Voting services

The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) sought to maximise voter participation and reduce informal voting by providing Victorians with the voting services and information they need to participate fully and appropriately in the election. These services include voting in person on election day or in the two weeks prior, mobile voting, voting by post and secure email link, interstate and overseas voting, and telephone assisted voting. These services are designed to provide every elector with a quality and convenient service in which to exercise their democratic rights. Central to this commitment to electors is a focus on securing voting centre venues that are fully wheelchair accessible.

Voting centre accessibility

Voting centres were established primarily in schools and community halls, with a preference for those venues that were wheelchair accessible. Disability and community groups were invited to suggest suitable voting centres that the VEC had not already identified.

Election Managers conducted an accessibility audit of all selected venues in order to classify each according to recognised national accessibility standards. Whilst the number of fully accessible venues increased compared to the 2014 State election, the VEC continues to be disappointed with the lack of wheelchair-accessible venues available for use as voting centres – particularly given that most of the venues are State Government-owned. See Figure 12 for accessibility rating of election day voting centres.

Additional voting accessibility

Electoral information in English and 20 other languages was available on the VEC’s website, as well as information about a telephone interpreter service. The telephone service provided pre-recorded information and an option for the caller to request the services of an interpreter. Voting instructions in a range of languages were also printed on the voter-facing side of voting screens at voting centres.

The VEC website conforms to the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.0 conventions and also
Voting

The VEC also briefed registered political parties and candidates on its proposed approach to administering the new laws to ensure questions of interpretation could be addressed before the early voting period and election day itself. Overall, implementation of the new arrangements in regard to signage progressed relatively smoothly, with most questions relating to the number of signs that candidates endorsed by registered political parties were entitled to display at each venue. In addition, some parties did not consider the proximity of early voting centres when arranging outdoor advertising (eg. electronic billboards), which exceeded the maximum permitted size. In all cases, such instances were resolved satisfactorily. One matter in relation to alleged intimidation at an early voting centre was referred to Victoria Police.

Voting on election day

Voting took place between 8.00 am and 6.00 pm at 1,794 voting centres throughout Victoria on Saturday 24 November 2018. Voters were able to cast an ordinary vote at a voting centre within their electorate, or an absent vote at any voting centre in the State outside their electorate. The VEC establishes a number of joint voting centres with the aim of reducing the number of absent votes issued at voting centres located close to electorate boundaries, thereby speeding up the voting process for affected electors (see Figure 13).

Voting centre locations and accessibility details were promoted through the public enquiry service, website, mobile app, election guides and metropolitan and regional newspapers.

Estimates for the number of voters anticipated to attend each election day voting centre were based on data from the 2014 State election and took into account increased enrolment and early voting. The VEC reviewed its election workforce planning when developing the plan for the 2018 State election.

Figure 12: Wheelchair accessibility of election day voting centres, Victorian State elections 2006-2018.

contains a link to BrowseAloud, a downloadable application that reads the text on a website.

Legislative changes impacting voting centres

The Electoral Legislation Amendment Act 2018 introduced a number of changes impacting campaigning and signage outside voting centres. This included: increasing the distance from the entrance to a voting centre where campaigning is prohibited from three metres to six metres (s158); placing a limit on the number and size of election related signs that can be exhibited within 100 metres of a designated entrance to a voting centre (s158A); and making it an indictable offence to subject any person campaigning for votes within 100 metres of a voting centre, to violence or intimidation (s152(4)).

The VEC appointed an additional staff member to each voting centre to assist in the administration of the new provisions and provided training and additional information to support the management of these requirements.

Figure 12: Wheelchair accessibility of election day voting centres, Victorian State elections 2006-2018.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>379</td>
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<td>286</td>
<td>178</td>
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<tr>
<td>Limited or No</td>
<td>682</td>
<td>415</td>
<td>416</td>
<td>658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wheelchair Access</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>816</td>
<td>975</td>
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</tbody>
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Absent votes

On election day 950 laptops were deployed to 873 voting centres across the State to allow electronic roll mark-off of electors casting an absent vote. Absent votes at these voting centres were placed directly into the ballot box on completion of each ballot paper instead of into a declaration envelope, therefore removing the amount of processing time required prior to counting. Of the 250,403 absent votes cast across the State, 174,409 were cast at laptop voting centres on election day.

Voting before election day

There has been a significant increase in the number of votes being cast before election day at Victorian State elections. In planning for the 2018 State election, the VEC made a variety of arrangements for electors who were unable to attend a voting centre on election day.

Electronic roll mark-off

The provision of electronic roll mark-off facilities at early and mobile voting centres – and at some absent issuing points at election day voting centres – meant that 1,557,616 electors were able to be marked directly off the electronic roll at the time of being issued with ballot papers. It also allowed the counting of votes to take place as soon as voting closed on election day, or for absent votes once the votes were received by the home electorate, once necessary reconciliations had been completed. During the election a total of 1,506 electronic roll mark-off
The case for change: Preparing for emergency situations

Victoria’s 2018 fire season began as early as September, with many parts of the state in the fire danger period during the two weeks of early voting. The most dangerous rating is ‘Code Red’ which means that if a bushfire starts, it will be uncontrollable, unpredictable and fast moving, with a high likelihood that people will be killed or injured. The Country Fire Authority makes recommendations for ‘Code Red’ situations, including leaving the area the night before the ‘Code Red’ Fire Day. There are other levels of severity in fire response planning, in addition to numerous other types of potential emergency situations. The VEC works closely with Emergency Management Victoria in the lead up to elections to conduct scenario planning for emergency events possible during the election timeline.

There are limited contingency options in responding to emergency situations at appointed voting centres during voting hours, such as bushfires and serious threats of violence. Sections 97 and 97A of the Electoral Act 2002 provide for adjournments and temporary suspensions for events that take place on election day. However, there is a lack of clarity around how these sections work together, and how decisions would be activated and communicated by the VEC in advance of election day. If the VEC adjourns voting at an appointed voting centre on election day, section 97 of the Electoral Act 2002 requires the VEC to adjourn voting for a period of not more than 7 days. In the event of a natural disaster, it may be that several voting centres no longer exist for the re-commencement of voting at the later date.

In addition, the Electoral Act 2002 does not provide guidance for the publication of election results in the event that voting is reconvened in a particular area at a later date. Providing the Electoral Commissioner with broader power to adapt provisions of the Electoral Act 2002 to ensure the proper administration of elections in an emergency situation would respond to this uncertainty.

The VEC notes that such an arrangement applies for Canadian elections under section 17 of the Canada Elections Act 2000.

See Recommendation 4 on page 109.

devices were deployed (556 during early and mobile voting and 950 on election day). This improved the voting process for these electors.

Early voting in person

Early voting in person was available at 103 early voting centres throughout Victoria. These early voting centres were open for two weeks, from 9.00 am on Monday 12 November to 6.00 pm on Friday 23 November. In addition, they were open until 8.00 pm on Thursday 22 November, and from 8.00 am to 5.00 pm on Saturday 17 November to meet the needs of electors. Whilst the number of early voting centres in 2018 was similar to the previous two elections, the VEC recognises that there will need to be more venues at future elections to cope with the high number of early voters and to meet expectations.

Legislative change moved the commencement of early voting from 4.00 pm on the day nominations closed, to 9.00 am on the Monday following the close of nominations. This change provided more time for the VEC to produce and distribute fully printed ballot material to each early voting centre in time for the commencement of early voting.

Eighty-seven of the 88 election offices operated as early voting centres. An additional 16 early voting centres were established to supplement election offices, in districts with larger geographical areas and those anticipating large numbers of electors from across the State, such as
Melbourne CBD and Melbourne Airport. A list of early voting centres is included as Appendix 8. The VEC received a small number of complaints relating to the location of early voting centres (see Section 12: Complaints management).

Operating hours at the Melbourne Airport early voting centre were extended to meet major flight departure times. It was open from 9.00 am to 10.00 pm on Monday 12 and from 5.00 am to 10.00 pm from Tuesday 13 to Thursday 22 November, and until 6.00 pm on Friday 23 November.

Mobile voting

The Electoral Commissioner has the authority to appoint certain establishments as mobile voting centres, to enable those electors to vote on-the-spot when a mobile voting team visits in the lead-up to a State election. These establishments include nursing homes, hostels, prisons and hospitals. There were 1,131 mobile voting centres appointed for the 2018 State election, compared with 1,106 locations in 2014. Some venues requested postal voting services only and 982 requested a mobile voting team to visit. Netbooks were used at mobile voting centres and provided access to the State electoral roll to assist election officials to identify each elector’s correct enrolment details and to mark them directly on the VEC’s central database as having voted.

Interstate and overseas voting

Early voting was available at 11 interstate and 34 overseas locations. A total of 9,311 votes were returned from voting centres outside Victoria during the 2018 State election (see Appendix 9 for interstate voting centres and Appendix 10 for overseas voting centres). This is almost 28% less than 2014 (see Figure 14).

The VEC was unable to offer postal voting administered by overseas locations. Due to heightened security around High Commissions and embassies, the VEC was informed that while these agencies were able to distribute outbound mail, they were unable to receive inbound mail.

Postal voting

Electors had until 6.00 pm on Wednesday 21 November to apply for a postal vote. Due to legislative change, the closing date to apply for a postal vote at the 2018 State election was one day earlier than at previous elections. Electors could apply for a postal vote by:

- completing an application online via the VEC website (new for 2018 due to legislative amendment)
- collecting a postal vote application form from any post office in Victoria
- collecting an application form from any election office or interstate voting location
- calling the VEC’s Public Enquiry Service to request an application form be posted to them.

Some applications arrived after the deadline and could not be processed. The VEC called these electors to offer them alternative voting options such as early voting or election day voting.

All postal vote applications were processed centrally for the 2018 State election. Most were completed online and, once submitted by the
elector, were immediately available in the VEC’s Election Management System (EMS). Applications received via mail were scanned and uploaded into the EMS. Most applications were able to be processed electronically, which eliminated labour-intensive handling of paper applications and helped to ensure the efficient delivery of ballot packs. Paper applications that could not be scanned were processed manually. The EMS enabled election officials to track all applications and inform electors of the status of their application at any time. Electors who applied online were also emailed a tracking number so that they could track the progress of their application via the website.

The VEC again established an email ballot material service for the 2018 State election. This facility was only available to electors in remote areas or overseas who would experience difficulty in accessing postal facilities. Electors could submit a postal vote application online, and provide an email address for receipt of ballot material. The VEC processed each application and the system automatically generated an email to each of these electors containing a secure link to all ballot material required to vote. To access the ballot material file via the email link, each elector was required to enter verification information provided by them at the point of application.

A total of 12,268 emailed ballot packs were dispatched during the election compared to 2,603 at the 2014 State election. It is assumed this increase is due to the convenience for electors outside Victoria to be able to vote without having to attend an early voting centre in person, or to apply for a postal vote using mail services.

The VEC received a large number of postal vote applications from the Liberal Party, which had dispatched applications in certain districts. These applications came directly back to the VEC using the reply paid service.

Once the initial backlog of applications was cleared (within two working days of the roll being available), the VEC endeavoured to process all further applications on the day they were received.

Some email voters experienced difficulties in accessing the downloadable files, although the VEC was able to rectify this issue. Additionally, during the VEC’s regular quality assurance processing it was identified that ballot papers had not been dispatched to a small number of electors. The VEC quickly contacted each affected elector and made arrangements for the postal vote to be dispatched to them, or to vote on election day.

Some electors who applied for a postal vote also voted at an early voting centre prior to receiving their ballot pack. The use of Netbooks at all early voting centres enabled the VEC to identify any elector who had been issued with, but had not returned a postal vote, and to cancel that postal vote. If the postal vote was returned, it was rejected by the system and not counted.

The case for change: Electronic assisted voting

The VEC introduced electronic assisted voting by way of a Telephone Assisted Voting service at the 2018 State election. As set out in the Electoral Act 2002, the service was available to electors who cannot otherwise vote without assistance because of blindness, low vision or a motor impairment. Telephone Assisted Voting was received well by users of the service, with more than five times the number of electors voting by this method than the in-person electronic voting service offered at previous elections. The VEC proposes that the eligible classes of electors defined in sections 110D and 110G of the Electoral Act 2002 be expanded to include electors experiencing homelessness, those with mobility issues who consistently face barriers accessing voting services, Antarctic electors, and those affected by a declared emergency situation, such as a bushfire or flood.

See Recommendation 3 on page 109.
To access TAV, electors were required to make two telephone calls: the first call was to register for a Telephone Assisted Vote and receive a unique registration ID and PIN; and the second call was to cast their vote. At no point during the second call was the elector identified by name or address. To facilitate this requirement and to ensure the secrecy of the elector’s vote, the VEC established two call centres at the Melbourne head office in different areas of the building.

At the close of voting 1,199 electors used TAV – an increase of 1,000 compared to users of the in-person system provided within Victoria at the 2014 State election.

Additional voting services

The VEC is committed to ensuring maximum accessibility to voting. Several major events were scheduled for Saturday 24 November, including the Ballarat Cup, Daylesford Agricultural Show, Frankston’s Christmas Festival of Lights, 2018 Gravity Enduro Cup, the Great Victorian Bike Ride, Queenscliff Music Festival, and the Timboon Artisan Festival. The VEC contacted the organisers of these events to coordinate information for participants, examine opportunities to advertise in relevant publications, or to provide information regarding voting centres close to the events.
By the numbers:

**Voting**

- 1,794 election day voting centres
- 61.98% election day voting centres with independent or assisted wheelchair access
- 9,311 votes cast at interstate and overseas voting centres
- 12,268 ballot packs sent by email
- 1,199 electors used Telephone Assisted Voting
- 11 votes cast by Antarctic electors