

Summary report of voter expectations at the 2022 State election

Survey findings

October 2022



The VEC pays respect to Victoria's traditional owners and their elders past and present who have been custodians of this country for many thousands of years. Their living culture and their role in the life of Victoria is acknowledged by the VEC.

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Introduction

This report is a summary of the findings from three surveys, conducted with members of the VEC's Online Research Panel (ORP) to understand voter expectations leading up to the 2022 State election. The information collected was used to plan and improve voting service delivery.

The timing of each survey allowed voter expectations, at particular points in time, to be assessed in line with VEC's strategic and planning priorities.

Table 1 Summary of survey date and sample size

	Date	Survey sample
Survey 1	Aug-Sept 2021	379 responses – representative sample from ORP
Survey 2	April 2022	156 responses – 70+ year old sample from ORP
Survey 3	August 2022	338 responses – representative sample from ORP

The first survey was conducted during a lockdown period, approximately one year from the election, and focused on attitudes towards voting in-person during a COVID-19 restriction period, the health and safety measures voters felt comfortable with, election information voters wanted to receive and expectations around postal voting. The information helped the VEC to plan for the possibility of an election occurring during a COVID-safe or restrictions period.

The second survey involved voters over the age of 70 years and focused on postal voting, the aim being to assess and plan for any change in postal voting rates amongst this demographic and determine what services and supports the VEC could provide to facilitate preferred voting methods.

The third was conducted three months out from the election and was used to consolidate information about the method voters intended to use to cast their vote, support for various health and safety measures at voting centres, such as mask-wearing and social distancing, the features of in-person voting most preferred by voters, and the type of election information voters wanted to receive. The information collected assisted the VEC to refine its service delivery model.

Detailed findings

1. Intended voting methods

The method voters intended to use changed over time, although as expected, in-person voting remained the most preferred option. Furthermore,

- intentions to vote in-person was lowest in the first survey, where a greater proportion of voters intended to vote by post (this was influenced heavily by the fact that the survey was conducted during a COVID-19 lockdown)
- voters over 70 years of age were more likely to consider voting by post, compared with the general voting population sampled
- at **Survey 3** rates of in-person voting were closer to those recorded in the 2018 State election.
- The closer to the election, the more certain voters were about their preferred voting method.

Table 2 Intended voting methods for Voter Expectations Surveys 1-3

Intended voting methods	Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3
In-person on the day at a voting centre	109 (28.8%)	63 (40.4%)	147 (43.5%)
In-person during the early voting period	94 (24.8%)	47 (30.1%)	115 (34.0%)
<u>In-person combined – early and election day</u>	<u>53.6%</u>	<u>70.5%</u>	<u>77.5%</u>
I am applying for a postal vote	102 (26.9%)	26 (16.7%)	49 (14.5%)
I receive my ballot pack in the mail automatically and do for each election	Not asked	10 (6.4%)	4 (1.2%)
Voting over the phone (I am blind/have low vision and/or have a physical disability that prevents me from getting to a voting centre)	Not asked	Not asked	1 (0.3%)
I have not decided yet	59 (15.6%)	10 (6.4%)	23 (6.8%)

(Survey 1 included an ‘Other’ option with 15 (~4%) responses, most of whom wanted to vote electronically or online).

Across all three surveys, most respondents intended to use the same voting method they had previously in 2018. However, some important observations emerged.

- While there was increased interest in voting by post, voting in-person remained the preferred method, mostly for reasons of convenience and avoiding crowds (early voting), having always voted this way (on election day) and because it was seen as important to turn-up to vote in person.
- For certain groups, especially those age over 70 years, postal voting was more likely to be considered for its convenience and accessibility. However, a significant proportion of this demographic preferred in-person voting and would only consider postal voting as an option when no longer able to vote in-person.

Although concerns about COVID-19 decreased progressively over the three surveys, there was greater acceptance of COVID-safe measures in **Survey 3** than in **Survey 1**.

2. The use of how to vote cards

In the third survey, participants were asked about their use of how to vote cards (HTVCs) when voting. HTVCs are a way for candidates to guide voters to number the ballot papers to advantage a particular candidate/party. HTVCs have been used for many years in Australia, and often contain a simple visual indication as to how to complete a ballot paper to favour a particular candidate or party.

Table 3 Whether following how to vote cards is important or not to voters

Is following a how to vote card still an important part of voting for you?	No. (%)
Yes	198 (58.6%)
No	141 (41.7%)

Most respondents considered HTVCs to be an important part of voting. Of these respondents, many wanted their vote to reflect the political choices of their preferred candidate or party, while others found HTVCs to be a helpful guide to the process of voting, making them more confident at correctly completing their ballot papers. For those that did not think HTVCs were important, most liked to do their own research and make their own choice about who to preference.

3. COVID-safe measures at voting centres

Survey 1 was conducted during the final State lockdown when concerns about COVID-19 and future lockdowns were front-of-mind. However, a large proportion of voters still expected to vote in-person if a lockdown was in place, as it was considered important for democratic participation and thus justified under any COVID-19 restrictions. Importantly, most respondents of this survey were confident (35%) or very

confident (48%) the VEC would conduct fair elections during a COVID restrictions or lockdown period, and similarly confident (33%) or very confident (53%) their vote would count under such circumstances.

Strong support was shown across multiple surveys for various health and safety measures to be adopted at voting centres in response to COVID concerns. Interestingly, support for such measures was greater in **Survey 3**, where respondents nominated close to 6 different measures each compared to **Survey 1**, where they nominated around 3.5 measures. These figures are partly a result of more specific options being provided in **Survey 3**. For example, two options were provided for social distancing rather than one in the first survey. Nonetheless, voters may have become more used to such measures and/or more likely to accept them voluntarily outside of a lockdown, rather than feeling forced to as part of broader restrictions.

Table 4 Important health and safety measures, from most to least, for surveys 1 and 3

Note: Respondents could select more than one option

Survey 3		Survey 1	
Measures	No. (%)	Measures	No. (%)
Hand sanitiser being available at all voting centres	257 (76%)	Masks to be worn by voters and VEC staff while in the voting centre	152 (40.1%)
Social distancing encouraged in the waiting lines	239 (70.7%)	Social distancing rules to be in place	146 (38.5%)
Mask requirements for everyone entering the voting centre	231 (68.3%)	VEC having a COVID-19 safe election plan in place	138 (36.4%)
Election staff wearing masks at all times	215 (63.6%)	Hand sanitiser at the entry and exit doors	136 (35.9%)
Social distancing in the voting centre	215 (63.6%)	The majority of the population to be fully vaccinated	126 (33.2%)
Masks readily available at all voting centres	206 (60.9%)	All VEC officials to be fully vaccinated	118 (31.1%)
Density limits on how many are allowed in the voting centre	202 (59.8%)	VEC sanitising all communal services regularly	106 (28.0%)

Survey 3		Survey 1	
Proper sanitising of multiple-use pencils	175 (51.8%)	Being able to bring my own pen/pencil to mark the ballot papers	103 (27.2%)
Election staff being fully vaccinated and taking tests each day	147 (43.5%)	I wouldn't want to attend a voting centre	75 (19.8%)
Single-use pencils being used	103 (30.5%)	VEC sanitising its pencils between use	71 (18.7%)
I have another suggestion to make me feel safer (please specify)	39 (11.5%)	New pencils provided (by VEC) at the voting centre that I can take with me afterwards	62 (16.4%)
		No sausage sizzles or cake stalls allowed	57 (15.0%)

4. Voting in-person at voting centres

In **Survey 3** respondents were asked to provide more information about their experiences of voting in-person at a voting centre, most of which was positive:

- 97% agreed voting centre staff were seen as helpful and approachable
- 93% of people felt safe and comfortable when they went to a voting centre
- 74% enjoyed the feeling of being at a voting centre in the community
- 74% did not mind having to wait in line to vote.

Looking towards the State election in November 2022, 88% of respondents indicated they were not expecting it to be difficult to vote in person and 85% were aware of which district they were enrolled in. To find their nearest voting centre, 63.9% said they would Google it and a further 26% said they would go directly to the VEC website.

The most important aspect of a voting centre was location (as indicated by 75% of respondents), followed by the length of time in queues (60.1%) and having friendly and helpful staff (43.8%).

5. Voting by post

By the time of the third survey, about three months out from the November election, respondents expecting to vote by post had decreased significantly, from over 25% in September 2021 to about 15% in August 2022. Slightly more (16.7%) voters aged over

70 years expected to vote by post in 2022, while about 6% of this cohort indicated they were already registered to vote this way.

Using this information, including requests for more information about postal voting, the VEC made plans for an increase in postal vote applications and took proactive steps to assist voters preferring to vote this way. However, any such increase was not expected to be as significant had the election occurred during a lockdown period and/or if concerns about COVID had not subsided somewhat.

6. Electoral information

Comparing the three surveys shows as the election draws closer, levels of engagement increase, not just in relation to intended voting methods, but to the type of electoral information respondents would like to receive.

Table 5 Important topics for voters, from most to least, for surveys 1 and 3

Note: Respondents could select more than one option

Important topics for Survey 1		Important topics for Survey 3	
Topic	No. (%)	Topic	No. (%)
How to find out who my local candidates are	118 (31.1%)	Important dates i.e. when the election is, when enrolment closes, when early voting begins.	240 (71.0%)
How preferential vote-counting works	115 (30.3%)	Information on local candidates	229 (67.8%)
How proportional representation vote-counting works	109 (28.8%)	Location of voting centres	175 (51.8%)
The different voting options available to me	108 (28.5%)	How to fill in my ballot papers correctly	145 (42.9%)
How to complete ballot papers correctly	93 (24.5%)	Guides on where to find accurate political or party information	114 (33.7%)
A summary of the entire election process	92 (24.3%)	How my vote is counted (the lower house preferencing system and	89 (26.3%)

Important topics for Survey 1		Important topics for Survey 3	
		the upper house proportional system)	
General information about the different ways votes are counted	82 (21.6%)	Changes to my local district boundaries	60 (17.8%)
How to apply for a postal vote	80 (21.1%)	Where and how to enrol	53 (15.7%)
How to update my enrolment online	66 (17.4%)	How parliament works and legislation is passed	50 (14.8%)
How to check my enrolment details are correct	54 (14.2%)	Support information for people living with disability	35 (10.4%)
How to complete an enrolment form	47 (12.4%)	What happens if I don't vote	17 (5.0%)
Supports available for people with disability	37 (9.8%)	Information on different language options for voting	12 (3.6%)
Why voting is important	36 (9.5%)		
Why election results can take two weeks or more to declare	23 (6.1%)		
What happens if I don't vote?	23 (6.1%)		

Across all survey groups, there was a preference for receiving electoral information through email, social media, websites and SMS, though respondents still wanted some information delivered via more traditional formats, such as the post, TV and radio. This provided further support for the multi-faceted State election advertising campaign in 2022, using new and old media formats developed by the VEC.

7. Responding to false or misleading election information

In **Survey 3** voters were asked about their views and expectations around the VEC's responsibilities to respond to election misinformation. Respondents replied as follows:

Table 6 Voter expectations for the VEC to respond to false or misleading electoral information

Would you expect the VEC to respond to false or misleading election information?	No. (%)
Yes	299 (88.5%)
No	21 (6.2%)
I am unsure	18 (5.3%)

Table 7 Voter expectations about the different ways the VEC could respond to false or misleading election information

Note: Respondents could select more than one option

How would you expect the VEC to respond to false or misleading electoral information?	No. (%)
Raise awareness about election misinformation through advertising	219 (64.8%)
Real-time responses to misleading election information on social media	189 (55.9%)
A registry to include all instances of misinformation and misleading election material during the campaign	180 (53.3%)
Provide resources for me to identify misleading information during the campaign	32 (9.5%)

Most (88.5%) were strongly in favour of the VEC responding to misinformation about elections and when asked what form such a response should take strong support was indicated for three different approaches:

1. an awareness raising advertising campaign about election misinformation
2. real time responses to false or misleading information via social media
3. a registry of misinformation and misleading electoral information.

Conclusions

- Most voters intend to vote in-person at the 2022 State election at similar rates recorded in 2018. The VEC expects the gap between early in-person voting and voting in-person on election day to continue to narrow as past voting trends indicate.
- Voters generally consider turning up to vote in-person as an important aspect of democratic participation. In-person voting during the early voting period is preferred by some for its convenience and to avoid queues, and location is the most important factor for voters when deciding where to vote early or on election day.
- Voters accept and are generally comfortable with adopting a range of health and safety measures for in-person voting, including mask-wearing, social distancing and using hand-sanitiser.
- There is likely to be a small increase in postal voting, though not as great if the 2022 State election were to be held during a COVID lockdown or restrictions period. A relatively small proportion of voters over the age of 70 years see postal voting as a convenient and accessible method to cast their vote, though most would only consider voting this way when no longer able to vote in-person.
- Over half of voters surveyed consider following a HTVC an important part of voting, mostly to ensure their voting preferences reflect the choices of their preferred candidate or political party, but for some as a guide to voting correctly. Voters that do not follow HTVCs generally prefer to make their own choices about vote preferences.
- Voters are interested in receiving information about a range of election topics, including how to find out about candidates they can vote for, how different vote-counting methods work and how to complete their ballots correctly. As the election nears the topics are more likely to include relevant information about important election dates and the location of voting centres.
- Most voters want the VEC to respond to false or misleading electoral information and support VEC efforts to raise awareness about it, respond in real time to such instances via social media and maintain a registry of misinformation and misleading electoral information.

