



Parliament of Victoria  
Electoral Matters Committee  
Parliament House  
Spring Street  
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002  
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November 6, 2020

Dear Committee

Re: Impact of Social media on Victorian Elections and Victoria's Electoral Administration

EMILY's List Australia is a financial, political, and personal support network for progressive Labor women candidates. It is the only network of its kind in Australian politics and has been significant in raising the level of representation of ALP women across state, territory and federal parliaments. Since its inception in 1996, ELA has helped 271 women MPs to be elected into parliaments around Australia. In addition, we have supported more than 300 unsuccessful candidates.

As an organisation that supports women candidates standing for elections, often for the first time, our submission draws on their experience of engagement with social media as they run their campaigns. As many of our supported candidates began their political journey through local government campaigns, we will also draw on this experience as well.

This is a late submission due to our wish to incorporate experience during the 2020 Local Government election campaign which, due to the COVID pandemic restrictions, was largely conducted via social media. This was the first time such wide use of social media campaigning occurred. We believe this experience will be a precursor for future elections. Our comments address directly the questions posed by the Committee.

There is no doubt that the use of social media as a campaigning tool has expanded rapidly. Women candidates experience gendered abuse and misogyny on their social media campaigning platforms in line with that experienced within the broader community. This encompasses seemingly benign attempts to make personal contact external to the campaign through to abusive sexualised threats of physical attack.

These attacks on social media also carry over to in person threats when campaigning and often into the post-election period when the woman is an elected representative. Such is our concern that our 2020 *Next Generation Julia Gillard Intern* (<https://www.emilyslist.org.au/interns>) is currently

undertaking a research project to determine the impact of this abuse on the women candidates and those women considering running for elected office in the future.

In Australia, sexist behaviour has long been tolerated in politics. The male-dominated culture within the Australian Parliament has protected those who harass or intimidate female parliamentarians and staffers (Collier and Raney 2018). Anecdotal accounts indicate that the prevalence of political violence is growing rapidly, as threats and aggression towards women in politics is spreading online. However, there is little research measuring the effect of political violence against women in Australia. There is need for greater understanding of the extent of abuse, especially on social media platforms, and the barriers it creates for women in entering politics, and the opportunities for change.

There is a need for in depth analysis of the use of social media and its impact on the electoral process.

### **Recommendations:**

**Q1.** Encouraging social media platforms to take more action against inappropriate activities (such as bots, harassment, trolling, spreading fake news).

The VEC and the Victorian Government must develop a process with social media platforms so that when candidates report such abuse to the VEC, they are able to assist with ensuring the platforms act in a timely manner. Our experience shows that social media platforms cannot be relied upon to act quickly during an election campaign in response to complaints by individual candidates. Immediate and direct action should occur for especially overt abuse, threats and harassment.

**Q2.** The government funding media literacy campaigns to help people know what they can trust online.

The experience of our candidates and elected MPs indicates that abuse and harassment of women via social media is an ongoing problem. It does not only happen during the campaign. Government funding for media literacy campaigns needs to cover a wider brief than election campaign material. Government funded media literacy campaigns to help people know who they should behave and how they can trust online material must be developed for schools and TAFEs, in addition to more generic campaigns that have been run in other jurisdictions which focus on election periods only.

**Q3.** Requiring public disclosure of all online political advertising (for example, webpages created by social media platforms showing all of the political advertising on their platform and who paid for it, or webpages created by parties/candidates showing all of the online ads they have run). And **Q4.** Requiring online electoral advertising to state who paid for it.

EMILY's List Australia is supportive of increased transparency by disclosure of all online political advertising as stated. The VEC must be resourced with staff and appropriate powers to track and to penalise noncompliance.

**Q5.** Government support for independent and trust-worthy organisations that can factcheck claims or identify misinformation.

Political factchecking is well established. It would be prudent to undertake a comparison of the experiences of other Governments and factchecking organisations on their effectiveness. An established authority will also need the authority and be required to act to remove misinformation if it were identified.

**Q6.** Using independent organisations (e.g. the Victorian Electoral Commission) as a source of reliable information about electoral candidates.

Election candidates must be required to provide basic information as part of their acceptance as a candidate to ensure they are identifiable. Like the postal ballots issued by the VEC for Local Government elections, statements by the candidates could be made available online for all elections as an unbiased resource for voters.

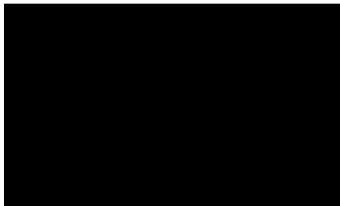
**Q7.** New laws requiring truth in political advertising.

Experiences in other jurisdictions such as the ACT, to inform the timeliness of processes for assessing and implementing corrective measures for any truth in advertising laws with appropriate penalties should be considered. More importantly, bans on any political advertising on social media that impacts negatively on women and any minority group must be strongly enforced.

**Q8.** Are there other things you'd like to see the government do relating to social media or online advertising and elections?

Our experience over twenty years of supporting women candidates to be elected has shown us that social media, both the platforms and the way in which they are used for campaigning, are evolving and that this change is rapid. Whatever processes are put in place to ensure social media and other forms of online advertising does not negatively impact on women candidates will need to be reviewed and updated regularly to ensure they remain relevant and appropriate to meet the intention of whatever legislation and regulations are enacted.

Yours sincerely



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