

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
Department of House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
AUSTRALIA

Dear Committee Secretary,

I am currently based on Tokyo, Japan. I moved to Japan on the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Programme in 2002 which I undertook for one year before moving to Tokyo to work.

I first had an extended stay in Japan as an exchange student in 1998, a year in which a federal election was held. Even though we are not living in Australia, we are still very much concerned with the issues our country faces and want to have a say in choosing a government that we believe will take the country in the right direction. I was very much interested in exercising my vote in this election I made inquiries about how I could do so and was thus able to vote at the embassy. This raised my awareness that I need to make special arrangements for voting while overseas. But this awareness came about from my own volition – at no point had I received any advice or information about how to deal with this issue.

This raises the biggest problem, which is that there is not sufficient information available to Australians about their rights and obligations while they live overseas and that the AEC, DFAT and other bodies could do a lot more to take the information to the people rather than them having to seek it out, especially when the consequences are so great. Suggestions of having information provided when you apply for passports, or when you are actually departing Australia are all excellent ideas. In all the preparation for moving overseas it would be helpful to have this fact alerted to you as you are about to depart Australia.

As I write this, I again become concerned about whether my enrollment is in order and whether I am still eligible as an overseas voter. I decided to check my enrollment online and it was confirmed but there is no indication on my enrollment that I have overseas voter eligibility. Just a simple checkbox showing this status on the confirmation form would provide great peace of mind to people like me living overseas that believe we have done the right thing and enrolled correctly.

Many young Australians, like myself, travel to Japan every year to participate in the JET Programme. Individuals participate in the program for periods between 1 and 4 years and so it is possible that someone could become disenfranchised in this period if they do not know about their rights and the necessary processes. It would be possible to include information about eligibility for overseas voting and disenfranchisement in information

packets given to individuals leaving on this program. Another alternative would be to inform them of these issues during the orientation program. During every orientation program, all Australian JETs make a visit to the Australian embassy where they receive a kind of show bag of information on living in Japan and the kinds of services the embassies and consulates can provide. This would be a very simple method for disseminating information about overseas voting and ensuring that none of these young Australians become disenfranchised during their stay.

Finally, the proposal to decrease the amount of time to enroll after an election is called would be a great disadvantage to those of us living overseas, as well as to people at home in Australia. Even in the Internet age, there is time lag in accessing the information and the time difference can make it difficult to make the necessary phone calls within Australian business hours. Please leave the law as it stands and allow sufficient time for people to undertake the necessary actions to ensure they can vote.

I urge you to take these suggestions and those from the other submissions into consideration when determining the appropriate way to deal with these issues. It is clear that a lack of information is the biggest issue and there are many suitable ways for dealing with this. I implore you to take these actions to ensure that Australians all around the world do not lose their right to vote.

Sincerely,

Lucy van der Wall