Election Countdown

On Saturday, 27 November 2010 more than 3.5 million Victorians will head out to voting centres to have their say in shaping the State.

In preparation, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) is recruiting and training over 17,000 people to work in the 1,800 voting centres across Victoria. Over 125,500 pencils have been bundled and sharpened, over 11.5 million ballot papers will be printed and the cardboard voting screens are being updated to include voting instructions in twenty different languages.

Electronic initiatives will be a big focus this year, with electronically assisted voting extended to every early voting centre in Victoria and the introduction of electronically marking voters directly off the State roll available at selected voting centres.

In the weeks before the election, every enrolled voter will receive a redesigned ‘EasyVote’ card which will include all the voting centre locations in their district and clear instructions on how to vote correctly. The State election hotline will be up and running from late September to field any queries and the VEC website is being redesigned and rewritten to make it even easier to find information on Victoria’s biggest electoral event of the year.

Legislation Watch

As Selections was being prepared, important legislative developments relating to electoral enrolment have been taking place around Australia.

On 1 December 2009, the New South Wales Parliament passed the Parliamentary Electorates and Elections Amendment Act 2009. The Act has introduced a system of automatic enrolment, under which the New South Wales Electoral Commission can use information from trusted sources to automatically enrol new electors or to update existing electors’ addresses. The Act also allows eligible people to enrol and cast a provisional vote on election day, subject to the production of adequate identification. The new system is expected to be introduced before the next New South Wales State election in March 2011.

The Commonwealth Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) has conducted an inquiry into the implications of this legislation, realising that once the legislation comes into operation there will be an inevitable discrepancy between the Commonwealth and New South Wales rolls, which could cause confusion. On 22 February 2010, JSCEM recommended that the Commonwealth follow New South Wales and introduce automatic and election day enrolment. However, the Opposition members of the Committee opposed these recommendations.

Meanwhile, the Commonwealth Parliament is debating the Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Close of Rolls and Other Measures) Bill. Among other measures, the Bill would allow electors to update their enrolment details online. This amendment would make it easier to update enrolment, but it could lead to differences between the Commonwealth and State rolls.

The VEC will continue to monitor legislation and to recommend amendments that have the potential to improve electoral administration in Victoria.
Message from the Electoral Commissioner

The State election in November 2010 will present opportunities for innovation, as well as challenges for the VEC. The increased provision of services to improve accessibility to voting is one of the most important of those challenges.

In line with our commitment to continually improve our environmental performance, initiatives that use electronic technologies feature strongly in our plans.

Initiatives include the provision of online facilities for expressions of interest for election roles, training for election officials, electronic candidates’ rolls and street lists and electronic roll marking for early voting centres, and selected election day voting centres.

The expansion and improvement of electronic voting services for eligible voters is well underway, and it is anticipated that electronic voting facilities will be available in each district. It is a great achievement to be able to provide blind or low vision voters the opportunity to cast a secret ballot, many for the first time in their life.

A significant administrative initiative that will greatly reduce any necessity for recounts for the Legislative Council (Upper House) is the double-keying verification of ballot papers completed below the line for the Legislative Council.

The success of an election depends on good project management, collaborative teamwork, effective communication, comprehensive risk controls and the full commitment of all involved. My appreciation goes to VEC staff, partner organisations and service providers. I know they will be working with me to provide Victorians with electoral services that demonstrate impartiality, integrity, transparency, accessibility and innovation; the key elements of good electoral administration.

Steve Tully
Electoral Commissioner
New Look for VEC Website

New design, new structure, new content

More people are turning to the VEC’s website during electoral events than ever before, making it an increasingly important way of communicating with voters. When the Altona District by-election was announced, for example, the traffic to the website doubled within 24 hours of the sitting member resigning.

A major overhaul of the site was always part of our preparation for the 2010 State election, and a greater understanding of how people use the website drove the design.

The first thing you will notice about the new vec.vic.gov.au is the look, but the changes go much deeper than that. In consultation with users, a completely new menu structure has been designed to make it easier to search and find information. The content of the site has been completely overhauled and re-written to make it easier to understand with a fresh and friendlier tone. Above all, accessibility for all electors is vital. The new site is compatible with most screen reading software and, wherever possible, all downloadable files are available in multiple formats.

The new site will launch at the end of June and has lots of great new features including a one page summary of your electorate describing your local council, State district and region. This summary also includes boundary maps and direct links to more electorate information and results.

Locate your nearest voting centre on an interactive map

During the November State election, electors will be able to find their nearest voting centres on the website using the VEC’s dynamic new ‘Voting Centre Locator’ function.

By simply typing in their address or even just the name of their suburb, electors will have all the details of their nearest voting centres clearly displayed on an interactive map.

The map will show a ‘you are here’ marker and clearly indicate the nearest election day voting centres and early voting centres. The District boundaries will also be indicated.

A handy text box next to the map will feature all the details of the venues including the full name, address and opening hours, whether the venue is fully wheelchair accessible or wheelchair accessible with assistance.

The Voting Centre Locator function isn’t just limited to Victoria; it will also show interstate and overseas voting centres.

Online enrolment helper

Filling out enrolment forms will now be much easier for Victorians thanks to the VEC’s new online enrolment helper.

The VEC is the first electoral commission in Australia to create an online enrolment helper that guides the user through a series of questions, shown one at a time, on the screen.

The answers are then used to automatically generate a completed enrolment form that can be printed out, signed and sent to the VEC. The online enrolment helper is up and running, ready for this year’s State election and there are plans to create versions in different languages in the future.
Training for Success

Over 17,000 staff will be trained in the lead up to the State election and this year, for the first time, a new online training course will be used by all voting centre staff.

All 64 Election Managers, their 110 Assistants, support staff and a pool of standby staff will be trained at the VEC’s head office by VEC election experts. The seminars include presentations and practical exercises to equip them with the skills needed to manage their office, conduct the election and count the votes in their electorate.

Election Managers need to be strong communicators, possess good computer skills and be able to follow procedures to ensure that elections are fair, impartial and conducted according to law. Elections always attract people from a range of backgrounds and the VEC values this diversity.

This year’s staff includes retired school principals, young mothers, students and many people who enjoyed their role in previous elections and are keen to get involved again.

Ken Greed, an experienced Senior Election Official (SEO) said: “My association with the VEC has been just great, not only has it filled a retirement gap but it has enabled me to develop new skills and interests and to enter a different profession. I can’t speak too highly of the way [the VEC] conduct the training programs and support SEOs.”

Election official roles

Would you be interested in a role at a voting centre? The VEC is accepting expressions of interest via our website at vec.vic.gov.au/appointments.

The online form will guide you through a set of questions and outline the roles available. No experience is necessary, you just need to be over 16 and speak fluent English. Successful applicants will be contacted nearer to the time of the election.

Electronically marking the electoral roll

After a successful pilot at the Altona State by-election, the VEC is introducing electronic roll marking directly from a central copy of the State roll for the first time.

The VEC will roll out up to 1,000 netbooks across Victoria to early voting centres, mobile voting teams and 112 voting centres. Staff will be able to link to the VEC database and quickly mark voters off the roll using a simple search screen. The roll is then automatically and immediately updated.
Following its successful trial at the State election in 2006, Electronically Assisted Voting will now be expanded for this year’s State election and made available for eligible electors at every early voting centre in Victoria.

For the first time, the option of voting by telephone will be available to blind and low vision electors, giving many more electors the chance to vote in secret. The system is entirely automated and there is no link made between personal details and voter preferences.

Voting using the kiosk

Eligible electors using the kiosk will receive an ‘electorate card’ when they are marked off the roll. This card is encoded with the details of their District and Region. An election official will take them to a kiosk in a private voting area and the system will be activated once the card is inserted. The system will guide the elector through step-by-step instructions and they can adjust the volume, text size and colour to suit their needs.

Voting using the telephone

Once an elector is marked off the roll, an election official will escort them to a telephone in a private voting booth. The election official will dial into the system and audio instructions will guide the elector through casting their vote. They can navigate backwards and forwards through the various options using the telephone keypad.

Electronically Assisted Voting will also be used by some mobile teams who will be travelling around Victoria visiting hostels, hospitals, nursing homes, retirement villages and care facilities.

Voting overseas

Victorean electors in the UK will have the opportunity to vote electronically at four early voting centres across the country in Edinburgh, Manchester, South West London and Victoria House in central London. Electronically Assisted Voting will also be available for blind and low vision Victorian travellers at Melbourne and Avalon airports.

If you know of anyone who is blind or who has low vision, please mention this form of voting to them.
All Victorians Actively Participating in our Democracy

Imagine you have just arrived in Australia from a country where voting systems are very different, where culture and customs mean gender plays a strong role in the voting process, and where the right to vote freely is not always available. Now imagine you have difficulty understanding English too...when you think of it this way it’s easy to see how new citizens to Australia can be become disenfranchised from our electoral process.

According to the last census, 187,000 Victorians rate themselves as speaking little or no English and data mapping by the VEC also shows that in areas of Victoria with high populations of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) citizens, electoral participation is lower and levels of voting informality are higher.

The VEC is always looking for new and innovative ways to inform and engage with these communities and ensure they fully understand their democratic rights. In November last year the VEC launched ‘All about Voting’, an electoral education resource kit in partnership with AMES, Australia’s leading provider of multicultural language services.

‘All About Voting’ is a complete classroom resource and follows Sung, (pictured), as she experiences the democratic process from enrolling to vote to taking part in an election.

‘All About Voting’ is available free to adult education providers in Victoria and directly addresses the Electoral Matters Committee’s recommendation for the VEC to consider further electoral education with CALD audiences, and the VEC’s vision for ‘All Victorians to actively participate in our democracy’.

If you would like further information about ‘All About Voting’, please contact the Community Education Team on (03) 9299 0599.

Who Decides?

This year’s Parliament Open Day saw the debut of the VEC’s new interactive education game – Who Decides?

It sparked lots of debate about which level of government looks after which service.

Try it for yourself at vec.vic.gov.au/education
Voting is for Everyone

Outreach sessions at Scope Daycare Centres

‘Voting is for Everyone’ is the name of a new electoral education resource kit that the VEC is developing in partnership with Scope for disability services across Victoria.

During the development of the resource, the VEC ran a number of pilot outreach sessions with Scope service users. The feedback from these sessions has been invaluable in helping shape the final kit. The sessions kicked off with a discussion about voting rights and included information about who our democratic representatives are, what decisions our representatives make and how to contact them. After lunch, everyone was encouraged to take part in a mock election and there was an opportunity to enrol if they wished.

‘Voting is for Everyone’ directly addresses the accessibility and information issues faced by Victorians with a disability. Rhonda Joseph, Scope’s Quality Advisor says: “We have had some really positive feedback from these sessions with people who previously thought they were unable to vote, enthusiastically enrolling.”

‘Voting is for Everyone’ will be available from late August and aims to challenge some of the myths surrounding disability and voting. Rhonda Joseph believes “it will be a fantastic tool for rolling out across Victoria”.

For more information, please contact the Community Education Team on (03) 9299 0599.

Outreach sessions at Victorian prisons

One of the basic principles of a democracy is that all adult citizens should have the right to vote in elections, but there have always been exceptions to this rule. People serving prison sentences have often been excluded from the franchise, based on the argument that they have forfeited their citizen rights while they are in prison. The law on prisoners and voting has varied over the years. Under the Hamer Liberal government in the late 1970s and early 1980s, all Victorian prisoners had the right to vote; then, in the 1980s, Victoria came into line with the Commonwealth, and prisoners serving a sentence punishable under law by five years’ imprisonment or more lost the vote. Since 2002, prisoners serving a sentence of less than five years imprisonment have been eligible to enrol and vote. This is different from Commonwealth law, under which three years is the cut-off point.

In May 2009, of 2,154 Victorian prisoners serving sentences of less than five years, 600 (27.5%) were enrolled. It is not known how many of these 600 actually vote in Victorian elections, but it is probably a minority.

A VEC team has been visiting prisons, talking to inmates and staff about attitudes to, and the practicalities of, enrolment and voting. Research is ongoing, but it appears that the most effective way to encourage enrolment is to hold face-to-face enrolment sessions, which would be publicised in advance within the prison. At election time, mobile teams would visit prisons before election day. This face-to-face activity would be supplemented by straightforward information in prisoner induction and exit kits.
The Electoral Commissioner, Management Group and staff are committed to ensuring the VEC continues to take action to reduce the environmental impact of its activities.

By developing and implementing an Environmental Management Strategy, setting key objectives and implementing action plans to achieve its goals, the VEC is making real progress.

Staff ensure sustainability is a factor in planning operations and policy decisions and have devised and introduced sustainable practices into individual, team and organisation-wide projects including:

- the use of technology to ensure that document content dynamically fits pages, halving the paper needed for State election ballot papers and ticket books;
- the printing of multi-language information directly onto voting screens to reduce the need for separate leaflets;
- the use of technology to reduce the requirement for couriers where possible;
- the collection and provision of information in electronic format wherever possible;
- the introduction of online training modules for election officials;
- encouraging the use of reusable coffee cups, refillable pens, double-sided printing; and ensuring that suppliers are aware of our sustainability objective and;
- taking part in National Tree Day, Australia’s biggest community tree-planting event.

Join us on election night

The State Election Tallyroom will be in the Victory Room at Etihad Stadium on election night and the VEC is once again throwing open the doors to anyone who would like to be part of the atmosphere and watch the results roll in.

Doors open at 5.00pm on Saturday, 27 November.