



## Submission to the [Inquiry](#) into Civics and Electoral Participation in Victorian State Parliamentary Elections by the Parliament's Electoral Matters Committee

The Victoria-Tasmania Branch of the Proportional Representation Society of Australia welcomes this opportunity to make the following submission to the above Inquiry.

### 1. Electoral and Civics education

The electoral systems used for Australia's 15 legislative chambers give considerable power to voters to influence the outcome of elections. The Single Transferable Vote counting system that has applied for nearly a century in each house of the Victorian Parliament; in single-vacancy polls in the Legislative Assembly, and in multiple-vacancy polls using proportional representation ([PR-STV](#)) in the Legislative Council – has meant that each voter has had the ability to mark a ballot paper with much more information about their preferences among the candidates than was possible with the previous plurality (first-past-the-post) system, where voters were restricted to marking a cross (X) in a box against only one of the many possible candidates.

Rather than being an imposition, meaning that a voter has to take a few moments longer to vote, the emphasis in any education program should be on the empowerment that preferential voting using the Single Transferable Vote gives to the voter.

Compare a Victorian Legislative Assembly election with the far less empowering system used for the United Kingdom's House of Commons. There, [since 1945](#), all that one can indicate on a ballot paper is a single cross (X), so if one votes for a candidate that receives few votes, one's vote will be wasted. By contrast, in Victoria's Legislative Assembly, if one votes 1 for a candidate that has few votes, and no candidate receives an absolute majority of first preference votes, that 1st preference vote might have to be disregarded, but one's 2nd, 3rd, or subsequent preference might yet count towards the election of a candidate.

The Electoral and Civics education needs to occur at a range of levels of society; in schools to help prepare young people to use the rights of voting that do empower them, as part of processes that prepare new citizens, and in the general educational processes that occur in the lead up to elections.

The principal focus of this should be empowerment. That means encouraging voters to think about their first and subsequent preferences, and explaining clearly what it means to mark preferences, and how preferences beyond the first can contribute to the election of candidates.

Next year will be the [100th anniversary of preferential voting](#) for Australia's House of Representatives, which first took place at a by-election for the seat of Corangamite in 1918. It commenced for Victoria's Legislative Assembly in 1920. PRSAV-T Inc. recommends that Victoria celebrate one or both of those centenaries of world-leading electoral practices with a campaign to educate voters to see how preferential voting, with STV counting, has empowered them.

## **2. Strategies to reduce informal voting**

Strategies to reduce informal voting have first to identify what the reasons for informal voting are. The first of those is a lack of sufficient education. PRSAV-T Inc. considers that the strategy of voter education outlined in (1) above will certainly assist with that.

As outlined above, the key idea is the empowerment of voters. The electoral system for Victoria's Legislative Council is already at the forefront of good practice for mainland electoral systems, but PRSAV-T Inc. suggests that a key part of the solution to both the issues of electoral participation - see (4) below - is to further empower voters by discontinuing the disempowering [Group Voting Tickets](#) (GVTs), and totally de-cluttering Legislative Council ballot papers by refraining from any further 'above-the-line' form of [stage management](#) of their design and layout.

That stage management of Legislative Council ballot papers has - despite being obviously designed to enhance the power of party organizations - tended to [backfire](#). PRSAV-T Inc. urges the Committee to at least recommend adoption of the recent improvements in both the Senate, and South Australian Upper House, that have led to the discontinuation of GVTs.

## **3. Training of VEC staff**

All staff of the Victorian Electoral Commission, whether permanent or temporary, should be made fully aware of how the electoral system works, and should understand the empowering nature of the Single Transferable Vote in both single-vacancy Lower House polls, and multiple-vacancy Upper House polls. Those latter polls, unlike those for the Lower House, provide for proportional representation (PR).

VEC staff should have a sound understanding of the inherent superiority of both of Victoria's electoral systems, particularly the [Single Transferable Vote](#), and the [direct election](#) of MPs, compared with nearly all the electoral systems used overseas. Such direct election of members of both houses is entrenched for the Commonwealth, and for the Western Australian Parliaments, but it has unfortunately not yet been entrenched for Victoria's Parliament. Such a sound understanding would make VEC staff better equipped to respond to many immigrants' different experience of more restrictive [plurality](#) systems, as used in the UK, US, Canada, etc. or [party list systems](#) of PR, which are indirect, as used in much of continental Europe, South America, South Africa, Sri Lanka and New Zealand, so they can perceive voters' needs better when giving instructions.

There needs to be sufficient staff at polling booths to take the time required to explain to voters their rights and responsibilities, in addition to posters and other tools that explain preferential voting in both its single-vacancy (Lower House) and its PR-STV (Upper House) applications. Explanations need to be well thought through and clear, and available in multiple languages.

#### **4. Increasing electoral participation**

Many voters feel that voting in elections makes no difference. Unfortunately in single-vacancy electoral systems, such as Victoria's Legislative Assembly, this is largely true, because most of the districts are 'safe seats', which rarely or never change hands so, why bother to vote?

In the Legislative Council, the Group Voting Ticket system has reduced the engagement that voters have with individual candidates, and contributes to a feeling of disempowerment. There is no incentive for the actual candidates ostensibly being voted for to give much of an indication of their viewpoints or their character as the GVT stage management enables the contending parties to portray the election as a contest between party leaders at State level rather than between the actual candidates in each electorate. The growing success of smaller parties that utilize that by including their party's leader in the name of their party or 'network' is an indication of that weakness. PRSAV-T Inc. suggests that this disempowerment is a major reason for reduced participation particularly among younger voters.

Despite these problems, Victoria's electoral systems are certainly more empowering than those of many countries from which immigrants come. For example, those coming from the UK or India are accustomed to plurality (first-past-the-post) systems, which are far less empowering than Victoria's, as discussed above. Immigrants from Germany or New Zealand, on the other hand, are accustomed to MMP systems, which are a hybrid of an indirect party list system, and plurality counting in single-vacancy polls, and thus combine both of those undesirable features. Finally many immigrants come from countries like China that do not have free and fair elections. Improving the engagement of voters that were formerly citizens of those countries means education proposals that are tailored to explaining the greater benefits of the electoral systems here in comparison to what they are used to.

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