The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Parliament House
Canberra   ACT   2600

3 July 2002

INQUIRY INTO THE CONDUCT OF THE 2001 FEDERAL ELECTION

Thank you for your invitation to make a submission to your inquiry into the conduct of the 2001 Federal Election. I am grateful for the opportunity to raise one aspect of the election which I believe deserves the close attention of the Committee.

The electorate of Fowler holds the dubious distinction of having the highest informal vote recorded at the 2001 election. I am most concerned that one in every eight of my constituents, almost ten thousand electors, did not have their vote recorded at the election. There are many reasons for this and while my submission identifies some factors, it is beyond my limited resources to fully investigate this problem on a national basis. I would therefore strongly suggest that the Committee devote a significant part of its inquiry to identifying the causes of informal voting and proposing measures to reduce the level of informal voting.

My attached submission contains an analysis of voting figures for Fowler based on type of vote and a comparison of polling places with higher and lower informal votes. I have also included comments based on anecdotal evidence to identify other factors which may have influenced the informal vote.

I have made some recommendations which I believe would help to reduce the level of informal voting in electorates such as Fowler.

I would strongly suggest that the Committee give due consideration to the issue of informal voting in Federal elections.

Yours sincerely

Julia Irwin MP
<u>Member for Fowler</u>

Terms Of Reference

SUBMISSION TO THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON ELECTION MATTERS

INQUIRY INTO THE CONDUCT OF THE 2001 FEDERAL ELECTION

SUBMISSION BY JULIA IRWIN MP
FEDERAL MEMBER FOR FOWLER

4 JULY 2002

In response to the invitation by the Chair of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, the following submission is made covering aspects of the terms of reference as advised by letter of the 25th May 2002.

"That the Joint Standing Committee on electoral Matters inquire into and report on the conduct of the 2001 federal Election and matters related thereto."

Table of Contents

Introduction:

At the 2001 federal election, the electorate of Fowler recorded the highest informal vote of any electorate in Australia. The informal vote in Fowler was 12.75% compared with a national figure of 4.81% and 5.42% for New South Wales. This figure was much higher than the 5.78% recorded at the 1998 election and many times that of 1.48% recorded for the republic question at the 1999 referendum. The informal voting figures for Fowler and surrounding electorates are given in Table 1.

Electorate	1998 Informal %	2001 Informal %
Fowler	5.78	12.75
Blaxland	5.54	9.78
Reid	7.1	11.08
Werriwa	4.88	8.51
Prospect	6.48	8.99
Chifley	5.89	9.20

Table 1.

As Fowler has the highest proportion of electors born outside Australia and the highest number from non English speaking backgrounds, this is an obvious factor influencing the high informal vote. However, an analysis of informal votes cast at individual polling places suggests that this may only be part of the cause. Nor does the high NESB account for the large increase in informal voting in 2001.

An analysis of informal voting patterns in Fowler for the 2001 election reveals some important insights into impact of voting practices and offers suggestions for reducing the level of informal voting.

Informal Voting and Vote Type:

The large differences in informal voting between the type of vote is cause for further analysis. See Table 2.

Type	Ordinary	Absent	Postal	Pre-Poll	Provisional
% Informal	13.21	10.84	2.8	7.57	15.26

Table 2.

Informal Postal Votes:

The postal vote figure is much lower than any other type and seems to indicate two factors. Firstly, postal votes (legally or otherwise) tend to be checked by another person. This would result in fewer informal votes even allowing for the infirmity of the voter. Secondly, postal voters tend to be more experienced and are not rushed when filling out their ballot paper.

A survey of postal vote applications received at my office showed that requests from voters with Asian names made up less than 10% of all applications while people of Asian background make up more than 20% of the electoral roll. It would appear that many Asian voters who may be eligible for a postal vote were not aware of this process. Postal vote applications distributed in the electorate, including my own were in English only. Please also note my comments in the section *Number of Candidates,* regarding the difficulty of elderly voters of Asian origin in writing western numbers.

The low informal vote for postal votes is very significant and warrants further investigation by the Committee.   The Committee may wish to note that by my estimate, at least 80% of postal voters in Fowler received the Labor How to Vote.

Informal Pre-Poll Votes

The informal vote for Pre-Poll was also low by comparison with the informal ordinary vote type. The figure was lower than informal ordinary votes for any booth. The committee should note that at least 90% of all Pre-Poll voters were offered the Labor How To Vote.

Informal Absent Votes:

Informal Absent Votes were also below the level of informal ordinary votes although not by as great a margin. By comparison with polling places in the electorate, absent votes ranked 8th lowest out of 37 booths. The figure was almost the same as the informal vote recorded at the Sydney Town Hall voting place.

Interestingly, the top candidate on the ballot paper received 4.97% of the absent vote compared to 3.11% of the ordinary vote. This could indicate a tendency for voters to make a "Donkey Vote" when How To Vote material is not available. Distribution of "How To Vote" material to absent voters tends to be unreliable for all parties and it is

assumed that absent voters rely more on having the party name on the ballot paper than on How To Vote material.

Informal Provisional Votes:

Provisional votes showed the highest level of informal voting of all types. Two factors may contribute to a high level of informal provisional votes. Firstly, provisional voters may have moved from their previous address and were consequently deleted from the roll but had not enrolled at their new address. They would therefore be similar to absent voters in informal voting patterns. Secondly, they may have found the provisional voting process frustrating and cast an informal vote in protest. Further evidence of this is shown by the top candidate receiving 6.43% of the provisional vote which was more than double the ordinary vote percentage, ie a "Donkey Vote" was cast. It should also be noted that the vote for the Government (Liberal) candidate was the 3rd lowest of all polling places. Again the suggestion is that some informal and donkey votes represent a protest vote.

Informal Ordinary Votes:

While high levels of informal voting are of concern for absent and provisional voting, 87% of votes were cast as ordinary votes in Fowler. Informal voting for ordinary votes is therefore my highest priority. The following analysis of informal ordinary votes in Fowler was conducted to identify where possible, influences on the level of informal voting.

Size of Polling Place:

Larger booths tend to be busier and at certain times of the day, long queues form. Delays of half an hour or more can be experienced before voters can enter the polling place and cast their vote. Delays are most noticeable when polling places open and there is an early rush of voters. This was the case with all of the larger polling places in Fowler. An analysis of polling place size and informal voting in Fowler showed a slight correlation between the two (Coefficient of Correlation $+0.24$).

The frustration of delay and the feeling of being rushed during the voting process may contribute to the higher level of informal voting at larger polling places. When combined with inexperienced voters of non-English speaking background, the compound effect may be a significant factor in informal voting.

Composite Polling Places:

At the 2001 election there were 7 composite polling places in Fowler. The informal vote at composite booths was 13.52% which was little different to the 12.75% overall. It should be remembered that the 2001 election followed a redistribution which made significant changes to the boundaries and lead to an increase in composite polling places from 1 to 7. While no effect on informal voting can be seen at those polling places which lost voters to other electorates, 2 composite polling places which were added to Fowler showed higher levels of informal voting.

Booth workers did report some confusion among voters but it was also noted that many voters brought cards issued by the Divisional Office. It is understood these cards were issued to voters affected by the redistribution. The issue of these cards can be seen as effective in informing voters of the electorate in which they are to vote.

The issue of cards to all voters immediately before elections could be of great assistance in electorates such as Fowler where electorate boundaries are not well defined.

Number of Candidates:

An obvious factor in the level of informal voting was that the number of candidates in Fowler increased from 5 in 1998 to 10 in 2001. The greater complexity of filling in 10 numbers may not seem that daunting but the following experience illustrates something that is easy to overlook.

During the campaign I was asked to address a group of elderly people of Asian origin. During my discussion I learned that many members of the group had great difficulty in writing western numbers. They could write the number (1), but some found it impossible to write the numbers up to ten. To assist the group I arranged for some (practice) ballot papers to be made available so that they could gain experience filling them in. Unfortunately, many found this difficult even after a number of attempts. I hesitate to guess how they managed filling in the ballot paper on the day. This does at least suggest why there are fewer informal postal votes.

Preferential Voting:

Ballot papers marked for only one candidate make up a sizeable proportion of informal votes. Given that the overwhelming number of Senate votes were cast "above the line", it should not be surprising that many voters number only one square when completing the House of Representatives ballot paper.

The Committee should also note that in NSW State elections a system of "Optional Preferential" voting applies. This system allows the voter to mark the ballot paper for one candidate only. Reports from scrutineers suggest that a proportion of informal votes in Federal elections occur due to confusion between the two systems. Booth workers regularly advise voters to "fill in every square" on the House of Representatives ballot paper, but this remains one of the most common causes of informal voting.

How To Vote Cards:

My analysis for this submission uncovered an interesting link between "How to Vote" cards and informal voting. I have already made the link between the access to how to vote cards and low informal voting in the section dealing with Postal and Pre-poll votes. In looking for differences in the conduct of the 2001 election it was apparent from my own observation and reports from booth workers that only the Labor Party handed out at all polling places in the electorate.

Small party candidates covered less than 5 booths of the total of 35. The Liberal Party covered less than half of the booths and for many of those covered they were not crewed at important times. Many polling places were open for more than an hour before Liberal Party workers arrived. This is the busiest time for voting and lead to some amusing exchanges. Labor Party booth workers were abused for not handing out the Liberal How to Vote.

An interesting result of this frustration shows in an analysis of informal votes and Liberal and Labor voting patterns. By comparing the Liberal Vote and the informal vote at each booth, there appears to be a tentative link between a high Liberal vote and a high informal vote (Coefficient of Correlation + 0.29). In contrast a high Labor vote lead to a low informal vote (Coefficient of Correlation – 0.32).

While these are hardly strong links, they do back up anecdotal evidence that in electorates such as Fowler, distribution of How to Vote material maintains party voting loyalty and thereby reduces informal voting. While it is noted that ballot papers carry the name and party of each candidate, as mentioned above, some voters, particularly the elderly, have difficulty writing western numbers. How to vote cards provide a template for voters to copy the numbers from.

Based on this evidence, the distribution of How to Vote material should not be discouraged as it is in some electoral systems.

Video Voting Information:

An innovation used at both the 1998 and 2001 Federal elections has been the use of community language video presentations of voting information at polling places where a high proportion of the electorate are known to have a non-English speaking background. The screens were placed in the polling place and could be viewed by voters as they waited to be checked off the roll.

In 1998, the informal vote in Fowler fell from 8.1% in 1996 to 5.8% and it was felt that the use of video information in community languages was in part responsible. A list of polling places and the language of video voting instructions used at the 2001 election is shown in Table 3.

Polling Place	Language	Informal Vote %
Cabramatta PCYC	Vietnamese	11.63
Liverpool PS	Spanish	14.61
Canley Vale PS	Vietnamese	13.14
Canley Heights PS	Vietnamese	13.78
Harrington Street PS	Vietnamese	16.38
Cabramatta High School	Cantonese	10.39

Table 3.

While the informal votes for these polling places are high it should be noted that they were targeted as having high informal votes in the past. It should also be noted that the Cabramatta PCYC and Cabramatta High School polling places, Cantonese and Vietnamese speaking booth workers handed out the Labor how to vote. This may have had some impact on the informal vote at these polling places.

The feedback I have received from booth workers suggested that the use of video voting instructions was well received by voters and that it should be expended to other polling places and other languages. It was also suggested that the videos be made available to community groups before the day of the election.

Recommendations:

1. Target electorates with high levels of informal voting:

That the Australian Electoral Commission identify electorates with an abnormally high informal vote and such electorates should be targeted for special initiatives to reduce the level of informal voting.

2. Develop resources in community languages for distribution in target electorates.

That the Australian Electoral Commission develop and distribute additional voter guide resources including video and printed material for distribution in target electorates.

3. Expand the use of video resources in polling places

That the Australian Electoral Commission expand the use of community language and English language video voting instructions to all targeted electorates.

4. Reduce delays at polling places

That the Australian Electoral Commission review the voting processes and the level of resources available at larger polling places with a view to reducing delays in voting. This may include the use of morning only staff to cover the busiest voting times.

5. Allowance for voters unable to write western numbers:

That the rules allowing assistance to blind and disabled voters be extended to voters not proficient in writing western numbers.

6. Increase awareness of postal voting eligibility in Non-English speaking communities:

That the Australian Electoral Commission develop resources in community languages to inform eligible voters of their potential use of postal voting