

HOW TO  
VOTE CARD



# Voter Conformity with Candidate How-to-Vote Preferences

Local Government  
Post Election Information Series

## Voter conformity with candidate how-to-vote preferences

Under the preferential system operating in Victorian local government elections, voters have to number every square on the ballot paper. In unsubdivided councils and multi-councillor wards, there are often large numbers of candidates on the ballot paper. The nature of the preferential system encourages candidates to negotiate preference arrangements with each other, so that they can benefit from preferences flowing from elected or excluded candidates. To maximise their chances of election, candidates issue directions to voters on how they would like them to allocate their preferences. In elections conducted by post, candidates may include their advised indications of preferences, to be printed below the candidate statements included in the ballot packs that the VEC posts to every voter. In attendance elections, candidates and their supporters distribute registered how-to-vote cards to voters outside voting centres.

The VEC can provide information on the degree to which voters conform with candidates' how-to-vote instructions. For elections counted by computer, the VEC holds the preferences for each vote, which can be sorted by candidate and by conformity with how-to-vote instructions. The VEC selected ten elections for study from the 2008 local government elections – all for multi-councillor wards (except for the unsubdivided East Gippsland Shire). To ensure a representative sample, the VEC selected attendance and postal elections, from inner suburban, outer suburban and regional areas, and covering a range of socio-economic variables. The elections chosen were as follows:

Council and Ward	Type of election	Geographic position	SEIFA (Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas)	Percentage speaking a language other than English at home
Ballarat Central Ward	Postal	Provincial	965	3.4
Casey Mayfield Ward	Postal	Outer suburban	992	23
East Gippsland	Postal	Rural	932	3
Glen Eira Camden Ward	Attendance	Middle suburban	1088	29.6
Greater Dandenong Red Gum Ward	Attendance	Middle/outer suburban	914	59
Macedon Ranges West Ward	Postal	Peri-urban	1032	4
Maroondah Wyreena Ward	Postal	Outer suburban	1034	9.4
Moreland South Ward	Attendance	Inner suburban	997	42
Stonnington North Ward	Postal	Inner suburban	1130	21.3
Whittlesea East Ward	Postal	Outer suburban	966	44.8

The following table shows the degree to which voters in the above elections complied with candidates' how-to-vote instructions:

<b>Council</b>	<b>Total votes</b>	<b>Ballot papers following HTV instructions</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Ballarat	16,206	6,982	43%
Casey	19,344	8,035	42%
East Gippsland	26,348	11,740	45%
Glen Eira	18,666	7,974	43%
Greater Dandenong	12,398	4,397	35%
Macedon Ranges	8,222	3,811	46%
Maroondah	18,382	10,087	55%
Moreland	18,745	7,945	42%
Stonnington	14,737	7,410	50%
Whittlesea	24,275	11,782	49%
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>177,323</b>	<b>80,163</b>	<b>45%</b>

Somewhat fewer than half of the voters surveyed followed their first chosen candidates' directions. Those directions clearly had a strong influence on the results of the elections, but over half the voters made up their own minds on the allocation of preferences. How-to-vote conformity ranged from 35% in Greater Dandenong to 55% in Maroondah, with seven elections having a conformity rate in the 40s.

To what extent did factors such as the type of election and the nature of the area affect voters' responses? The following table compares how-to-vote conformity in postal elections with that in attendance elections. Slightly more voters in postal elections followed how-to-vote instructions. The explanation probably relates to the nature of the elections. In postal elections, all voters receive candidates' preference indications, and have plenty of time to peruse them. By contrast, candidates in attendance elections are not necessarily able to distribute their how-to-cards to all voters.

Election type	Total votes	Ballot papers following HTV instructions	Percentage
Attendance	48,809	20,316	41%
Postal	127,514	59,847	47%

Seven of the elections examined were in the Melbourne metropolitan area, and three were in regional areas. Regional councils tend to have a lower informal voting rate than metropolitan ones, and it might be conjectured that regional voters would also show a greater tendency to follow how-to-vote instructions. However, the table below shows that there was no real difference between metropolitan and rural elections.

Area	Total votes	Ballot papers following HTV instructions	Percentage
Metropolitan	126,547	57,630	46%
Regional	50,776	22,533	44%

Councils with high proportions of residents speaking a language other than English (LOTE) tend to have higher informal voting rates than councils with low proportions of LOTE speakers. Does this also apply to how-to-vote conformity? The table below shows that voters in local government areas with few LOTE speakers were slightly more likely to follow how-to-vote directions than voters in areas where LOTE speakers were concentrated. However, the difference is very small, and unlikely to be significant. It can largely be accounted for by the fact that the election in Maroondah (a non-LOTE council) had an unusually high rate of conformity with how-to-vote directions.


LOTE speakers	Total votes	Ballot papers following HTV instructions	Percentage
> 40% of residents	55,418	24,124	44%
< 10% of residents	69,158	32,620	47%

The elections examined mostly had large numbers of candidates. The informal voting rate tends to increase with the number of candidates, and it might be expected that voters' ability to follow how-to-vote instructions would decline as the number of candidates increases. The following table shows the number of candidates for each election and the percentage compliance with how-to-vote instructions. When these two variables were compared, the correlation coefficient was .1958 – which means that there was practically no relation between the number of candidates and how-to-vote compliance.

Council	Number of candidates	Percentage of ballot papers following HTV instructions
Ballarat	16	43%
Casey	11	42%
East Gippsland	29	45%
Glen Eira	7	43%
Greater Dandenong	10	35%
Macedon Ranges	11	46%
Maroondah	14	55%
Moreland	12	42%
Stonnington	13	50%
Whittlesea	14	49%

It is also possible to examine how voters for individual candidates behaved. Compliance with candidates' how-to-vote instructions ranged from 2% (for a candidate in Greater Dandenong) to 64% (for a candidate in Maroondah). Political parties were active in some of the elections, and members of parties stood as candidates, but as the *Local Government Act 1989* does not recognise political parties, the VEC has no information to identify party candidates. However, it is possible to identify incumbent councillors, winning candidates and candidates who did not receive their deposit because they obtained less than 4% of the vote. A reasonable hypothesis is that incumbent councillors would have achieved some recognition during their term and that voters would be more likely to follow their how-to-vote instructions. The same could apply to winning candidates, who by definition had popular support. The following table shows how-to-vote conformity by council for different categories of candidate.

Council	Percentage of ballot papers following HTV instructions			
	Incumbent councillors	Winning candidates	Non-deposit candidates	All candidates
Ballarat	45%	43%	42%	43%
Casey	42%	39%	33%	42%
East Gippsland	45%	46%	43%	45%
Glen Eira	46%	43%	27%	43%
Greater Dandenong	40%	39%	10%	35%
Macedon Ranges	44%	48%	54%	46%
Maroondah	62%	59%	44%	55%
Moreland	56%	56%	34%	42%
Stonnington	55%	53%	40%	50%
Whittlesea	54%	54%	37%	49%
TOTAL	50%	48%	39%	45%



The results confirm clear tendencies for voters for incumbent councillors and winning candidates to be more inclined than average to follow how-to-vote instructions, and for voters for minor candidates to be less inclined to follow instructions. These tendencies were particularly strong in the attendance elections, probably because councillors, winning candidates and their helpers were able to hand out how-to-vote cards to voters entering voting centres, while many of the minor candidates did not do so consistently. In contrast, no tendency was apparent in the three regional elections.

In summary, the findings of this study of ballot papers for ten elections are:

- 45% of voters followed how-to-vote instructions;
- voters in postal elections were more likely than those in attendance elections to follow how-to-vote instructions;
- there were no clear differences in behaviour between metropolitan and regional councils, nor between councils with high proportions of LOTE speakers and those with low proportions;
- the number of candidates in an election did not affect compliance with how-to-vote instructions;
- voters for incumbent councillors and winning candidates were more likely to follow how-to-vote instructions, and voters for minor candidates (those who failed to regain their deposit) were less likely to do so. This tendency was stronger in attendance elections, but not apparent in regional elections.

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