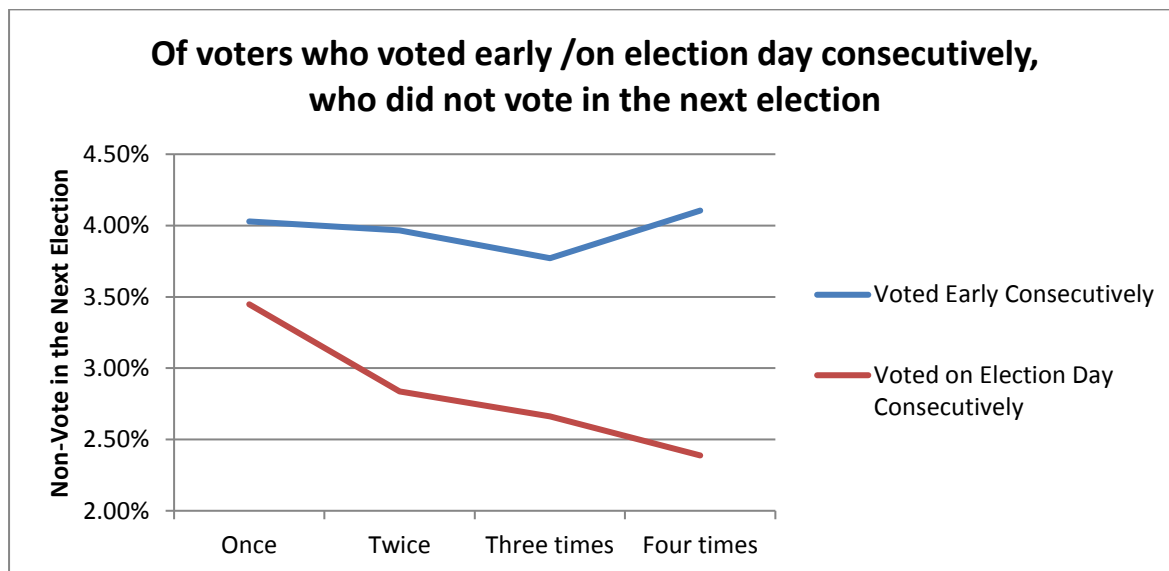


Figure 9: Early voting and non-turnout, enrolment records from 1998 to 2013 (Source: AEC data).

In terms of electoral logistics, the impacts of increased early voting on election management bodies in Australia are significant. Pre-poll ordinary votes represent the fastest increase in early voting and drive resource requirements for pre-poll voting

centres. Further, declaration votes (whether cast early or on election day) take longer to scrutinise and count. In the 2014 South Australian state election, for example, a combination of high numbers of early votes (all of which were cast as declaration votes) and a close contest meant that the results of the election were still uncertain days after the poll (The Australian 2014).

Advocates of early voting in the USA argue that early voting is an opportunity to increase the efficiency of election administration and reduce the election burden on precincts on election day (McSweeney 2010). This is not self-evidently true in the Australian electoral context. In the 2013 federal election, all 100 of the largest polling places were pre-poll polling places. There were 29 pre-poll polling places which took over 10 000 votes (the largest of which, Ballarat Pre Poll Voting Centre, took almost 17 000 votes), and while these votes were cast over about three weeks, all had to be counted on election night. The appropriate distribution of resources across pre-poll polling and election day polling centres is a real challenge given the difficulty of forecasting early voting demand at the polling place level, and being able to accurately link the subsequent drop in demand on election day back to particular polling places. Moreover, reducing the number of conveniently located polling place on election day may negatively impact on turnout. Consequently, further research is needed to inform decision making and planning to address these issues.

Perhaps because of the convenience factor of early voting, those who vote at pre-poll polling places have traditionally not complained about queues at pre-poll polling places, however queuing effects can be significant. Concerns about queuing to pre-poll may be increasing, and for example in South Australia voters were warned to expect queues if they wanted to vote early for the 2014 State election (ABC 2014). Given that many pre-poll voters are voting in between their week day commitments, if pre poll resources are insufficient, the subsequent long queues may result in some voters abandoning their attempts to vote early. In some cases they might therefore not be able to vote at all.

Early voting has the potential to reduce long queues on election day but also may increase the burden of election administration over a longer time period. Continued increases in early voting will challenge electoral management bodies that have to appropriately resource early and election day polling places.

Conclusion

Early voting has become an accepted feature of elections in Australia at both the federal and the state level, and one that is taken advantage of by an increasing number and proportion of voters. Early voting has a substantial impact on the logistics of running an election and the amount of time over which election resourcing needs to be coordinated.

Consequently, forecasting the number and location of early votes will be increasingly important to inform the distribution of election resources between early and election day polling places.

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