



Electoral Commissioner

Our ref: 4490

[REDACTED]
Inquiry Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear [REDACTED]

Questions on Notice – public hearing 6 December 2019

Please find enclosed responses to Questions on Notice taken at the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters public hearing on 6 December 2019.

Question 1:

Ms Thwaites asked about recall of the 'Stop and Consider' campaign, and how that changed across the course of the campaign. *[Proof Hansard pages 3-4]*

Answer:

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) ran independent benchmarking and tracking surveys for the 'Stop and Consider' campaign.

During the evaluation survey about one in nine respondents (11%) indicated that they recognised the campaign - a rise from the benchmark figure of 5%. This level of recognition is commensurate with the expenditure on the campaign. While the recognition of the campaign did not differ greatly across demographic categories it was somewhat higher among those aged 18 to 24 (16% versus 10% among older demographics). Recognition of the campaign was also higher among respondents who indicated more regular use of social media (15% for people who use social media for 20+ hours per week).

The market research undertaken also showed that the 'Stop and Consider' campaign was generally well received. Two in five (40%) of those recognising the campaign claimed they would take action on account of seeing it. Of those, the action that 52% of respondents said they would take would be to "check facts relating to social media content".

Question 2:

Senator Askew asked whether postal votes sent from within Australia, which were recorded as not being included in the count because they were received late, came from a particular area. *[Proof Hansard page 8]*

Answer:

Of the 3,140 postal votes returned to the AEC after the 13th day cut off period, 1,611 postal envelopes were from overseas addresses. The remaining 1,529 postal envelopes were from addresses within Australia. A breakdown per state and territory is listed below. An analysis of this data showed that there was no particular division or area (e.g. inner/outer metro, rural, provincial) within each state that was disproportionately represented in the postal vote envelopes received after the 13 day cut off period.

NSW	Vic	Qld	WA	SA	Tas	ACT	NT
279	325	516	138	168	27	47	29

Question 3:

Senator Waters asked if the AEC could quantify the costs of the extra efforts made to provide postal votes to electors on the Wednesday, Thursday and Friday prior to polling. *[Proof Hansard page 9]*

Answer:

There are a number of divisions that reported using alternative methods to deliver postal voting packs to ensure electors received them on time.

For example, in the divisions of Blair and Oxley, the Ipswich show holiday fell on Friday 17 May 2019, interrupting postal services on that day. Two staff members used an AEC vehicle to deliver 60 packs across the divisions, travelling approximately 250km over a five hour period. In other divisions there are reports of AEC staff delivering packs to voters on their way home from work. On occasion, couriers were used to deliver postal voting packs directly to electors or to certain post offices to meet delivery schedules instead of through mail centres which could have caused delays.

As much of this extra effort was recorded anecdotally, the cost is not quantifiable.

Question 4:

Senator Waters asked the AEC for information about voter education on preferencing. In particular, education on the value of one's vote and how it either diminishes or doesn't diminish. *[Proof Hansard pages 9, 12 and 26]*

Answer:

The AEC is committed to delivering communication and education programs to inform Australians about electoral processes, and to facilitate their successful participation in electoral events. At each federal election the AEC conducts a comprehensive communication campaign that includes a multi-million dollar advertising component run across multiple channels. The formality phase of this AEC communication campaign explains how to mark preferences on the two different ballot papers.

Further formality guidance is provided by the delivery of an official guide to households, information on AEC digital channels and a range of community engagement activities, including in a number of languages. Our research across several electoral events has shown that voter recall and knowledge about how to complete ballot papers experiences a sharp decline between elections, and as such instructions about how to complete ballot papers will remain a primary focus of AEC election time communications.

The AEC responded to feedback about voter education late last year and reorganised information on the AEC website to create a dedicated page on preferential voting – *Learn about elections* at <https://www.aec.gov.au/learn/>. This page provides both simplified and detailed explanations of how

preferences are counted in House of Representatives and Senate contests. The section also includes a practise voting tool and a community education kit which includes session materials for making your vote count.

The AEC's National Electoral Education Centre welcomes approximately 100,000 school students from across Australia. The programs incorporate an authentic election scenario outlining the transfer of preferences to achieve an election result. The AEC's outreach program, *Get Voting*, equips schools with materials and knowledge required to run a preferential election for a class or school; and more than 500 schools ordered election kits in 2018-19. Professional learning modules, and resources for educators, including the flagship education resource *Democracy Rules* support this program and provide additional tools for teaching civics and citizenship.

The AEC is currently expanding the reach of face to face professional learning opportunities to teachers, with the intention of providing sessions in every state of Australia over the next electoral cycle. Additionally, the AEC is currently updating a variety of digital electoral education resources ensuring suitability for multi-age audiences. The AEC will continue to review our education offering throughout the stages of the election cycle.

Question 5:

Senator Waters asked for a copy of the 2019 election householder guide. [*Proof Hansard page 10*]

Answer:

The online version of the 2019 election official guide is available at -
https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/Federal_Elections/2019/files/downloads/official-guide.pdf

Question 6:

Senator Waters asked whether there had been any difference in the number of people receiving the householder guide, and what the cost would be of sending one copy to each household as addressed mail. [*Proof Hansard page 13*]

Answer:

The Official Guide to the Federal Election is not a legislated requirement, and is not individually addressed to electors. Evaluation and market research of the AEC's public information campaigns has indicated it remains an important source of information for electors.

At the 2019 election a copy of the guide was delivered as unaddressed mail to more than 10.6 million households across Australia, and available on the AEC website.

In 2019, the delivery cost of the guide was \$1,856,708 (\$0.174 per unit x 10,670,739). This was based on a contracted Australia Post rate.

To deliver the same number of guides as addressed mail, the cost would have been \$12,068,105 (\$1.130 per unit x 10,679,739 units). This is based on the standard priority interstate addressed mail rate.

Question 7:

Senator WATERS asked whether the AEC's expenditure on social media advertising has increased or decreased in recent elections. [*Proof Hansard page 13*]

Answer:

As a percentage of the overall media placement costs, the AEC's advertising investment in social media channels increased between the 2016 and 2019 elections.

The AEC works with the government-wide independent master media agency to plan the level of investment of media placement to achieve the recommended optimised advertising performance in the concentrated period of an election.

Question 8:

Senator Waters asked the AEC for information regarding public funding entitlements, in particular relating to Senate groups with individual members of a group claiming on both above the line and below the line votes. [*Proof Hansard page 20*]

Answer:

Section 293(1)(b) of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* states that election funding is payable in relation to a registered political party:

- (b) in respect of candidates whom the party endorses in a Senate election and who are members of a group—the total number of formal first preference group votes given for the candidates is at least 4% of the total number of formal first preference votes cast in the election.

The calculation of the election funding entitlement for the Senate group includes both above and below the line first preference votes. The decision on how the Senate group entitlement is claimed by members of a Senate group is a matter for the relevant political parties and candidates to determine.

The AEC has finalised election funding payments to political parties, candidates and Senate groups for the 2019 federal election and the information is available on the [AEC website](#). All claims for election funding were within the political parties', candidates' and Senate Groups' entitlements.

Question 9:

Senator Waters asked about the quality of data entry of Senate ballot papers. In particular, whether manual checking of files against ballot paper images or papers was undertaken, and if it was, by whom, and on what proportion of ballot papers. [*Proof Hansard page 21*]

Answer:

The AEC conducts extensive testing and assurance processes for both the Senate scanning and Senate count systems prior to use. Thorough user testing is conducted before the scanning and data capture process is accepted for each election. Integrity checks inherent in the system during the conduct of the scrutiny include a double-blind data capture process, which entails one capture of preferences by data recognition software (or by data entry operators for preferences where the software cannot interpret the number) and then a second capture of preferences by data entry operators without being able to view the previous capture. For each ballot paper, both sets of preferences are compared and if there is any discrepancy, the ballot paper is escalated for checking by an AEC senior operator. Any uncertainty in preferences or challenges are escalated directly to AEC officers to resolve. Measures are also in place in all AEC scrutines to conduct assurance checking between results of the initial and later scrutines as well as between House of Representatives and Senate results, to identify any areas that may require investigation.

Question 10:

Senator Waters asked if there was an estimated error rate of data entry for the Senate scanning solution. *[Proof Hansard page 21]*

Answer:

AEC's estimated error rate for Senate scanning solution data entry is 0.65% and compares very favourably with the typical error rate of hand count systems for elections, which is estimated at approximately 2%. As outlined above, thorough user testing is conducted before the scanning and data capture process is accepted for each election. There are integrity checks inherent throughout the scrutiny process, which include a double-blind data capture process (including both system character recognition software and data entry operators) and escalation of any discrepancies, decisions required or challenges.

The business rules for the process also include an automatic additional layer of checking for all informal ballot papers and any ballot papers with sequence errors. The result of the business process is an incredibly high level of assurance that data has been correctly captured before it is passed to the count system.

Question 11:

Senator Waters asked if the AEC intended to conduct a statistically meaningful audit of the Senate scanning solution as part of the next federal election. *[Proof Hansard page 21]*

Answer:

The AEC has undertaken rigorous testing and this has provided high assurance of the processes that were in place with the vendor used in 2016 and 2019.

Question 12:

Senator Waters noted anecdotal reports from scrutineers that there were often differences that became apparent when viewing a full colour scan image of a Senate ballot paper as opposed to bi-tonal. The Senator asked the AEC for information concerning how and when full-colour scans of Senate ballot papers were used instead of bi-tonal scans, and whether the AEC had any plans to mandate full colour. *[Proof Hansard page 22].*

Answer:

Any ballot paper preferences that could not be determined or were challenged by a scrutineer were sent to an AEC workstation for further adjudication. These were then resolved through a number of possible actions including: examining the ballot paper image as a whole; retrieving the physical ballot paper to examine it; or escalating the image to the Australian Electoral Officer (AEO) for their final adjudication. All of these actions were undertaken in full view of any scrutineers present at the scrutiny.

Any data capture by the character recognition software and data entry operators was based on the bi-tonal images (black and white). Any preferences that could not be determined based on the scanned images, resulted in the physical ballot paper being retrieved for final adjudication, where necessary.

The capture of the additional colour images was trialled for the 2019 federal election.

The data capture for the next federal electoral event will be completed using the bi-tonal images as per the 2016 and 2019 elections. Any use of colour images in the future would depend on technical

limitations, as colour images are much larger in size. This increases the cost of storage and requires significantly more processing capacity.

Question 13:

Senator Waters asked whether there was any difference in the number of Senate ballot papers physically retrieved or accessed at the Central Senate Scrutiny between this election and the last election. *[Proof Hansard page 22]*

Answer:

The AEC is not aware of any significant difference between the number of ballot papers retrieved during the last two events. There are several reasons why a ballot paper may be physically retrieved or accessed at the Central Senate Scrutiny site including if a paper is unscannable and requires manual entry, or to confirm preferences – whether initiated by a scrutineer or AEC staff member. Accurate figures are not available as ballot papers are only retrieved as required. Not every scrutineer challenge resulted in a retrieved ballot paper.

Question 14:

Senator Waters asked whether full colour scans of Senate ballot papers clarified scrutineer questions more quickly than bi-tonal scans. *[Proof Hansard page 22]*

Answer:

In the vast majority of cases, queries related to the interpretation of a preference that was not able to be easily recognised (e.g. 3 vs 8, 1 vs 7, etc.) The option to physically retrieve the ballot paper was always available if doubt remained.

Any data capture by the character recognition software and data entry operators was based on the bi-tonal images (black and white). Any preferences that could not be determined based on the scanned images, resulted in the physical ballot paper being retrieved for final adjudication, where necessary.

Yours sincerely

Tom Rogers

28 January 2020