The count begins

The counting of votes began at the close of voting on Saturday 24 November and continued through until Tuesday 11 December when final results for the Legislative Council were calculated. Counting timelines and processes differed according to the type of vote being counted and whether it was for the Legislative Assembly or Legislative Council.

Vote types

There are different types of votes that are cast at an election. The type of vote and where it was cast affects when it will be counted.

During the early voting period an elector may cast an early vote in person at any early voting centre within Victoria, interstate or overseas. Alternatively an elector may opt to vote by post.

Election day voting is only available within Victoria, although electors can vote at any voting centre across the state. Votes cast by electors at an election day voting centre in their own district are referred to as ordinary votes and are counted after the close of voting at the voting centre where they were issued. Votes cast by electors attending a voting centre outside of their enrolled district are referred to as absent votes and are not counted on election night.

Postal votes

At the 2018 election all postal votes were counted at the centralised Postal Vote Count Centre (PVCC) from election night. This differed from previous elections and allowed election offices to focus on counting own district early votes on election night where previously they would have counted postal votes.

The establishment of the PVCC also allowed the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) to minimise the movement of ballot papers across the state during the counting period.

Early votes

Early votes cast within an elector’s district are counted within the district, while those cast outside an elector’s district are forwarded to
the appropriate election office for counting after election day. In 2018 the exception was that early votes cast via Telephone Assisted Voting, and at interstate and overseas early voting centres, were counted at the PVCC in order to minimise the movement of ballot papers received centrally.

Absent votes

Voting centres with an electronic copy of the State-wide roll for absent vote issuing reconcile the completed ballot papers, and then enclose them in specially designed envelopes to be forwarded to the appropriate election office for counting after election day. Absent votes that were issued using a declaration envelope are forwarded to the appropriate election office after election day.

‘Marked as voted’ votes

Electors found to have already been marked on the roll when they attend to vote, but claim not to have voted, are issued with ballot papers that are included in a ‘declaration’ envelope once completed. Any ‘marked as voted’ votes are checked to determine if they should be included in the count. Votes cast within the elector’s district are included in the count in the election office after election day, and those taken outside of the elector’s district are sent to the appropriate election office for the completion of relevant checks and counting after election day.

Provisional votes

Electors who believe they should be on the roll but cannot be found on the roll complete an ‘Application for Enrolment/Provisional vote’. These votes are checked to ensure electors are eligible to enrol, prior to the votes being admitted for further scrutiny. Votes cast within the elector’s district to be admitted to the count are counted in the election office, and those cast outside of the elector’s district are sent to the appropriate election office after election day and admitted to the count after the relevant checks.

The case for change:
Processing early votes

Early voting in Australia takes two forms: postal voting and early voting in person. Postal voting has been a part of Victoria’s State elections since 1900, but early voting in person is a more recent development, with the VEC establishing early voting centres in each district since 1999. As in all Australian jurisdictions, the number of Victorians casting their vote in person before election day has steadily increased at every election over the last 20 years. The Electoral Legislation (Amendment) Act 2018 removed the requirement for electors to declare they were unable to vote on election day. This change may account for some, but not all of the 1.37 million early votes cast at the 2018 State election (from 25.79% of all votes in 2014 to 36.77% last year). This trend is expected to continue and new solutions will be necessary to optimise the number of votes that are able to be sorted, reconciled and counted on election night.

A legislative change to allow the VEC to prepare (but not count) early votes from 8.00 am on election day (as per postal votes) will help ensure the prompt reporting of election results.

See Recommendation 5 on page 109.

Counting on election day

The counting of votes commenced at 6.00 pm on election day, but the preparations began hours before voting closed. At the centralised PVCC, election staff established a restricted zone where they extracted postal votes for all districts and regions from their envelopes from 8.00 am until 6.00 pm – early extraction, sorting and reconciliation was allowed for the first time under new legislation. After completing verification activities, election staff extracted ballot papers
Counting the votes

from over 186,000 envelopes (86.44% of the total postal votes that had been returned prior to election day). Meanwhile, in election offices from 4.00 pm until 6.00 pm, election officials established restricted zones for sorting and reconciling own district early votes. Once complete, sorting continued for early votes for other districts and regions. The higher than anticipated number of early votes made this a labour-intensive task, with large teams working through the night and into Sunday. Given the upward trend in early voting, the VEC recommends to further increase the preliminary sorting period for early votes (see The case for change: Processing early votes).

Once voting closed at 6.00 pm, counting commenced at each voting centre, election office and the PVCC.

Ordinary votes issued in election day voting centres made up 48.27% of the total vote counted for the election and were counted in voting centres on election night. Voting centre staff conducted three ordinary vote counts on election night. District votes (to elect the Legislative Assembly) were counted twice as follows:

- first-preference count
- two-candidate-preferred count.

The two-candidate-preferred count (2CP) involves the distribution of preferences to the two candidates considered most likely to be in the lead. The purpose of the 2CP is to provide an early indication of the election result.

Region ordinary votes (to elect the Legislative Council) are also counted to first preference by group above-the-line (ATL) and below-the-line (BTL) and any ungrouped candidate.

At the PVCC, all extracted district postal votes were counted to first preference and the 2CP. At each election office, all own district early votes were also counted to first preference and the 2CP. No counting of region postal or early votes took place on election night.

Election day performance targets

The VEC set strong targets for the counting of votes. These performance targets covered the publishing of results within two hours of the close of polls, the counting of votes on election night, and the counting of votes on election weekend.

Two hour target — voting centres

The target to have more than 75% of own district first preference results from voting centres published within two hours of the close of polls was not reached. Instead, 64.33% of voting centres had their results published by 8.00 pm on election night. One hour later, however, the VEC had published 87.96% of own district first preference results.

Election night target — early and postal

The VEC achieved its target to count 90% of own district early votes held at the election office on election night, with 99.33% of own district votes cast in early voting centres counted. However, the target to complete district first preference counts for 90% of all postal votes returned by close of voting was not achieved, with 86.44% being verified and sent to extraction. The decision was made to exclude envelopes returned on the Friday before election day given that verification activities on these envelopes could not be completed before the Saturday extraction. However, 100% of the postal votes that were extracted on election day were counted that night.

Overall election night target

The target to count 75% of total district votes counted for the election on election night was exceeded, with 79.08% counted during this time.

Counting after Election Day

Region early votes that were cast by electors in their own district were counted to first preference in election offices from Monday 26 November. Region postal votes extracted on election day were counted to first preference on Sunday 25 and Monday 26 November at the PVCC.
From Tuesday 27 November, Election Managers began receiving votes cast by electors outside their district from other election offices via the declaration exchange, which were reconciled and processed before counting. As per counting on election night, three counts were then conducted on all votes received, including any own district ‘marked as voted’ votes and any own district provisional votes once assessed for eligibility:

- first preference count — district
- two-candidate-preferred count — district
- first preference count — region.

During monitoring of the 2CP counts on election night it was identified that there were some districts that required a correction to 2CP candidates. New 2CP counts were required for Geelong, Pascoe Vale, Shepparton and Morwell Districts. Election offices commenced corrected 2CP counts from the Monday after election day. In Werribee District it was not clear who the 2CP candidates would be. The VEC subsequently conducted a full preference distribution for Werribee District.

The VEC processed 36,312 provisional declarations from people who could not be found on the roll when they arrived to cast a vote (see Figure 15). Of these, 26,096 were subsequently counted. Those rejected were largely due to the elector not being entitled to enrol. The VEC will continue to focus the enrolment phase of its election advertising on the close of roll date, so that the number of electors enrolling on the day is manageable at voting centres, and to reduce the number of rejected provisional votes.

By Thursday 29 November – five days after election day – 91.40% of all first preference votes had been counted. First preference counts of postal votes, which could be received up until 6.00 pm on Friday 30 November, as well as all votes returned from interstate and overseas venues, continued through the first weekend in December.

**District rechecks**

Election officials recheck the formality and first preferences for all district ballot papers. This is a normal part of the counting process and results are adjusted to correct any discrepancies.

In 2018, district rechecks were conducted manually, with the exception of Melbourne District where preferences were entered into the VEC’s computer count application. This was a trial to test the feasibility of data-entering district ballot papers at a State general election – a counting method that would streamline the counting process and allow for the distribution and analysis of raw preference data per district. The VEC will investigate the option of implementing this counting method more broadly at the district level at future elections.

**District preference distributions**

Preference distributions determine the result of an election in any district in which no candidate obtained an absolute majority of first preference votes (ie, more than 50%).

**Unenrolled/provisional declarations 2006–2018**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of votes issued</th>
<th>Number of votes counted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>36,312</td>
<td>26,096</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>50,655</td>
<td>37,622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>34,546</td>
<td>29,252</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>39,667</td>
<td>2,617</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 15: The number of provisional declaration votes issued and counted, Victorian State elections 2006-2018.
Following the recheck, the candidate with the fewest first-preference votes is declared excluded, and votes for that candidate are distributed to the remaining candidates according to the preferences on the excluded candidate’s ballot papers. This process continues until one candidate obtains an absolute majority of the formal votes. Preference distributions were conducted in 48 districts in 2018.

The VEC’s computer count application was used to calculate the Melbourne District preference distribution on Friday 30 November. All manual preference distributions commenced on Monday 3 December and were completed by Wednesday 5 December.

District recount

A recount can be called when the election result is close, and involves reviewing and recounting parcels of votes. One recount was conducted for the 2018 State election, for the Ripon District. Candidates Louise Staley (Liberal Party) and Sarah De Santis (Australian Labor Party) were separated by 31 votes at the end of the preference distribution, with Ms De Santis as the successful candidate. The recount was conducted from Wednesday 5 until Saturday 8 December, with the final margin reduced to 15 votes, with Ms Staley as the successful candidate.

Ms Staley was declared elected on Monday 10 December. An application requesting a further recount was made to the Court of Disputed Returns in January 2019. See Section 13: Inquiries and disputes.

District two-party preferred counts

For statistical and analytical purposes, it can be useful to see how the vote across the State is divided between the Labor Party and the Liberal and National Coalition. The VEC uses two-party-preferred (2PP) counts in those districts where the two-candidate-preferred (2CP) count or the preference distribution does not show how the vote is divided between the two main parties.

If required, the 2PP count takes place once all the counting for the district has been completed. In 2018, the VEC conducted 10 2PP counts. Further details are in Section 16: Analysis of the election.
A full recheck of all region above-the-line and informal ballot papers took place from Sunday 25 November until Friday 7 December. During the recheck, all votes were kept in their specific parcels. As the recheck for each parcel was completed, the ballot papers were packaged into ‘those marked below-the-line (BTL)’, ‘those marked above-the-line (ATL)’ and ‘those deemed to be informal’. All formal ballot papers marked ATL and informal ballot papers were retained at the respective recheck centre (MRRC, PVCC or individual election office).

The BTL votes were only check-counted – rather than fully rechecked – as they would effectively be rechecked when data-entered into the VEC’s computer count application as part of computer count activities. Two teams of 30 data-entry operators were established for the metropolitan computerised count, housed in the same building as the MRRC. Individual parcels containing BTL ballot papers were passed to the computer count team from Friday 30 November until Tuesday 11 December. The PVCC also delivered its individual BTL parcels to the metropolitan computer count team on Monday 3 December.

A team of up to 20 data-entry operators was established at each of the three regional computer count centres in Ballarat, Shepparton and Warragul. Individual BTL parcels were delivered to the respective regional computer count centres on Wednesday 5 December. Data entry then occurred from Thursday 6 to Sunday 9 December.

Data from BTL ballot papers was entered into the computer count application, twice. The application identified discrepancies between first round and second round for the data entry operator to review and correct. During data entry, the computer count application identified ballot papers deemed to be informal, which were passed to the informal checking team to determine if they were formal ATL, formal BTL, or remained as informal.
When all BTL ballot paper data had been entered a second time, the total number of ATL ticket votes for each group (comprising those held at the respective recheck centre, and those identified at the computer count centre) was uploaded into the computer count system.

Once ATL and BTL data had been entered into the computer count application, the number of informal ballot papers (comprising those at the respective recheck centre and those at the computer count centre) was entered into the system.

When all ballot papers to be included in the calculation of results had been entered into the computer count application, a final reconciliation of all ballot papers for each region took place prior to the results being calculated. The calculation of results for all eight regions commenced at 2.00 pm on Tuesday 11 December. Results were published as ‘provisional’ awaiting the declaration of results which took place from 6.00 pm on Tuesday 11 December. This was in-line with the proposed schedule outlined in the Service Plan.

**Count process summary and transparency**

Scrutineers are permitted to be present at all stages of counting. Election Managers publish candidate bulletins when required, outlining counting activities in their offices. Counting activities were also published daily to the VEC website to allow candidates and registered political parties to plan scrutineer activities.

**Results feed**

All results were progressively displayed on the VEC website and results reports were made available to scrutineers. Election results were also provided as downloadable data files in a form that could be programmed for media coverage. These files included information on candidates, party affiliation (where applicable) and voting locations.

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**The case for change: Extending counting days**

The VEC currently has 21 days from election day to complete all counting and recounting activities, and return the writs to the Governor. This requirement is fixed despite the chance of one or more recounts being required in the days and weeks following election day. While the VEC takes all possible steps to build a robust counting timeline, there are increased logistical requirements that need to be managed for particular recounts, including the Legislative Council.

At the 2018 State election, results of the Legislative Council elections were calculated and declared 17 days after election day. If a re-count had been required for any of these elections, the current timeline allows only three working days to arrange and conduct the recount(s) before returning the writs.

For comparison, Commonwealth elections allow 56 days from election day for the Australian Electoral Commission to return the writs to the Governor-General and State Governors.

To protect the accuracy and integrity of all counting activities in an election, including any re-counting, as well as the opportunity for candidates and parties to arrange scrutineers, the VEC recommends extending the return of the writs from 21 days to 23 days from election day. This extension moves the deadline from Saturday to Monday and provides a contingency in the event that one or more region recounts are required.

See Recommendation 6 on page 109.
By the numbers:

**Counting the votes**

- **99.33%** own district early votes counted on election night
- **79.08%** of total votes counted on election night
- **87.96%** of voting centre district results published by 9.00 pm on election night
- **26,096** provisional votes counted
- **44.32%** of electors voted early by post or at early voting centres
- **9,000** parcels of election records returned to the VEC for storage

**Virtual Tally Room**

More than 250,000 people accessed the VEC’s Virtual Tally Room from election night until it was decommissioned on Monday 26 November – a substantial increase on the 103,190 users in 2014. There was significant interest in the results for close seats.