

Written Evidence to the Parliament of Victoria, Australia

Professor Toby S. James, Professor of Politics and Public Policy, University of East Anglia

Co-Director of the Electoral Integrity Project

Dr. Holly Ann Garnett, Associate Professor of Political Science, Royal Military College of Canada

Co-Director of the Electoral Integrity Project

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1. We are responding to the request to submit evidence on the proposed move to a national electoral roll platform. We are the Directors of the Electoral Integrity Project, a world leading academic project which produces innovative and policy-relevant research on elections worldwide. Our joint and individual research expertise includes research on voter registration systems, including an international comparison of systems. In this submission, we will draw attention to what is at stake in the design of registration systems and summarise recommendations from our research.

2. The key metrics for measuring the quality of electoral registers are: accuracy of the electoral register, completeness and efficiency (James 2020, 59-86).

- a) The *accuracy of the electoral register* can be usefully defined as the extent to which there are no false entries on the electoral registers. Accuracy is therefore commonly measured as the percentage of entries on the registers which relate to verified and eligible voters who are resident at that address. Inaccurate register entries may relate to entries that have become redundant (for example, due to home movement or death), duplicate registrations, ineligible electors, or fraudulent registrations. Accuracy matters because inaccurate electoral registers can lead to ineligible citizens voting and undermine confidence in the electoral process. It also helps electoral management bodies (EMBs) to provide correct and relevant information to electors in the form of reminders and voting information.
- b) The *completeness of the electoral register* is the extent to which every person who is entitled to be registered, is registered. The electoral register should include all citizens eligible to vote. Again, the completeness allows for better planning on the part of the EMB and, even if not being on the register does not prevent an elector from casting a ballot (in cases where election day registration is permitted), the process will be easier for both administrators and the elector if the advance registration lists are more complete.
- c) *Efficiency* refers to the volume of resources that are needed to maintain electoral registers, in proportion to the number of citizens that the register should include. EMBs are faced with significant resource constraints. Thus, having a system that reduces the logistical burden on both EMBs and the voters is necessary. Furthermore, some systems can increase efficiency by reducing or eliminating manual inputting of information (for example, online registration, see (Garnett 2019, 2021)), thus reducing the chances of clerical errors.

3. There are enormous variations in the quality of electoral registers around the world.

- a) Few countries provide detailed evaluations of their completeness and accuracy rates. However, by dividing the number of names on the electoral register by the estimated number of eligible electors provide an indication of the level of completeness and accuracy. In some

states such as Armenia, the ratio is over 100% which suggests poor levels of accuracy. In some states such as Kuwait, the ratio is around 30%, suggesting major problems with completeness (James 2020, 68)

- b) A pressing problem is variations in the quality of registers within countries. For example, if a voter registration completeness is much higher amongst older Australians than younger Australians, then this can lead to uneven levels of voting – and in turn, uneven levels of voice in Australia’s democracy. In the UK, for example, nearly all citizens over the age of 65 were registered in 2018 (94%), but the rates were as low as 25% for 16-17 year olds. Recent changes to the voter registration system in the UK have contributed towards these inequalities (James 2014). Reforms must be sensitive to the possibility of increasing or decreasing inequalities (James and Garnett 2020).

4. The best voter registration system might not be the same in all countries and territories. Each has their own administrative traditions, demographic and political challenges. A one size fits all approach all countries. There are some general lessons from academic research that helps to identify good practices, however:

- a) Automation of registration leads to more complete electoral registers, without compromising their accuracy. Recent comparative work has demonstrated a statistical relationship between automatic voter registration systems and experts’ perceptions of the completeness of registration lists (James and Garnett 2021) . However, there is no clear relationship (either positive or negative) with the accuracy of these lists (James and Garnett 2021).
- b) The same research likewise demonstrates that investments in the workforce of electoral management (measured by the organisational performance of the electoral management body) has positive effects on completeness and accuracy.

5. Considering the question posed for the state of Victoria, we note that national registers (as opposed to sub-national registers) can have both advantages and disadvantages:

- a) Advantages:
 - There is scope for cost efficiency because of the opportunities provided by economies of scale. Centralised administrative staff, resources and infrastructure can save taxpayers money.
 - A centralised national system also enables easier data sharing. Data sharing across regions can provide opportunities for technical error.
 - Accuracy rates could also be positively affected by a national register because duplicate registrations could be more easily identified.
 - Completeness rates could also be positively affected because work could be undertaken to identify any missing individuals by comparing the electoral register to other data sources.
 - Voters’ experiences could be improved. Voters would be required to register in one central system, which could be updated once when their information (for example, address) changes, rather than requiring changes to multiple registration lists. Requiring multiple changes increases the registration burden and therefore the likelihood that information will become inaccurate.
- b) Disadvantages:
 - There is potential for lost local knowledge amongst electoral officials (James 2017). Local officials at the Victorian Electoral Commission will know their surrounding areas better than nationally based electoral management.

- It may reduce the autonomy of the Victorian Electoral Commission as it would be reliant on data from the national AEC for running elections. This may not be a disadvantage per se, however, since it would enable the Victorian Electoral Commission to focus on other tasks and Victorian citizens might benefit from a more efficient process.
- Holding all of the data in one place can create 'data honeypots' which encourage cyber attacks. However, cyber attacks would remain a threat regardless of the system in use.

9. Overall we would recommend that:

- Recommendation #1: the effects of the change on completeness, accuracy and cost efficiency should all be monitored and evaluated prior to and following any change.
- Recommendation #2: if a national register is adopted then ways for the local knowledge of officials at the Victorian Electoral Commission to be used should be maintained.
- Recommendation #3: The quality of electoral registers is often shaped by automatic voter registration and the investment in electoral bodies. Direct (or automatic) enrolment mechanisms are therefore strongly encouraged to be maintained. As is investment in the Australian Electoral Commission – at the Commonwealth and state level. These should therefore be priorities for the Victorian Parliament.
- Recommendation #4: a national voter registration system would be easier for citizens to understand, more cost efficient and could lead to improved accuracy and completeness.

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