POSITION PAPER

ELECTRONICALLY ASSISTED VOTING

The VEC is providing an expanded Electronically Assisted Voting (EAV) service for the 2010 State election, in line with its Disability Action Plan 2008-2011, the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006, and in accordance with the recommendation of the Parliamentary Electoral Matters Committee.

Introduction

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) places a particular emphasis on electoral accessibility and has focused on those sectors of the community who face sensory, physical, educational or informational barriers to enrolling and voting.

A considerable number of Victorian electors cannot vote without assistance or via assistive means. One of the barriers to voting unaided for a significant proportion (19%¹) of the population is low vision or blindness. These electors may require special ballot material (printed in Braille) or they may require the help of a relative or a VEC election official to help them complete their ballot papers.

Further, Australian Bureau of Statistics figures from 2006 show that almost half (46%) of all readers in Australia are only capable to Literacy Levels 1 & 2 – Level 3 is considered to be the minimum for today’s literacy needs. People likely to be assessed at Literacy Levels 1 & 2 include those who left school early, people from a culturally or linguistically diverse (CALD) background, people with an acquired disability (after a stroke or car accident), intellectual or physical impairment (acquired or otherwise) who can still understand the concept of voting, people with dyslexia, or people with mental health issues.

Lack of English language skills also presents another accessibility issue. One in four Victorians was born overseas and 44% were either born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. Victorians come from more than 200 countries, speak more than 230 languages and dialects and follow more than 120 religious faiths². The proportion of Victoria’s population who speak a language other than English at home has steadily increased during each Census period. More than 187,000 Victorians rate themselves as speaking little or no English at all in 2006.

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006 – 50,000 Victorians are classified as legally blind; Radio for the Print Handicapped research indicates that approximately 800,000 Victorians have a print handicap of some description. These figures provided by Vision Australia.

² DIAC, 2008, The People of Victoria: Statistics from the 2006 Census
While the number of electors requiring assistance is known for some groups, it is not known how many of the informal votes collected by VEC would be completed formally if unaided electors had been provided assistance.

**Precedent**

Legislative change in 2006 enabled the VEC to implement an electronically assisted voting pilot for blind electors or electors with low vision. The pilot was successful and the services were well received.

The VEC has suggested that further legislative change to enable additional categories of electors to access electronically assisted voting facilities would be useful. At present, access to EAV is limited to interstate electors, overseas electors and Victorian electors who are blind or who have low vision.

**Implementation for the 2010 State Election**

Blind or low vision electors will have the option of using a telephone voting facility at any of the 100 early voting centres across the State. A total of 208 supervised telephones will be provided for electors to record their vote via the telephone keypad. Recorded instructions will guide the elector through the voting process with audio prompts in twelve languages* including English. At least two telephones will be provided at all 100 early voting centres.

More than half of the early voting centres will also have the option of a touchscreen kiosk facility - the VEC will provide 79 supervised kiosks across 52 early voting centres. Electors with low vision can use this touchscreen machine unaided and listen to audio cues via a headset. This system also has the capacity to provide audio cues in twelve languages (if required) including English.

A total of 88 telephones will also be made available for use at other early voting centres as required such as Victorian hospitals and nursing homes.

Kiosks will also be available at four locations in the United Kingdom (three in England and one in Scotland) where electors with low vision may wish to vote using electronically assisted means, while telephone voting will be available to eligible Victorian electors at seven interstate locations.

Votes recorded electronically via either the kiosk or the telephone will be centrally collected and processed. The process involves printing the votes to paper after the close of voting and including them with votes collected in the traditional manner. The system is highly secure and reliable.

The VEC has no plans to extend these services to the general populace who are able to vote unassisted.

Should the Parliament consider expanding the provision of electronically assisted voting to other categories of electors prior to the 2010 State election, additional categories of Victorian electors could also access electronically assisted voting. These include electors who:

- speak little or no English but who are fluent in at least one of the languages complementing English on this system;
• have trouble reading or writing; or
• have fine motor skill impairment.

In addition, the VEC will designate carers as eligible to vote early when they accompany an elector eligible for EAV.

**Scrutiny and security**

The VEC is providing a virtual private network for the management and observation of the electronically assisted voting system and to ensure the security of the collection and storage of votes.

The mature and proven electronically assisted voting system encrypts and protects votes. The system also uses advanced technical means to protect voter identity and privacy. Voters will be provided with a receipt – the receipt number of which can be entered in a website page for the voter to confirm the successful transmission and processing of their individual votes. This service does not show how the voter voted, nor can the receipt be aligned with the voter’s identity. It only shows that the vote has been received and decrypted by the VEC.

Other security and safety measures include:

• the decryption of votes can only take place with several authorised VEC executive staff members participating;
• the engagement of a software auditor to examine the software and run diagnostic tests to ensure it is free from errors or malicious functions;
• a partnership with an academic organisation that has expertise in information security to voluntarily observe and comment on the EAV design and implementation; and
• the engagement of security specialists who are tasked to try and penetrate the electronically assisted voting systems both from outside the VEC and from within. Their analysis is very important in the VEC’s and others’ final assessment of the fitness for purpose of the EAV system.

The VEC will provide elaborate measurement and reporting systems for staff and scrutineers to gauge system security and overall system health at all times.

*The 11 languages other than English provided include Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Croatian, Greek, Italian, Khmer (Cambodian), Macedonian, Serbian, Turkish and Vietnamese.

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