Reducing barriers to participation

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) education and inclusion services program delivers a suite of initiatives aimed at communities and population cohorts facing barriers to electoral participation. These groups include people experiencing homelessness, young people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, and people in prisons. These population cohorts were the focus for programs in 2018.

The foundation program for the 2018 State election featured peer-based information delivery through the Be Heard! Democracy Ambassador Program. This was complemented by:

- electoral engagement for people in prisons
- enrolment outreach and supported voting services for people experiencing homelessness
- outreach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- a partnership with La Trobe University’s Living with Disability Research Centre
- electoral vocabulary resources for learners of English as an additional language
- the VEC’s Passport to Democracy program in schools.

Outreach engagements increased 35% for the 2018 State election compared to 2014.

Be Heard! Democracy Ambassador Program

The Be Heard! Democracy Ambassador Program was scaled up for the 2018 State election after a successful pilot in 2014 with Horn of Africa communities.
Targeting priority districts

Conducting face-to-face outreach work is resource intensive and difficult to implement State-wide over a short time period. The VEC analysed voting centre data from the 2014 State election to identify electoral districts with the highest rates of informality and the lowest levels of voter turnout. This data was then cross-referenced with Census data to find areas with the lowest levels of English proficiency, and the highest levels of disadvantage, homelessness, and populations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. This process identified 14 priority areas across Victoria: around Frankston, Melton, Mildura, Moe,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>CALD communities</th>
<th>People with a disability</th>
<th>People experiencing homelessness</th>
<th>Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities</th>
<th>Multiple/other</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voter education session</td>
<td>3,086</td>
<td>979</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>373</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>4,756</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enrolment outreach session</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community event</td>
<td>1,416</td>
<td>437</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>2,880</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other e.g. meeting, library stall</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4,607</td>
<td>1,466</td>
<td>1,281</td>
<td>543</td>
<td>349</td>
<td>8,246</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Youth reached across target communities: 271, 534, 74, 110, 16, 1,005

Figure 10: Participants in the VEC’s Democracy Ambassador peer-to-peer learning sessions by target community. The youth figures (bottom row) were recorded within each community group, rather than as a separate group.
Moorabool, Noble Park, Orbost, Pakenham, Reservoir, Robinvale, Shepparton, St Albans, Wendouree, and Werribee. The VEC then approached service providers and community leaders in these areas, or who worked with target communities, to help recruit Democracy Ambassadors, coordinate outreach sessions, and distribute information on electoral engagement.

Program impact

The VEC set ambitious targets for the Democracy Ambassador Program. The aim was to reach 7,500 participants across the four target communities, and the VEC surpassed this, reaching 8,246 participants over 335 sessions (see Figure 10).

The VEC published four performance targets in relation to the delivery of its education and inclusion services program. These are outlined in Appendix 21. Independent evaluation of the Democracy Ambassador Program revealed significant improvements in participants’ understanding of how to vote correctly. However, the 8,246 participants comprised only some 3% of the voters in the target areas. As the proportion was small, it is difficult to distinguish the effects of the Democracy Ambassador Program from other factors affecting informal voting in those areas. The informal vote in the target areas increased by 0.95 percentage points – slightly above the Statewide increase of 0.61 percentage points. However, in 10 of the 14 target areas the increase in the informal vote was less than that for the State as a whole.

It is worth noting that many participants face significant systemic barriers to voting, which a single voter education session or enrolment outreach session cannot overcome. Unless these barriers are addressed, they are unlikely to enrol and vote. For example, support workers at one youth homelessness organisation said while the Democracy Ambassador session was beneficial, they didn’t think the young people who attended that session would have voted in the election because their lives were simply ‘too chaotic’ now. They hoped the education session would lead to these young people voting in the next State election once their lives were more stable.

Supporting people with intellectual disabilities to vote

In 2016, the VEC commissioned La Trobe University’s Living with Disability Research Centre to look at strategies to support people with an intellectual disability to enrol and vote. The VEC invited other Australian electoral commissions to partner on the project, and six subsequently did so.

The first phase of the project involved conducting research with staff at disability support services, and then people living with an intellectual disability. A pilot program was developed to address capacity building in family members and disability support services. The key objectives were to:

- increase enrolments and voter participation of people with intellectual disabilities
- increase willingness and likelihood of supporters to provide voting support to people with intellectual disabilities and build the capacity of service providers to encourage supporters to do so
- increase provision of voting support by supporters, including family, front-line staff and other supporters/carers
- increase supporter knowledge and shift attitudes related to voting rights, resources and their role in supporting people with intellectual disabilities to vote.

The pilot program was the fourth phase in a long-term engagement project for the VEC. This program brought together other VEC engagement initiatives, including Voting is for Everyone, the Democracy Ambassadors, Easy English guides, the Talking Democracy civic education kits for people studying English as an additional language, and voter education sessions. The VEC developed a training package for managers and operational staff, education resources for families and carers, and a marketing and communication plan. Mentoring sessions with disability support workers and management were held at two organisations in Dandenong and Mildura. These
sessions were designed to build democratic and electoral awareness and to demonstrate the resources available to help participants to learn about voting and making choices.

The initial results were positive. Among the group of 45 people with intellectual disabilities who were surveyed in relation to enrolment, certainty and voting status:

- the number of people enrolled increased from 17 to 22
- the number of people who were certain about their enrolment status increased from 31 to 42
- the number of people who had voted increased from 21 to 24.

Staff members were very positive about the resources and sessions, with a significant increase in their knowledge about voting rights, their awareness of the relevant voting resources, and the number who felt that support for voting was endorsed by their organisation. The willingness of staff members to provide support was high before the pilot program and remained so after it. However, some were uncertain about whether all people with intellectual disabilities should be supported to vote, and how to ensure support with the practical aspects of voting does not cross the boundary into decisions about who to vote for.

Talking Democracy

Talking Democracy is a civic education kit for people studying English as an additional language or other courses in TAFE, school or community settings. It was launched in the lead up to the State election. The kit is based around two videos and a suite of resources, which explain the democratic process in Australia, the importance of voting, and how to vote correctly.

The resource was used as part of the Be Heard! Program and the La Trobe research pilot project. A total of 714 copies were downloaded and 57 copies posted to English language providers across Victoria.

Outreach to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

The VEC provided 28 electoral outreach sessions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities during October and November 2018. In the absence of a designated Indigenous Inclusion Officer, this outreach was conducted alongside the Democracy Ambassadors and youth outreach programs.

These sessions were conducted at Colac, Framlingham, Geelong, Heywood, Lakes Entrance, Melbourne, Mildura, Orbost, Portland, Robinvale, Shepparton and Warrnambool, to combined audiences of approximately 400 people – many of whom were elders or community leaders. In addition, the VEC held information stalls at regional shows and carnivals in Ballarat (Indigenous football carnival), Dandenong, Echuca (Indigenous football carnival), Mildura, and Shepparton which offered access to additional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
The case for change: Witnessing provisions

A key activity for the VEC is to enrol eligible electors, including those accessed through outreach and inclusion initiatives and programs. Where a person may not have ready access to a valid document of identification (i.e. a driver licence or a passport), they may ask a person who is already enrolled to attest to their identity and witness their enrolment form. For particular cohorts, election officials may not have access to a person who is in a position to provide their enrolment information as a witness, such as prison staff. There is an opportunity to expand the witnessing provisions to allow authorised officials who are in position to attest to the identity of a person to witness the person’s enrolment form without disclosing their personal information.

See Recommendation 2 on page 108.

Passport to Democracy program

There was no formal program to contact schools to offer them specific State election information. However, the Passport to Democracy program responded to a number of requests by schools for State election information, or who requested a session to align with the State electoral cycle. The program visited 44 primary and secondary schools to conduct workshops and mock elections for 3,137 students from the start of July until the State election. Sixteen of these schools requested specific information for students of, or close to, enrolment and/or voting age (totalling 1,787 students).

The electoral districts of Altona, Footscray, Melbourne, Pascoe Vale, Prahran, and Yan Yean included the largest number of students accessing this election information. In addition, during the 2018/19 year, there were 350 downloads of materials from the Passport to

Democracy website pertaining to the Program and its specific learning modules named Decide, Research, Activate and Vote.

Enrolment outreach and supported mobile voting

The VEC recognises that particular sections of the community face physical, socioeconomic, and cultural barriers to accessing the electoral process. The provision of a specialist mobile early voting service is a targeted and acute solution to overcoming some of these barriers.

The VEC’s education and engagement staff would not usually play a role in the operational side of an election. The decision to staff the central mobile early voting service enabled the natural progression of a number of specialist engagement projects to their ultimate outcome: participation in the electoral process.

Previous experience providing special voting facilities in homelessness agencies has also demonstrated that it is vital to have staff who are aware of the circumstances facing the electors they are working with, and the community context in which they are operating. See Appendix 11 for the locations visited by the VEC’s supported mobile voting teams.

People experiencing homelessness

There are approximately 2,000 Victorian electors who have enrolled using the No Fixed Address enrolment option, meaning they won’t be fined if they can’t vote due to their housing situation. However, based on Census data, the VEC estimates that over 16,800 people in Victoria who are experiencing homelessness or have insecure housing are eligible to vote.

In the lead up to the State election the VEC offered supported mobile voting to homelessness services across Victoria. This was to increase the opportunity for people experiencing homelessness to participate in the State election. Feedback from service providers highlighted that this is an important service provided by
the VEC and means some people voted who would otherwise not have participated.

People in prisons

Under Victorian law, people on remand or serving a sentence of less than five years are entitled to enrol and vote. The VEC engaged with Corrections Victoria, focus groups of prisoners, prison support groups, ex-offenders and other prisoner advocates to implement the following in the lead up to the election:

- development of Voting and Elections – a resource kit for Victorian Prisons aimed at program officers, peer listeners in prison, and prison support workers. It provides information about enrolling and voting while in prison
- training sessions for peer listeners at Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, Marngoneet Correctional Centre and Karreenga Annexe to raise awareness of enrolment among prisoners. At Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, VEC staff assisted women to enrol to vote with the support of one of the peer listeners. Staff at Marngoneet Correctional Centre and Karreenga Annexe delivered a formal training session for peer listeners, none of whom were eligible to vote but all were very engaged and interested in learning more in order to assist other prisoners
- an article for Corrections Weekly about enrolment and voting
- distribution of enrolment forms, postal vote applications, and other information to prisons
- a supported mobile voting service at Fulham Correctional Centre, Marngoneet Correctional Centre and Karreenga Annexe, Melbourne Assessment Prison and Tarrengower Prison.

Democracy Live Program

Democracy Live was the VEC’s awareness-raising program for the 2018 State election. Activities focused on busy Southern Cross Station and the Queen Victoria Night Market, as well as Dandenong Market given the cultural diversity of shoppers and typically higher levels of informal voting through that area. The campaign was active during the early voting period to encourage people to vote or to enrol and vote (ie, cast a provisional vote) if they had missed the close of roll. The VEC’s multi-lingual Democracy Ambassadors were present to help overcome any language barriers.

The first event at Southern Cross Station was on Derby Day (Saturday 3 November) to target race-going crowds with a free 180 degree photo booth, makeup stand and shoeshine stand – all aimed at creating opportunities for staff to talk to racegoers about getting ready to vote whilst they
Democracy Live successfully generated awareness and public engagement opportunities. Although the number of engagements was less than half of those in 2014, there was a 230% increase in collateral distributed and a 100% increase in general engagements. Originally, the program was to conclude with a Democracy Live public celebration of democracy on election night whilst watching the live election results in Federation Square, but a booking oversight by Federation Square Management meant this activity could not take place.

were getting ready for the races. The second event at Southern Cross Station was during peak hour on Wednesday 14 November to target city workers and featured a lucky dip barrel and free collateral as the drawcards for conversation opportunities. Commuters queued for more than 50 metres to try their hand at the lucky dip. The lucky dip barrel was equally popular at the Dandenong Market on Saturday 17 November.

A guerrilla marketing approach was used at the Queen Victoria Night Market. Staff roamed the market and nearby tram stops, handing out information and starting conversations about the late night voting hours at the nearby early voting centre.

By the numbers:
Education and inclusion program

57 Democracy Ambassadors employed
8,246 participants in outreach sessions
44 schools visited by Passport to Democracy program
28 outreach sessions to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
5 prisons visited by supported mobile voting teams
25 homelessness agencies visited by supported mobile voting teams