

SUBMISSION 35



GEOGRAPHICAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES
HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of House of Representatives
P.O. Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Committee

My name is Kelly Parker; I am a PhD student at the University of Adelaide under the supervision of Professor Graeme Hugo. My research explores the movement patterns and experiences of Australians currently living in the United States. As part of my research I designed a survey that was distributed to Australians living in the United States. I find some of the responses to this survey - namely answers to a question about voting the last Australian election and comments some respondents left at the end of the survey about voting issues - to be relevant to this inquiry. Based on comments from survey respondents, there appears to be a lack of clear and accurate information about the voting rights and procedures for Australians living overseas.

In the following document I have included responses and comments about voting from Australians living in the United States who answered my survey. It is my position that these comments support the claim that Australians overseas need to be provided with more information about their voting rights and procedures while overseas.

For your information I have also attached a copy of the survey questionnaire that was distributed to Australians in the United States for my research, as well as some supplementary tables based on preliminary analysis to provide some information on the survey sample. Thank you very much for your attention.

Yours sincerely

KELLY PARKER

Attachments:
Inquiry submission document
Survey

Introduction

The purpose of this submission is to advise the committee of preliminary research findings that suggest Australians who are living or planning to live overseas need more information about their voting rights and procedures.

“Terms of reference” relating to this submission:

- The adequacy of electoral education of migrant citizens (Australian emigrants)
- The role of the Australian Electoral Commission and State and Territory Electoral Commissions in promoting electoral education

Research Findings

The information presented here is based on the findings from a survey given to Australians living in the United States as a part of PhD research. More than 1,500 Australians living in the United States answered the survey¹. One question in the survey was “Did you vote in the last Australian election?” 73.4 percent of respondents had not voted in the last Australian election². The intended purpose of placing this question in the survey was to use the answer as a possible illustration of a way Australians living overseas remain connected and engaged in their homeland, by continuing to vote even while living away. Other responses in the survey indicate that the group does keep strong links with Australia (94 percent of respondents said they did keep contacts with people and/or organizations in Australia³); therefore it was expected that rates of voting participation would be higher.

At the end of the survey was an open-ended section where respondents were free to leave comments with regard to the contents of the questionnaire. Apart from the single yes-or-no question mentioned above, nothing in the survey referred to voting and/or elections, yet the voting rights (or lack thereof) and the **lack of information** Australians in the USA felt they had received regarding their voting rights and opportunities as Australians overseas

¹ Survey analysis is still in process; a brief summary of the available respondent characteristics can be found in Table 4 of the Appendix.

² See Appendix Tables 1-3 for more detailed information on the characteristics of those who voted in the last Australian election.

³ See Appendix Tables 5 and 6 for more detailed information on the contact respondents keep with Australia

was one of the most common themes of respondent comments. I will provide some anonymous comments from survey respondents that are relevant to this submission to the inquiry.

Voting-related comments came under two major themes:

- 1) Respondents lacking information about their voting rights while overseas and/or lack of information specifically about elections.
- 2) Respondents who were aware they could not participate in Australia elections and were upset about that fact.

Comments regarding a lack of information about voting rights and procedures will be presented first, as this is most relevant to the inquiry. Other voting comments will also be included to support the idea that a lack of desire to be involved in Australian elections while living overseas is not the issue.

Comments relating to a lack of information about voting rights and opportunities

“I know a number of Australians over here and most are still very interested in what is happening at State and Federal levels Our Government doesn’t do a good job of keeping in touch with us, or letting us know how to keep in touch with them.”

“I’d like to vote in the Australian elections but it wasn’t possible when I first left Australia. Recently I heard that it is now possible to vote even if you are living abroad but when I went to apply it was too late to be in time to vote for the last election.”

“Hard to find information about voting in Australian elections, which I would have liked to do.”

“I didn’t know I could vote in any elections in Australia.”

“I am a proud Australian, but it is very easy to feel disconnected. Plus I’d love to be able to vote.”

“I requested a postal vote, but never received any documentation. I did want to participate.”

“I have always wondered about voting while absent...”

“Difficult to vote because being on the electoral roll triggers fines if I don’t vote in state and local elections. It is too difficult to keep up on state and local issues for voting purposes, however I would be interested in voting in Federal elections.”

“I am not on the voting role anymore because I used to get fined for not voting in local elections that I would not necessarily know about. It was easier to take my name off the electoral role, rather than be fined. The national and state elections are advertised and easier to find than local ones.”

“I tried to vote in the last election but since I had signed off the electoral roll when I left the country in 2000, I was told I had to re-register and could only do that in Australia.”

“I attempted to vote in the Australian election, yet was advised I’d been living outside of Australia for too long and my name has been taken off the electoral role. I believe that Australians living overseas should still be able to vote in Australian elections...”

Comments from respondents who would like to vote but cannot

“I would like to vote in Australian elections but am ineligible to do so due to length of residency outside of Australia can we fix this?”

“I’m unable to vote in either the US, as I’m not a citizen, or Australia, as I’m not a resident. I would like to be able to vote in Australia under certain circumstances...”

“Although I wished to vote in Australian elections, Australian laws currently prohibit me from voting”

“I have voted in every election that I was permitted to until my name was removed from the electoral role and I became disenfranchised.”

“...question Y1 [voting question] could allow for changed voting patterns, there is a limit of 5 years to being registered as an international voter, I voted during the first five years abroad, but since have been struck off the electoral roll.”

“I didn’t vote in the Australian election because I was removed from the electoral roll.”

“Didn’t vote in the Australian election because I was kicked off the roll.”

“Need to be able to vote again, as we were dropped off the register many years and cannot get back on until we reside in Australia...”

“ I would very much like to vote in the Australian elections, but I am prohibited by antiquated laws based on my non-resident status. However, I continue to pay taxes in Australia, therefore I should be able to vote.”

“To my dismay I was told by the Australian consulate that I was not allowed to vote.”

“Having been out of the country for over 5 years, I have been removed from both the Federal and State electoral lists due to the fact that I am no longer paying taxes in Australia and because I have been away for more than 3 years. I find this to be a right which as an Australian citizen I should be able to exercise even if I never return to Australia. I am yet to understand the reasoning behind this, and would like to see a change to this rule so that Australians overseas my vote in elections no matter how long they have been out of the country.”

“ I would have voted in the last election, but am ineligible due to the amount of time I have spent living abroad.”

“I did not vote in Australian elections because of changed validity laws.”

“Did not vote because Aust Govt sent us a letter saying that we could no longer vote in elections in Australia. We are citizens but are residents in the USA. We disputed this but it seems we are not able to vote.”

“Think I should be able to vote and utilize medicare benefits if I pay for these.”

Conclusion

It is hoped that presenting these comments collectively gives a louder voice to what appears to be a concern for many Australians living overseas. The comments included here show that for this group of people it is not the desire to participate in Australian elections while overseas that is lacking, but rather the correct information about voting rights and how to be involved that needs to be improved.

APPENDIX: Survey response data

(Survey analysis is still in process; these figures are what are available to this point)

Table 1: Respondents voting in last Australian election

	n	%
Yes	384	24.5
No	1152	73.5
Unknown	31	2.0
Total	1567	100.0

Table 2: Respondents who voted in last Australian election and years since first arrival in the USA

	n	%
5 years ago or less	250	65.1
6-10 years ago	80	20.8
11-15 years ago	20	5.2
16-20 years ago	8	2.1
More than 20 years ago	16	4.2
Unknown	10	2.6
Total	384	100.0

Table 3: Respondents who voted in last Australian election by age group

	n	%
Under 25	12	3.1
25-29	75	19.5
30-34	117	30.5
35-39	79	20.6
40-44	34	8.9
45-49	31	8.1
50-54	14	3.6
55+	19	4.9
Unknown	3	0.8
Total	384	100.0

Table 4: Survey respondents by age and sex

	Females		Males	
	n	%	n	%
Under 20	2	0.1	1	0.1
20-24	23	1.5	8	0.5
25-29	108	6.9	74	4.7
30-34	169	10.8	151	9.6
35-39	173	11.0	139	8.9
40-44	107	6.8	121	7.7
45-49	76	4.9	85	5.4
50-54	50	3.2	60	3.8
55-59	40	2.6	45	2.9
60-64	19	1.2	35	2.2
65+	18	1.1	27	1.7
Total	785	50.1	746	47.6

*Missing 2.3% age/sex values (36 responses)

Table 5: Respondents contact with people/organizations in Australia

	n	%
Yes	1468	93.7
No	74	4.7
Unknown	25	1.6
Total	1567	100.0

Table 6: Respondents who are in contact with Australia by type of contacts kept (N=1468)

	%
Social	99.1
Information/current affairs	55.0
Employment and professional	39.9
Education and study related	13.4

ATTACHMENT A

Survey of Australians in the United States

Please mark multiple-choice answers with an "X". Use as much space as necessary to complete fill-in-the-blank questions. Thank you very much for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

Completed forms may be returned as an email attachment to: kelly.parker@adelaide.edu.au by fax: +61 8 8303 3772 or by post: Kelly Parker, The University of Adelaide, Dept. of Geography and Environmental Studies, Level 7 Napier Building, Adelaide, SA 5005. This survey may also be completed online at: <http://www.aisr.com.au/AustraliansInUS.asp>

A.1 What is your country of birth? _____

A.2 Please state your country(s) of citizenship: _____

A.3 Please state your country(s) of residency: _____

A.4 Which US visa do you hold? _____

B.1 Where are you currently living in the US?

City/Town _____ State/Territory _____

B.2 Where were you living when you left to go to the US?

Suburb/Town _____

State/Territory _____ Country _____

C.1 In what year did you first arrive in the US to live? _____

C.2 How old were you when you first arrived in the US to live? _____

D.1 Please indicate the main reasons for your decision to go to the US: (select all that apply)

- Better Employment Opportunities
- Education/study
- Marriage/partnership
- To be close to family/friends
- International experience
- Lifestyle
- Higher income
- Partner's employment
- Business opportunities
- Career and promotion opportunities
- Overseas job transfer/exchange
- Professional development
- More favorable income tax regime
- More favorable business tax regime
- Better employer-supported or work-based training
- Better education institutions for skill training and upgrading
- Want to establish, relocate or expand a business to the US
- No equivalent jobs in Australia
- Other (please specify) _____

E.1 What is your current employment status?

- Employed full-time (go to question E.2)
- Employed part-time (go to question E.2)
- Unemployed (go to question F.1)
- Not in workforce (go to question F.1)
- Student (go to question F.1)

E.2 If currently employed, is your job:

- Permanent
- Contract

E.3 Current main occupation: _____

E.4 Industry employed in: _____

E.5 In this occupation, are you:

- Working for wages, salary or commission
- In your own business and employing others
- In your own business, not employing others
- Other (please specify) _____

F.1 Current annual income:

Please select currency: US\$ A\$

- < \$25,000
- \$25,000 - \$49,999
- \$50,000 - \$74,999
- \$75,000 - \$99,999
- \$100,000 - \$124,999
- \$125,000 - \$149,999
- \$150,000 - \$174,999
- \$175,000 - \$199,999
- \$200,000 - \$300,000
- > \$300,000
- Refused

G.1 Employment status before going overseas:

- Employed full-time
- Employed part-time
- Unemployed
- Not in workforce
- Student
- Other (please specify) _____

G.2 Has your *individual* financial situation/income changed since going to the US?

- Improved
- Got worse
- Stayed about the same

G.3 Has your *family* financial situation/income changed since going to the US?

- Improved
- Got worse
- Stayed about the same
- Not applicable

H.1 Are you currently studying?

- Yes, full-time (go to question H.2)
- Yes, part-time (go to question H.2)
- No (go to question I.1)

H.2 Location of Educational Institution (City/State/Country): _____

H.3 Field of Study: _____

H.4 Type of award you are seeking:

- Doctoral degree
- Masters degree
- Postgraduate diploma
- Bachelors/Honours degree
- Undergraduate diploma
- Other (please specify) _____

I.1 What is your highest completed educational qualification? (select award or equivalent)

- Doctoral degree
- Masters degree
- Postgraduate diploma
- Bachelors/Honours degree
- Undergraduate diploma
- Other (please specify) _____

I.2 Field of Study: _____

I.3 Location of educational institution:

City/town _____ State _____ Country _____

I.4 Year of award:

- 2005
- 2004
- 2003
- 2000 – 2002
- 1995 – 1999
- 1990 – 1994
- 1980 – 1989
- Before 1980

J.1 Did you have contacts in place with people/organizations in the US before moving there?

- Yes
- No

J.2 How did you learn of opportunities in the US that encouraged your move there? (select all that apply)

- Existing networks in the US
- Networks in Australia
- Partner/family going there
- Been to the US before
- Experiences of others who have traveled to the US
- Independent search
- Other (please explain) _____

J.3 What made you choose the US over other international destinations? (select all that apply)

- Better opportunities
- Higher salaries
- English speaking
- Similar culture
- Direct work or study transfer
- Spouse/partner there
- US only option considered
- Other (please specify) _____

K.1 Have you moved back to Australia to live at any stage since first arriving in the US?

- Yes (go to question K.2)
- No (go to question L.1)

K.2 How long did you live back in Australia?

- Less than 6 months
- 6 months - 1 year
- 1 - 2 years
- Longer than 2 years

K.3 Why did you move back to Australia to live?

- To be close to family and friends
- Employment/Business related reasons
- Education
- Lifestyle
- Other (please specify) _____

L.1 Have you lived in countries other than Australia and the US?

- Yes (go to question L.2)
- No (go to question M.1)

L.2 What were your main reasons for living in countries other than Australia and the US? (select all that apply)

- Employment/business related reasons
- Partner's employment
- Education/study related reasons
- Marriage/partnership
- To be close to friends and family
- International experience
- Lifestyle
- Other (please specify) _____

M.1 How many visits have you made to Australia since first arriving in the US?

- None
- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4 - 5
- More than 5

M.2 Main reason for visits to Australia: (select all that apply)

- Visit friends and family
- Employment/business related reasons
- To attend a conference/meeting
- Holiday
- Education
- Other (please specify) _____

M.3 Average length of stay in Australia on visits there?

- less than 1 week
- 1 - 2 weeks
- 2 weeks - less than 1 month
- 1 month - less than 3 months
- 3 months - less than 6 months
- 6 months or more

N.1 Do you plan to live in the US permanently?

- No, plan to move back to Australia (go to question N.2)
- No, plan to move to another country (go to question N.2)
- Yes (go to question O.1)
- Undecided (go to question O.1)

N.2 When do you plan to leave the US?

- Within 1 year
- 1 - 2 years
- 2 - 3 years
- 3 - 5 years
- 5 years or more
- Undecided

N.3 What are your main reasons for planning to leave the US? (select all that apply)

- End of employment contract
- Work opportunities elsewhere
- To be close to family/friends
- Lifestyle better elsewhere
- Education opportunities elsewhere
- US visa expires
- Other (please specify) _____

N.4 If returning to Australia, where do you plan to live upon return? (city/state):

O.1 If NOT planning/undecided whether to return to Australia, why?

- Employment opportunities better outside of Australia
- Higher income outside of Australia
- Better educational institutions outside of Australia
- Partners employment located outside of Australia
- Marriage/partnership keeps me outside of Australia
- Family/friends outside of Australia
- Lifestyle more attractive outside of Australia
- Established in current location
- Cost of relocating back to Australia
- Other (please specify) _____

P.1 Has the intended length of your stay away from Australia changed since your first arrived in the US?

- Yes, I am staying away for more time than originally intended
- Yes, I am staying away for less time than originally intended
- No

P.2 What are the main reasons for the change in your intended length of stay away from Australia? (select all the apply)

- Employment opportunities changed
- Education opportunities changed
- Family situation changed
- US visa situation changed
- Lifestyle considerations
- Want to be close to friends and family
- Other (please specify) _____

Q.1 Do you still consider Australia to be your home?

- Yes
- No
- Undecided

R.1 Do you have contact with other Australians living in the US?

- Yes (go to question R.2)
- No (go to question S.1)

R.2 What type of contacts do you have with other Australians in the US? (select all that apply)

- Social (family and friends)
- Employment/business related
- Education/study related
- Other (please specify) _____

R.3 Do you participate in any Australian organizations/clubs in the US?

- Yes
- No

R.4 Please list any Australian organizations/clubs you are involved with in the US:

S.1 Do you maintain contact with people/organizations in Australia?

- Yes (go to question S2)
- No (go to question T1)

S.2 What type of linkages do you keep with Australia? (select all that apply)

- Social (family and friends)
- Employment/business related
- Education/study related
- Informational/Current Affairs
- Other (please specify) _____

S.3 Please describe any professional linkages you keep with Australia:

S.4 How frequently do you make contact with your networks in Australia?

- At least once per week
- Fortnightly
- Monthly
- Every 3 - 6 months
- Less than every 6 months

S.5 What is the *primary* method you use to maintain contact with Australia?

- Email/Internet
- Telephone
- Post
- Other (please specify) _____

T.1 Do you feel your presence in the US has any benefits for Australia?

- Yes (go to question T.2)
- No (go to question U.1)
- Undecided (go to question U.1)

T.2 If yes, what?

- Existing contacts useful for other Australians
- Learning skills/gaining experiences that are transferable back to Australia
- Encouraging goodwill towards Australia
- Increasing knowledge about Australia in the US
- Creating links with US organizations
- Other (please specify) _____

U.1 Do you feel your presence in the US has benefits for the US?

- Yes (go to question U.2)
- No (go to question V.1)
- Undecided (go to question V.1)

U.2 If yes, what?

- Creating international contacts for Americans
- Contributing skills/experiences that are transferable to the US
- Encouraging goodwill towards the US
- Increasing knowledge about Australia in the US
- Creating links with Australian organizations
- Other (please specify) _____

V.1 Current marital status:

- Never married
- Separated/Divorced
- Widowed
- Married (including de facto)

V.2 Has your marital status changed since you left Australia?

- No
- Yes (please explain) _____

V.3 What is your current partner's:

Country of birth: _____

Citizenship(s): _____

- Not applicable

V.4 Do you have a spouse/partner living in a country other than the US?

- Yes, in Australia
- Yes, in a country other than Australia
- No

W.1 Do you have children? (select all that apply)

- Yes, living in the US
- Yes, living in Australia
- Yes, living in a country other than the US and Australia
- No

W.2 Do you have children living in the US in the following age groups? (select all that apply)

- Birth to 1 year
- 1 - 5 years
- 6 - 10 years
- 11 - 15 years
- 16 - 18 years
- Over 18 years
- Have no children living in the US

X.1 Current housing tenure in the US:

- Homeowner
- Purchasing home
- Renting
- Other (please specify) _____

X.2 Please select any of the following that you own in the US and/or Australia:

- | | | |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> US | <input type="checkbox"/> Australia | A home |
| <input type="checkbox"/> US | <input type="checkbox"/> Australia | Property |
| <input type="checkbox"/> US | <input type="checkbox"/> Australia | A business |
| <input type="checkbox"/> US | <input type="checkbox"/> Australia | A bank account |
| <input type="checkbox"/> US | <input type="checkbox"/> Australia | Financial Investments |
| <input type="checkbox"/> US | <input type="checkbox"/> Australia | Other (please specify) _____ |

Y.1 Did you vote in the last Australian election?

- Yes
- No

Z.1 Sex:

Male

Female

Z.2 Year of birth: _____

Please provide comments or suggestions that you feel may be of use to this study:
