The VEC believes that the continued engagement of all citizens in the democratic process, regardless of their English language proficiency, is an important part of an inclusive and representative democracy.

Broadly speaking, the right to vote is an enshrined right in the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities 2006*, section 18:

“(1) Every person in Victoria has the right, and is to have the opportunity, without discrimination, to participate in the conduct of public affairs, directly or through freely chosen representatives.

(2) Every eligible person has the right, and is to have the opportunity, without discrimination -

(a) to vote and be elected at periodic State and municipal elections that guarantee the free expression of the will of the electors; and

(b) to have access, on general terms of equality, to the Victorian public service and public office.”

In line with this charter, the VEC’s vision is to have ‘all Victorians actively participating in our democracy’. To realise this vision and to recognise the basic human right of democratic participation for all, the VEC acknowledges the need for in-language electoral information and education.

**Victoria’s increasing cultural and linguistic diversity**

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 faiths\(^1\). The proportion of Victoria’s population who speak a language other than English at home has steadily increased

\(^1\) DIAC, 2008, *The People of Victoria: Statistics from the 2006 Census*
during each Census period. More than 216,000 Victorians rate themselves as speaking little or no English at all.

Many migrants are keen to become citizens in their newly adopted country and can do so after having lived in Australia for five years. Data from the Victorian Multicultural Commission indicates that more than 67% of Victorians born overseas had become Australian citizens at the time of the last Census in 2006. Once an Australian citizen, anyone over the age of 18 and living in Victoria must enrol and vote – both are compulsory.

While the Australian Electoral Commission enrols approximately 95% of new citizens, it is important to follow up this enrolment process with education initiatives, which deal with how to make a vote count in the Victorian context.

The information needs of culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) community members

Ongoing research within particular communities will assist the VEC to identify and address barriers to enrolment and voting. Many new citizens will come from countries and cultures where voting systems are very different, where culture and customs mean that gender plays a strong role in the voting process, and where the freedom to vote as one chooses is not always available. Lack of access to electoral education and information within CALD communities can effectively disenfranchise a significant number of voters.

Data mapping by the Victorian Electoral Commission demonstrates that electoral participation in Victoria is typically lower and levels of informality are higher in areas with high populations of CALD voters.

Recent research undertaken in two of the most populous communities – Chinese and Vietnamese – indicates that amongst citizens with little or no English skills, the desire to vote is strong and considered important\(^2\). However, a number of gaps in information provision have been identified, including:

\(\text{a) a lack of awareness of the need to update enrolment each time a person moves house; and}
\)

\(\text{b) a lack of awareness of the need to use numbers to indicate preferences when voting.}
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Current VEC initiatives

The VEC provides a number of community education and engagement programs to assist CALD communities to access information and education. These include the provision of election-specific and general information sessions with interpreters; the development of a series

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\(^2\) Cultural and Indigenous Research Centre Australia, 2009, *Victorian Electoral Commission: Barriers to Enrolment and Voting within Chinese and Vietnamese Communities*
of translated enrolment form companion sheets to assist those with little English proficiency to complete an enrolment form\(^3\) and several new initiatives to be rolled out for the 2010 State election, as detailed below.

The first major initiative for the 2010 State election is the provision of translated voting instructions in 20 languages to be printed on every full size voting screen. This will help to ensure that everyone who wants to cast a formal vote is able to do so, regardless of their English proficiency. The decision to print these instructions directly onto the voting screens (which must be produced for the election) means that there will be little to no cost attached to this initiative.

The second initiative is the expansion of the VEC’s electronic voting service, which has been available for blind and vision-impaired voters, to CALD voters (dependent on legislation). Translated instructions would be available via a computerised system in text and/or in audio format. The system would advise the voter if they are in danger of casting an informal vote and give them the opportunity to revise their selections.

Enabling voters to access information in their own language to enable them to participate effectively within Victoria’s democracy is not only a human right, but a moral imperative.

**Statistics**

According to the Department of Immigration and Citizenships 2008 publication *The People of Victoria: Statistics from the 2006 Census*:

- 20.4% of Victorians speak a language other than English at home, with more than 200 languages and dialects spoken;
- 3.8% of Victorians speak English not well or not at all;
- the top 10 languages spoken at home by people who speak English not well or not at all are Vietnamese, Italian, Greek, Cantonese, Mandarin, Arabic, Turkish, Macedonian, Croatian, Khmer;
- the 10 Local Government Areas (LGAs) with the highest proportion of language other than English (LOTE) speakers are Greater Dandenong (55.2%), Brimbank (53.7%), Whittlesea (43%), Maribyrnong (42.8%), Moreland (39.5%), Darebin (39%), Monash (38.6%), Hume (36.2%), Manningham (35.7%), Melbourne (33.1%); and
- the 10 LGAs with the highest proportion of people who speak English not well or not at all are Greater Dandenong (15.8%), Brimbank (12.7%), Maribyrnong (11%), Darebin (8.5%), Whittlesea (8.5%), Moreland (8.3%), Yarra (7.3%), Hume (7.1%), Monash (5.9%), Moonee Valley (5.8%).

\(^3\) Current legislation requires that the enrolment form is printed in English.
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