

Mr Mark Roberts
Executive Officer
Electoral Matters Committee
Parliament of Victoria
Parliament House, Spring Street
East Melbourne Vic 3002

16 July 2017

RE: Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Participation

Dear Mr Roberts,

I refer to the letter from the Hon Louise Asher MP, Chair of the Electoral Matters Committee, dated 5 June 2017 to the Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) in relation to the Committee's Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Participation.

Please find attached submission from the VLGA to this inquiry as requested by the Committee Chair.

We would like to inform the Committee that the VLGA is prepared to speak before the Committee during the public hearings from Monday 23 October.

We also seek permission from the Committee to release this submission to our members and Victorian councils generally before the public hearing date.

Please contact [REDACTED] or via email [REDACTED] if you have any queries in relation to any aspect of this submission.

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]

Kathryn Arndt
CEO VLGA

Attachment 1: Submission from the Victorian Local Governance Association

Introduction

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Participation by the Electoral Matters Committee.

The VLGA will respond to the inquiry terms of reference in general terms as this inquiry relate to state parliamentary elections and the VLGA submission will be informed from its experiences of local government elections and our limited experience in contacts with the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC). This submission focuses on three particular issues: voter turnout, informal votes and voter education and engagement in the electoral participation process.

Voter turnout

In preparing this submission, the VLGA examined the voting statistics between the 2014 State election and the 2016 local council elections. We would like to highlight the following for the Committee's attention:

- The voter turnout for the 2014 State election was 93%, identical to the 2010 and the 2006 State election turnouts when rounded off to the nearest whole percentage pointⁱ.
- The percentage of informal votes cast for the 2014 State election was 5% for the lower house and 3% for the upper houseⁱⁱ.
- The voter turnout for the 2016 local government elections was 72% in all councils, comparable to the 2012 and 2008 council election turnouts when rounded off to the nearest whole percentage point (71% and 75% respectively)ⁱⁱⁱ
- There has been a sharp decline in voter turnout from 70% in 2008 down to 64% in 2012 and 61% in 2016 in local government elections where attendance voting is required. Postal voting in council elections resulted in similar voter turnouts – 76% in 2008, 73% in 2012 and 74% in 2016^{iv}.
- The percentage of informal votes cast for the 2016 local government elections was 6%, with attendance voting attracting higher rate of informal votes (8%) compared with postal voting (6%)^v.
- There has been an upward trend in informal votes from 5% to 6% for all council elections between 2008 and 2016. In particular, the percentage of informal votes for postal votes increased from 4% in 2008 to 6% in 2016. 72 out of 78 councils used postal voting for their 2016 elections^{vi}.

It can be seen from the above that there is already very good voter engagement at the State election level, much higher than at the local government elections level. The VLGA therefore contends that increasing electoral participation in local government elections would be beneficial and may well have consequential benefits for electoral participation in State elections.

Informal votes

In relation to strategies to reduce informal voting, the above statistics again do not suggest that informal voting is a major cause of concern at the State election level. However, the 6% of informal votes at local government elections do warrant further commentary.

The VEC analysed the informal vote in the 2016 local government elections, the first time it has done so, in order to examine any trends among the informal votes. The VEC found that *“68.8% of the informal votes were cast by voters who expressed a clear preference, but their vote could not be counted because of the formality rules in the (Local Government) Act”*^{vii}.

The VCE also demonstrated in its analysis that the average informal votes rose dramatically from 3.1% where there were 2-5 candidates standing, through to 6.49% with 11-15 candidates standing, 10.02% with 21-25 candidates and 14.65% with more than 25 candidates standing^{viii}.

The VEC concluded that *“the more candidates there were in an election, the higher the informal vote tended to be. This can be measured by the correlation between the number of candidates and the informal voting rate, which as $+0.828758^1$. This has been a consistent pattern since at least the 2005 council elections”*^{ix}.

The VEC recommended that the Victorian Government gives *“consideration of a remedy for the increased level of unintentional information voting in elections with high number of candidates”*^x.

The VEC analysis of informal votes in the 2016 local government elections and subsequent conclusion and recommendation provides considerable insight into strategies which may assist in addressing informal votes at State elections.

The VLGA highlights to the Committee that the Local Government Act is currently being re-written, and opportunities exist to potentially address the VEC’s recommendation above regarding informal votes. Once again, the VLGA contends that changes to electoral participation at local government level will have positive benefits for State elections.

Voter education and engagement

Victorian councils currently engage the VEC to run their local government elections. This is done via a service agreement between a council and the VEC. The VLGA has been informed by the VEC that the extent of community education and engagement during council elections is determined by councils in their service agreements. The VEC, as the independent provider of election services, do not engage in additional community education and engagement.

The VLGA respects the independent role of the VEC as the provider of election services and appreciates the potential for misconception among community and citizens for the VEC to undertake community education and engagement activities during election periods.

¹ A correlation between +/- 0.5 – 1.0 is considered to be strong to very strong

The VLGA notes that the VEC website does contain information and resources under the Education and Inclusion section. However, some resources, such as the slide presentation for the CALD community were developed in 2009. There does not seem to be a systematic voter engagement and education program within the VEC.

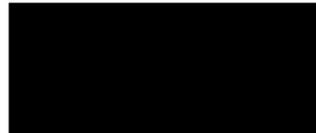
Conclusion and recommended actions

As stated above, the VLGA submission is drawn from the experiences of local government elections. The comparative data on voter turnout and informal votes suggest that these issues warrant greater levels of attention and action at the local government election level than at the State election level. Moreover, increased ongoing voter education and engagement will enhance electoral participation in all levels of government. Accordingly, the VLGA recommends that a state-wide strategy be developed to enhance electoral participation in local and State government elections. In particular, the Committee may consider the following actions:

1. Updating voter education and engagement resources, targeting those group experiencing barriers for electoral participation such as youths and voters from CALD backgrounds.
2. A pro-active and ongoing voter education and engagement program be developed and implemented with all relevant stakeholders.
3. Development and ongoing analysis of electoral participation measures such as voter turnover and informal votes to evaluate and enhance the voter education and engagement program.



Kathryn Arndt
CEO VLGA



Cr Marg Attley
President, VLGA

ⁱ [https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/files/Report to Parliament on 2014 Vic election Section 08 Voting.pdf](https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/files/Report%20to%20Parliament%20on%20the%20conduct%20of%20the%202016%20Local%20Government%20Elections.pdf)

ⁱⁱ Ibid (page 27)

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<https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/files/Report%20on%20the%20conduct%20of%20the%202016%20Local%20Government%20Elections.pdf>

^{iv} Ibid (page 25)

^v Ibid (page 250)

^{vi} Ibid (page 25)

^{vii} Ibid (page 26)

^{viii} Ibid (page 26)

^{ix} Ibid (page 26)

^x Ibid (page x)

