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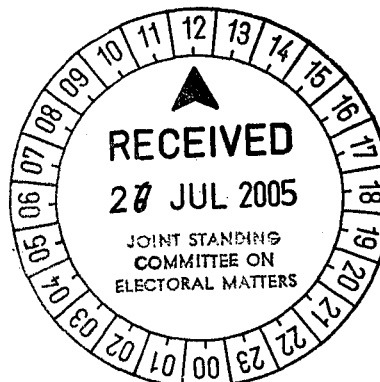
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Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters	
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14 July 2005

Mr Tony Smith, MP  
Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600



Dear Mr Smith,

**Re: *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, Access to Electoral Roll 90B(4) and 91A(2A)(a).***

We seek to make a late submission to the *Inquiry into the 2004 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto*. In 2004, the regulations governing access to the Australian Electoral Register were amended. Following this amendment, access to the electoral roll for the purposes of drawing survey samples for academic research was significantly restricted by the Australian Electoral Commission.

This submission seeks to (a) inform the Joint Standing Committee about the impact of these restrictions on academic research; and (b) request that the Committee consider the reinstatement of access to electronically delivered samples derived from the Australian Electoral Roll for non-commercial, public interest research in universities.

Yours sincerely

Lawrence Cram

**INQUIRY INTO THE 2004 FEDERAL ELECTION AND MATTERS RELATED THERETO.**

Access to the Australian Electoral Roll and Impact of Regulation Changes in 2004  
*Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, Sections 90B(4) and 91A(2A)(a).*

This submission is made by the ANU and outlines the impact of recent AEC rulings on access to the electoral roll for the Australian social science research community.

## 1. Background

In June 2005 a request was made to the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) for a random extract from the electoral roll (in electronic format) to assist in the conduct of a national survey of Australian citizens – the 2005 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes (AuSSA). The request was made in the following terms:

The AuSSA is Australia's national social survey and is fielded bi-ennially by the Australian Social Science Data Archive (ASSDA) based at the ANU. The AuSSA was first conducted in 2003 using an electronic version of the electoral roll for sampling purposes. We are seeking continued use of the roll in 2005 on the following grounds:

**[A] Survey Quality:** The roll provides for the most reliable sample to be drawn and allows for individually addressed questionnaires to be sent to potential respondents. These are factors vital to achieving credible response rates and minimizing respondent bias, thereby ensuring the quality of the results. Any decline from current rates (45 percent in 2003) could lead to Australian data being excluded from the leading international surveys.

**[B] NHMRC compliance:** The 2003 and 2005 surveys both received approval from the ANU Human Ethics Committee (protocols 2003/126 and 2005/145) which ensures compliance with NHMRC guidelines for research using human subjects. No privacy-related complaints or confidentiality concerns were lodged in relation to the 2003 survey.

**[C] Public interest:** The AuSSA is a wholly *academic and not for-profit initiative* that promotes the public interest in several key ways:

- it is widely utilized for research and teaching purposes within Australia and internationally;
- it provides data relevant to the federal government's national research priorities including Promoting and Maintaining Good Health and Safeguarding Australia;
- it provides data for the two leading academic social surveys in the world – the International Social Survey Program and World Values Survey – ensuring Australia is included in overseas research of key social trends;
- it is the companion survey to the Australian Election Study (AES), supplementing that Study's focus on elections, political behaviour and voting in Australia; and
- it includes a core section on health that contains several key epidemiological indicators utilized in medical research to monitor citizen's health and social and psychological well-being. In addition, the 2005 AuSSA contains a range of more specialized health and medically relevant items such as support for organ donation, fertility treatment, abortion and health care provision.
- As you may be aware, in 2004 and preceding years the AEC has (for a fee) provided a random sample of registered electors for the Australian Election Study based on the most up to date version of the electoral roll. We would like to request the same service be provided for the 2005 AuSSA. In making this request we would stress that we are seeking a once-off extract from the Electoral roll to be used for purposes of survey sampling for AuSSA 2005. The extract will be destroyed after fieldwork and not exploited for any commercial, or further academic, purpose.

In the event, this specific request by researchers at the Australian National University, on behalf of a consortium of researchers at eleven other Australian universities, was refused on what we view as a very narrow reading of the relevant Regulation by the AEC. The outcome of this request has broader implications for social and political research in Australia and these concerns are outlined below.

## 2. Research Issues

- The Electoral Roll is the sampling frame of choice for social and political research in Australia. It is a high quality universal record of citizens. Thus, samples from the Electoral Roll enable researchers to gather genuinely representative data about Australians that contributes to understanding and solving a range of social and other problems.
- Without access to a sampling frame of the superior quality of the Electoral Roll, the quality of national data sets, and so the viability of Australia's social science research infrastructure will be threatened.
- Limiting access to the electoral roll also compromises Australian research internationally. As one of the few countries with compulsory voting, Australia is distinctive in having a high-quality, comprehensive, publicly available, sampling frame that arises as a by-product of normal administrative procedures, and thus is effectively costless.
- Without access to a sampling frame of this quality, Australian researchers' capacity to meet their obligations to international collaborations such as the International Social Survey Program and the World Values Study will be undermined.
- Without access to electronically delivered samples from the electronic roll, academic researchers must pay for alternative sources. This can be very expensive, and wasteful, particularly when the vast majority of academic research is directly and indirectly publicly funded.

Most academic researchers requesting access to the electoral roll do so for non-commercial reasons – to produce basic and applied curiosity-driven research into important social questions. Much of this research is publicly funded through competitive research grants, and similar sources. Capitalising on this public investment means securing the highest quality research possible. Limiting access to the electoral roll undermines other public investments in social science research.

The convention among academic social researchers is to make their data freely accessible to other researchers. This is made possible through national data archive resources such as the Australian Social Science Data Archive. There are therefore positive spin-offs from primary data collection in the secondary data analyses they make possible. Again the quality of these analyses is compromised if the original researchers have to adopt second-best strategies in drawing their samples.

- Universities require adherence to stringent ethical protocols in the conduct of social research.
  - participation in such research must be voluntary; that is, addressees are not obliged to participate and can withdraw without penalty at any time.
  - protocols require full disclosure to potential participants of information about the source of their personal details (name, address etc.), about who has access to this information and for what purposes, and about the use and disposal of any further data participants supply.

These protocols reduce to negligible the risk of misuse of personal information.

## 3. Recommendation

We request that in the context of the Joint Standing Committee's Inquiry into the 2004 Federal Election that consideration is given to reinstating access to electronically delivered samples derived from the Australian Electoral Roll for non-commercial, public interest research in universities.

Representatives of the social science research community and the ANU are willing to attend the Committee's hearings on 5 and 8 August, 2005 to answer any questions or present further evidence on this matter.