

Referendum workforce: being impartial and issue neutral at the AEC - what you need to know

What is political and issue neutrality?

Being neutral, that is not expressing an opinion or taking actions, in relation to political parties, political candidates, and their policies is being politically neutral.

Being neutral, that is not expressing an opinion or taking actions that support either side of the subject of the referendum is being issue neutral.

Why do I need to be political and issue neutral?

The AEC's role is to deliver the referendum with the highest levels of integrity and impartiality. This requires the AEC and its staff, including temporary workers, to be both politically neutral and issue neutral.

The AEC places a strong emphasis on political neutrality and issue neutrality because it is responsible for providing the Australian people with an independent electoral service.

The important thing about working at the AEC is our commitment to neutrality, no matter whether it's political neutrality at an election, or issue neutrality at a referendum.

As a temporary worker, you play an important part in supporting the AEC perform its role in helping eligible Australians to vote. This includes:

- fostering an inclusive polling place and workforce that fully supports participation in the voting process
- promoting the safety and wellbeing of polling place staff and voters
- ensuring the integrity of the result through AEC processes.

What does it mean for me?

The AEC must maintain strict political and issue neutrality and cannot engage as an employee anyone who is, or is seen to be, publicly active in political or issue affairs.

Remaining issue neutral does not mean temporary workers cannot have a personal view on the referendum question. Rather, it's about making sure we don't let our personal views or opinions influence the way we perform our job as temporary workers or say or do anything that might give the perception that this is the case.

In the context of the 2023 referendum, this means:

- not allowing your personal view on the referendum question to influence your decision making or conduct as a temporary election worker

- not maintaining any connection with, or indicating any bias or preference for or against, the 'Yes' or 'No' side of the debate
- not publicly expressing an opinion on the referendum question, or saying or doing anything that could be perceived as expressing an opinion (including via personal social media accounts, letters, or emails), and
- being diligent with who and what you discuss regarding the referendum question – it's also important to note that remaining issue neutral applies even if you're using social media anonymously, or under an alias or pseudonym.

What about social media?

When we talk about 'social media,' we mean a wide range of online interactions on many different platforms, including social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat and Reddit, or professional networking sites like LinkedIn, or video sharing sites and apps like YouTube and TikTok, and includes blogs or online forums. It may also include comments on news articles and in some cases, more seemingly private tools like email.

All AEC employees, including the temporary workforce, must not make public comment on the referendum or share the knowledge gained of AEC business to comment on any issues. This includes questions about the process, political and issue neutrality, and the impartiality or independence of the AEC.

Off-hand or careless posts on social media can undermine public trust and erode confidence in the AEC and the integrity of the voting process. Your behaviour on social media before you joined the AEC could affect public trust and confidence. It might be a good time to review your online footprint and remove posts that could compromise your neutrality as an AEC employee.

Behaviours may include posting content, uploading pictures or commentary, participating in online petitions or fundraisers, commenting on posts, blogs, Instagram photos or YouTube videos, sharing memes, or just simply 'liking' other people's content. It may also include sending direct or private messages on networking platforms.

For more information on social media in the Australia Public Service visit [Social media: Guidance for Australian Public Service Employees and Agencies | Australian Public Service Commission \(apsc.gov.au\)](https://www.apsc.gov.au/social-media-guidance).

Can I comment on AEC social media posts?

No. Please do not comment on queries directed to the AEC or related to AEC business. The AEC has a dedicated media team that will respond to public comments and queries. However, you can 'like' an AEC social media post.

If you come across online disinformation or misinformation about the referendum you can notify the media team at media@aec.gov.au

How should I respond to questions about the referendum?

You could say something like I'm not able to comment because I work for the AEC which is the independent organisation that's running the referendum. I have to be neutral on politics and the referendum question.

You can also refer them to the AEC website where there is information about the referendum process.

What should I wear to work at the referendum

The AEC recommends wearing neat and comfortable clothing that does not have branding that could be perceived to be comprising political and issue neutrality. Consider your choice of clothing and ask yourself how it could be perceived from a political and issue neutrality perspective.

AEC staff must not wear political/campaign messages on badges or clothing when representing the AEC, such as in a polling place. You can wear First Nations artwork on items of clothing, as long as it does not endorse an outcome of the referendum or express a personal opinion.

Do I need to wear AEC identification?

Yes. You must always wear your AEC vest and AEC identification when you are working for the AEC. As a personal safety measure, you must remove your AEC vest or identification outside of AEC sites.

What is the *Acknowledgement and Declaration of Key Obligations Upon Engagement* form?

All AEC staff, both permanent and temporary, are required to provide a declaration of political and issue neutrality which is designed to avoid a conflict of interest. Being a member of a political party or having a prior party affiliation does not automatically mean you are not able to work for the AEC, but you are required to maintain neutrality and you may face dismissal if you do not.

When you register to work for the AEC at electoral events, you need to acknowledge your commitment to political and issue neutrality. The Acknowledgement and Declaration of Key Obligations Upon Engagement (ADKO form) is a requirement to ensure you understand your obligations.

Supporting your wellbeing

Your safety and wellbeing is important to the AEC.

We all have different reactions and experiences about the topic of the referendum, and we need to be considerate of our colleagues and the public.

It is our responsibility to actively build and maintain a safe and respectful environment and help keep each other safe and supported.

You may encounter differing views or opinions you find distressing. Should you experience this while working at the referendum, speak with your supervisor or contact the divisional office.

For support 24 hours a day, seven days a week, you can contact:

- 13YARN (13 92 76) (for First Nations employees)
- Lifeline (13 11 14)
- Benestar (1800 071 198). Benestar is the Employee Assistance Program provider for the referendum. This service is available to AEC Staff, including our temporary workforce.

I still have questions, who can I contact?

If you would like more information or have questions about neutrality or impartiality you can contact the Employ Train Pay (ETP) Helpdesk at employtrainpay@aec.gov.au or on 02 6271 4631.