

Introduction

Background

- 1.1 A joint committee of the parliament, now known as the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, has examined the conduct of every federal election and related matters for the past 25 years.
- 1.2 The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters of the 42nd parliament is continuing this practice with its review of the 2007 federal election and related matters.
- 1.3 A feature of the 2007 election was the conduct of two electronic voting trials:
 - Electronically assisted voting for blind and vision impaired electors; and
 - Remote electronic voting for selected Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel serving overseas.
- 1.4 The trials had their origins in recommendations that the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters of the 41st parliament made in its review of the 2004 election.
- 1.5 The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and its partners, including the Department of Defence and non-government organisations representing or providing services to people who are blind or have low vision, should be recognised for their work in delivering the trials. The committee recognises that there was a sustained effort over a relatively short period to develop solutions to a number of technical, logistical, administrative and legislative issues.

Should electronic voting be continued?

- 1.6 The threshold issue for the consideration by the committee is different for each of the trials:
- For the trial of electronically assisted voting for electors who are blind or have low vision the key issue is whether the improvement in the quality of the franchise, which allowed electors to cast a secret and independent vote, should be continued given the significant cost incurred in providing this service. The committee recognises, however, that it is difficult to place a monetary value on being able to cast a secret ballot – something that most of us take for granted;
 - For the trial of remote electronic voting for selected ADF personnel serving overseas the key issue is whether the voting system maximises voting opportunities while at the same time imposing as little a burden as possible in operational areas.
- 1.7 For electors who are blind or have low vision, a key benefit was the ability to cast a secret and independent vote – an experience normally taken for granted by the majority of Australians.
- 1.8 For ADF personnel serving overseas, a key benefit was a higher likelihood that a vote would be included in the count by bypassing the possibility of logistical delays involved in alternative forms of voting such as postal voting.
- 1.9 The combined costs of the trials was over \$4 million, with an average cost per vote cast of \$2,597 for the trial of electronically assisted voting for blind and low vision electors and \$1,159 for the remote electronic voting trial for selected defence force personnel serving overseas.¹
- 1.10 This compares to an average cost per elector at the 2007 election of \$8.36.²
- 1.11 Beyond the threshold issue for each of the trials, the committee has examined what changes, if any, should be made if these forms of voting were to continue. The committee has also examined a number of alternative and complementary voting methods that should be considered in relation to the trials.
- 1.12 For the electronically assisted voting trial for people who are blind or have low vision some of the issues that the committee has addressed include:

1 Australian Electoral Commission, submission 169, pp 60 and 62.

2 Australian Electoral Commission, *Electoral Pocketbook* (2008), p 73.

- Can other groups in the community who also need assistance with voting, such as people with a print disability, also benefit from the voting system used for the trial?
 - Are there any other technologies, such as magnifiers, that could also be used to improve the voting experience?
 - What improvements, if any, can be made to the voting system to strengthen the integrity of the vote and facilitate greater participation by electors?
- 1.13 For the remote electronic voting trial for selected Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas some of the issues the committee has considered include:
- What is the impact on operational areas of accommodating the necessary technical infrastructure involved in the trial?
 - Could the system used for the trial be adapted to provide others, such as Australian Federal Police officers stationed overseas and Australians working in Antarctica, with similar opportunities to vote remotely? and
 - Can some of the logistical issues involved in delivering alternative forms of voting such as postal voting be overcome by other means?

Conduct of the inquiry

- 1.14 The inquiry was referred by the Special Minister of State on 27 February 2008. On 12 March 2008, a Senate resolution specified a number of matters that the committee should give particular reference to as part of the inquiry, mainly covering issues related to funding and disclosure.
- 1.15 The committee advertised for submissions on 30 April 2008 in an advertisement in The Australian newspaper. Public hearings commenced in June 2008.
- 1.16 Details of the submissions and hearings drawn on for this interim report are listed in appendices A and B respectively. Full copies of the submissions and public hearing transcripts can be found at the committee's website on www.aph.gov.au/em.
- 1.17 The committee's review of the electronic voting trials has also been informed by the AEC's own reviews of each of the trials and separate reviews of each trial undertaken by a contractor on behalf of the AEC.

These reports were incorporated as exhibits to the inquiry and are available on the committee's website.

- 1.18 The AEC arranged in November 2008 for the committee to have a 'hands on' demonstration of some of the equipment used as part of the electronic voting trials. This demonstration proved invaluable to the committee in understanding, from a user's perspective, how electronically assisted voting and remote electronic voting was conducted.

Report structure

- 1.19 Chapter 2 provides a general background to electronic voting and examines a number of recent domestic and international developments in electronic voting. This provides contextual information for the committee's evaluation of the two electronic voting trials.
- 1.20 Chapter 3 reviews the conduct of the remote electronic voting trial for selected ADF personnel serving overseas. The evaluation framework considers whether the trial provided greater opportunities for these personnel to vote than previous federal elections (where voting had been predominantly based on postal voting) and whether remote electronic voting has a greater impact in operational areas. Other elements of the trial, including the security and transparency of the voting system and options for the future are also considered.
- 1.21 The trial of electronically assisted voting for electors who are blind or have low vision is examined in detail in Chapter 4. The evaluation framework is based around the benefits to electors who are blind or have low vision being able to cast a secret and independent vote and the relative cost of providing this service. Other elements of the trial, including the potential number of electors and options for the future are also examined.

