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Committee Secretary  
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters  
PO Box 6021  
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Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to the inquiry into civics education,  
engagement and participation in Australia

**Australian Electoral Commission**

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Classification: OFFICIAL

# 1. Introduction

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The AEC is committed to delivering electoral education and engagement activities to enable voters to understand and fulfil their right and obligation to vote. Our work to improve the community's understanding of electoral processes is critical to uphold and defend Australia's democracy.

The AEC Transformation Strategy launched in April 2024 and outlines how we will continue to maintain public trust in electoral outcomes into the future as a trusted agency committed to electoral integrity. The AEC's education and engagement programs are a key component.

Our education and engagement programs are expansive and diverse. They are tailored to meet the learning and communication needs of enrolled voters and young people. Schools-based initiatives such as the National Electoral Education Centre in Canberra comprise the AEC's starting point, and our community education and engagement programs expand upon this work.

Prioritising equitable inclusion and accessibility for voters is a key focus, regardless of location or personal circumstance. Current programs target communities and people who may experience barriers to electoral participation.

This includes Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and people with disabilities. These programs were enhanced in 2023 to support voters' participation in the first referendum held in more than 20 years. Our expanded community education and engagement approach will be continued for the next federal election and beyond.

Our education and engagement programs are the envy of many other international Electoral Management Bodies, and we make an important contribution to global best practice.

The AEC takes a multifaceted approach to addressing social, socioeconomic, and other barriers that may prevent electoral participation. These include legal and structural reforms, engagement, inclusive and accessible targeted initiatives. These are constantly evolving to ensure all Australians can be active members of democracy.

Voter equity is supported through delivery of information in community languages, tailored education and engagement resources, and support at polling places. Meaningful engagement with communities is key. We work to develop strategic partnerships and deliver community education where people gather – such as sewing groups, playgroups, and women's and men's groups.

The AEC has a global reputation as a leading electoral management body at the forefront of combatting threats to electoral integrity.

Initiatives include the [Reputation Management System](#), [Stop and Consider campaign](#), the AEC's Defending Democracy Unit and the [Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce](#), which safeguard the integrity of the AEC's processes. We also export our expertise as a founding partner of the [Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections \(BRIDGE\) program](#), and through our work supporting democracy in our region.

The AEC welcomes the opportunity to expand on these and other matters of interest to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters over the course of this inquiry.

## 2. AEC's school electoral education program

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### **This section addresses the following Terms of Reference**

- The effectiveness of formalised civics education throughout Australia and the various approaches taken across jurisdictions through schools and other institutions including electoral commissions, councils, and parliaments; the extent to which all students have equitable access to civics education; and opportunities for improvement.

The APSC's *Trust and Satisfaction in Australian Democracy* survey<sup>1</sup> cites a notable association between civic education and perceptions and engagement in democracy. It found that adults who received civic education in their primary or secondary school are more likely to say they understand democracy.

The AEC provides a comprehensive school-based electoral education program, focussing on experiential learning practices. Through our National Electoral Education Centre and Get Voting packs sent to schools, students have a hands-on electoral experience that includes learning how to enrol, voting, counting votes and declaring a result.

The National Electoral Education Centre is the AEC's flagship school education program, however being based in Canberra it presents challenges for many schools to travel, despite being subsidised. As outlined below, the AEC received funding in the 2022–23 Budget for an Advancing Education Project. Under this project AEC has developed a 3D online game available for download by schools via an app, scheduled to launch in 2025. The AEC will invest in the technology to deliver a contemporary experience in the digital age.

In addition, electoral education could be further enhanced through online digital programs delivered by AEC electoral educators, which would further extend our world-class program to schools unable to travel to Canberra. This will be achieved through an upgrade of facilities and additional electoral educators in order to reach more schools.

### **National Electoral Education Centre (NEEC)**

The NEEC is open to schools that visit Canberra as part of civics and citizenship excursions. Schools receive funding through the Parliament and Civics Education Rebate program. The content is aligned to the Australian Curriculum and is tailored to each school group by AEC's expert electoral educators. For example, the 3D game Democracy is updated each visit to reflect the electorate each school is from.

Sessions use experiential learning. Students explore the history of democracy and voting in Australia and experience the electoral process in action by running their own election or referendum in a simulated polling place. Students vote, count the votes, and declare the election result, and take on the roles of voters, ballot box guards, scrutineers, and polling officials.

Funding provided in the 2020–21 Budget enabled the refurbishment of the NEEC to ensure it remains a contemporary electoral education centre. Further funding was provided in the 2024–25 Budget for sustainment and maintenance costs over two years. The NEEC is widely regarded as a world-leading electoral education facility.

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Public Service Commission, *Trust and Satisfaction in Australia's Democracy*, 2023 National Survey, p. 25.

### Key facts

- The NEEC is on track to host around **81,000 visitors in 2023–24**. It is currently running at near full capacity with **18 sessions a day** on most days.
- By February 2025, the AEC will have hosted **2.5 million visitors**.
- NEEC visitor satisfaction surveys show more than **96 per cent of students and 99 per cent of teachers** report being satisfied with their experience.

### Feedback from NEEC visitors

Great session teaching students how to vote by actually including them to participate in the whole process, step by step. Great learning experience! **Teacher, New South Wales**

[I learnt about] the process of voting. We also learnt about when and how to enrol to vote. We learnt about the history of voting, and why it is important that we vote. **Year 6 student**

I learnt about how a referendum is created, the process of a referendum being passed, how to vote, what happens when you don't vote, what political neutrality is, how many MPs there are, who our local MP is. **Year 9 student**

### Get Voting

The Get Voting program, launched in 2012, provides schools with free resources to conduct school elections using a preferential system. In addition to enabling students to participate in the practical experience of voting, it develops students' trust, confidence, and motivation to participate in democracy.

Resources include a ballot box, ballot box seals and polling official badges. Supporting online resources include voter list and ballot paper generators, instructions for polling officials, guidance for setting up a polling place and vote tally sheets.

The AEC is re-promoting Get Voting to Australian primary schools throughout May and June 2024. The packs are reusable over multiple years.

#### Key fact

- More than **560,000 students** have experienced the voting process in the classroom through the Get Voting program since it began in 2012.

### AEC for Schools website teacher resources

The [AEC for Schools](#) website provides free education resources and programs for teachers to deliver civics and electoral education including:

- Democracy Rules – an enquiry-based electoral education resource including a detailed teaching guide, online interactives, and printable activities for students.
- Voting in Australia – a 22-page magazine that provides an overview of the Australian electoral system.
- Teacher professional learning – a self-directed, one-hour online course that equips teachers with skills in teaching electoral education as part of the Australian Curriculum in civics and citizenship. It aligns with the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers.

#### Key fact

- More than **1,000 participants** have completed the self-directed teacher professional learning course since 2020–21.

## Collaboration with other institutions

The AEC participates in collaborative education programs with other civic and cultural institutions. The **National Schools Constitutional Convention** is an annual event exploring the Australian Constitution for senior school students in Years 11 and 12. The AEC provides education on the referendum voting process, conducts a vote process, and provides the results according to the double majority system. The AEC also participates each year in the **ACT Schools Constitutional Convention**.

The AEC will participate in **Democracy Day in the NT** in May 2024. This is a collaborative initiative between the AEC, the National Capital Educational Tourism Project, Australian Parliament House, and the Museum of Australian Democracy. It will provide civics and electoral education to students in the Northern Territory, in addition to teacher professional development. The program will be delivered in Alice Springs and Darwin over four days and is expected to reach approximately **220 students and 25 teachers**.

In September 2024, the AEC will participate for the first time in **Virtual Week in Canberra**. This NSW Department of Education Distance and Rural Technology initiative offers virtual tours from Canberra-based institutions. More than **15,000 students** are expected to attend the week.

## AEC digital schools initiatives

In July 2024, the AEC will commence a trial of digital education through the DemocraCity for Schools program. This will enable us to reach schools that are unable to travel to Canberra, including those in regional and remote areas, and in lower socioeconomic areas.

The program will provide an NEEC-like experience through an immersive 3D electoral education video game. The game will allow students to explore the history of Australian democracy along with key election activities and concepts such as representation and ballot paper formality. It is aligned to the Australian Curriculum and allows teachers to choose modules based on the year level of their students or subject being studied. The game is designed for use alongside other AEC for Schools education resources such as Get Voting, which provide students a practical experience of voting in the classroom.

The DemocraCity game is being trialled in select schools in Term 3 and will be released for use by all Australian schools in 2025.

This is a significant step in increasing electoral education to more school students. Of the 2,313 education sessions that were delivered at the NEEC in 2023, 80 per cent of sessions were delivered to schools travelling from New South Wales, Victoria, or the Australian Capital Territory. Only eight per cent of all education sessions were delivered to schools travelling from outer regional, remote, or very remote areas. This data has been consistent across many years.

The recent report into the 2022 federal election by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters also recommended the 'Australian Government consider ways to strengthen civics education programs in Australian schools to better equip and prepare the next generation of voters to cast their first vote'.

### 3. Supporting community electoral participation through education and engagement

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#### This section addresses the following Terms of Reference

- The vast array of informal mechanisms through which Australians seek and receive information about Australia’s democracy, electoral events, and voting; and how governments and the community might leverage these mechanisms to improve the quality of information and help Australians be better informed about, and better participate in, the electoral system.
- Opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation.
- Social, socio-economic, or other barriers that may be preventing electoral participation; and ways governments might address or circumvent these barriers.

#### Supporting electoral participation of the general public

##### Media

The AEC proactively builds media understanding of the electoral system via media briefings, media releases, election media guides, AEC TV content and other proactive initiatives. Media outreach seeks to inform voters about their rights and responsibilities, while also educating about the electoral process. It also addresses myths and mis- and disinformation.

Media briefings strengthen the AEC’s relationship with the media and give media the ability to learn more about electoral events and educate themselves. In turn, the media consults the AEC on matters prior to publishing – either for comment or confirmation on issues. This gives the opportunity to debunk mis- and disinformation.

##### Key facts

For the 2023 referendum, the AEC:

- undertook approximately **430 media interviews** and answered more than **6,700 media enquiries**
- delivered **13 media briefings** with around **150 media outlets/representatives** across Australia, with the majority conducted in-person. It also included interviews AEC staff conducted in language.
- sent **39 media releases**, and recorded and distributed **five radio releases** on staff recruitment, enrolment deadlines, early voting, and referendum day
- recorded around **12 short video grabs** about various topics, such as early voting, postal voting, voting options, statistics and more
- conducted **93 media training sessions** to enable more AEC staff to do media interviews, of which eight were of Indigenous Electoral Participation staff.

## Social media

The AEC is active on social media to defend Australia's democracy and educate Australians about electoral processes. We have one of the most active and engaged social media presences across the public service.

### Key facts

As an example, during the referendum:

- our social media channels had more than **133,000 incoming messages** (writ-to-writ period)
- there were **12.15 million online impressions** of organic AEC messages. These included website links, which attracted just under **30,000 clicks**
- **359 proactive organic posts** were published
- the AEC hosted two Reddit *Ask Me Anything* sessions with the Electoral Commissioner Tom Rogers, Deputy Commissioner Jeff Pope, and National Election Manager Kath Gleeson. The sessions attracted **150,000 views**.

## AEC TV

AEC TV was introduced early in 2021 to communicate complex electoral and referendum information effectively through video and static resources. For the Referendum, AEC TV created proactive videos for use on social and digital media platforms. These were designed to educate voters about the referendum process, and to combat issues we anticipated would arise online.

### Key fact

- Around **150 videos** (including in accessible formats and in-language) were created with over **one million views**. Many of these addressed emerging questions uncertainties and help in the AEC's efforts to pre-bunk likely areas of disinformation. The channel helps ensure the community have an easily digestible source of truth on electoral matters.

## Information campaigns

The AEC runs major advertising campaigns targeting all eligible voters for federal electoral events. A campaign typically includes more than 1500 ads for TV, radio, press, cinema, out of home, digital and social media. The ads educate voters on why it's important to vote, close of rolls, voter services, and voter formality. It runs in 32 international languages and includes a dedicated First Nations campaign in over 20 Indigenous languages.

In addition, the AEC delivers an official guide to around **11.3 million households** for by-elections, elections, and referendums. It explains why to vote, where to vote, what to expect at a polling place, a reminder to stop and consider the source of information, and instructions on how to correctly complete a ballot paper. It is available in 33 languages, and in accessible formats such as Braille, audio, e-text, and large print.

### Key facts

Campaign advertising for the Referendum achieved impressive reach with:

- over **110 million** completed views of video ads
- over **1 billion impressions** through video, display, audio, search, and social media
- **6.5 million** clicks to the AEC's website
- **104,000** radio spots, **4,300** outdoor panels and **611** newspaper inserts
- **22.5 million** impressions through our Snapchat quiz and **17,000** click-throughs
- **1 million** people reached on Samsung TV through a government-first initiative targeted to people who own a Samsung TV (currently more than 2.6 million Australia)
- **17 million** people reached through Meta.

The AEC engages an independent market research company to evaluate the outcomes of every advertising campaign. A survey is undertaken to understand levels of awareness, attitudes, and likely behaviours before a campaign. This provides a benchmark to measure against after a campaign is complete. For the Referendum campaign, research found the campaign creative rated highly for 'having an important message' and being 'clear and easy to understand'.

### Key facts

Research also revealed that because of the referendum campaign advertising:

- **97 percent** understood voting is compulsory, up from **79 percent** at benchmark
- **72 percent** understood the range of early voting options, up from **63 percent** at benchmark
- **67 percent** understood how a referendum result is decided, up from **63 percent** at benchmark
- **66 percent** understood how to complete their ballot paper, up from **9 per cent** at benchmark

### AEC website

The AEC's website assists voters with a range of topics and gives updates on current electoral events. People can go to the website to enrol or check their enrolment details, learn about elections, find out where they can go to vote, access education resources and practise voting. It also contains the AEC's Disinformation Register, frequently asked questions, access to AEC TV and the AEC's Reputation Management System.

The AEC website includes information in accessible formats. It is built to allow users to navigate the website on any device. Where possible, it is WCAG 2.1 Level AA compliant. Users who have low vision, low literacy, or who difficulty reading text online can click the 'Listen' button on each page to hear the content. The page content can be saved as an audio file. Importantly, information is available in a range of formats including video, Auslan and Easy Read, and in up to 34 international languages and 27 First Nations languages.

In 2023 the AEC launched a referendum subsite, including a referendum version of our popular practise voting tool. As there hadn't been a referendum since 1999, it was important to remind people voting is compulsory while providing information on the referendum process.

### Key fact

- The AEC website had **21,900,013** unique views during the 2023 calendar year. The AEC's virtual tally room for the 2023 referendum had **424,797** unique views.

### Writs to Referendums electoral exhibition

The AEC's public exhibition *Writs to Referendums: Celebrating Australia's unique electoral system* is located in the Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House, Canberra. It opened in November 2022, and brings together interactive technology, historic objects and cinematic-style videography to tell the story of Australia's democratic system.

The exhibition offers visitors a glimpse into the delivery of Australia's largest and most complex peacetime logistical exercise. It also documents the experiences of the many Australians who help make elections and referendums happen. It features commentary from voters, temporary election workers, party workers, scrutineers, and AEC staff.

Funding in the 2020–21 Budget enabled the establishment of the exhibition and, with additional funding in the 2024-25 Budget, it will remain open until mid-2026.

### Key fact

- Since opening, more than **70,100 visitors** have attended the *Writs to Referendums* exhibition.

## Community education resources

The AEC provides online resources to enable community groups to run electoral education in their own communities. New federal election content will be available in July. Resources include:

- presentation slides
- facilitator guides
- printable supporting resources
- practice voting activities.

## Practise voting tools

The AEC has developed practise voting tools which are available on the website. Three versions are available to allow people to practise voting in the House of Representatives, Senate and referendums. The practise voting tools enable people to fill in a ballot paper and check to see if it has been completed correctly. The tools are available in 13 languages in addition to English and are an important way people can learn about ballot paper formality.

### Key facts

- Since the House of Representatives and Senate tools were launched in 2016, they have received **1.05 million views** across 886,504 users.
- Since the referendum practise voting tool was launched in 2023, it has received **227,115 views** across 179,410 users.

## Supporting electoral participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

### Indigenous Electoral Participation Program

The AEC's Indigenous Electoral Participation Program (IEPP) works with communities and in partnership with local organisations to encourage electoral participation in ways that are culturally suitable. Our IEPP staff in every state and territory aim to increase the enrolment, turnout, formality rates, and workforce participation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Through its partnership model, IEPP works with Indigenous-led community organisations and other services providers to identify culturally and regionally appropriate opportunities to support electoral participation. Partnerships also help the AEC to understand challenges to enrolment and provide opportunities to support enrolment.

As part of these electoral support and participation services, and with the assistance of its partners, the IEPP delivers Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander electoral education in urban, regional, and remote communities. This approach was expanded during the referendum and resulted in **266 education sessions** being delivered in First Nations communities around Australia.

The IEPP also employs Community Electoral Participation Officers (CEPOs) to conduct electoral engagement and education activities. CEPOs are casually employed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff who are locally engaged and conduct engagement work in and around their community, and mostly in-language. This allows the IEPP to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in a culturally appropriate, consistent, and frequent manner.

### Key fact

- **82 CEPOs** across Australia were engaged during the referendum period, with **42 bilingual CEPOs** covering **16 languages**.

## Story of change

An innovative community-led electoral participation education activity in Geraldton, WA, used the arts to educate people about the voting process. The activity involved local music bands playing a song each at the event and then having the community vote on their favourite band using the preferential voting system. It gave the community an experiential learning and culturally appropriate insight into the electoral process. Attendees also felt more confident completing a ballot paper, and more informed about how preferential voting works. This event was filmed and distributed via AEC partner social media accounts throughout Geraldton, and a story published in the Geraldton Guardian newspaper.

### Enhancing Indigenous Electoral Participation initiative

The Enhancing Indigenous Electoral Participation initiative has enabled the AEC to:

- make enhancements to the electoral roll to better capture and link traditional, kinship and other recognised names
- conduct research to inform future Indigenous-centric communication strategies incorporating specialist media, advertising, and communications products.

Informed by this research, a new electoral education program to support participation in the 2024–25 federal election is in the final stages of development. It is exploring how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples think and feel about enrolment and voting, along with barriers that may need to be addressed and preferred ways for the AEC to deliver electoral education.

Early research findings suggest major gaps exist about the foundational knowledge voters have, particularly understanding the levels of government and impacts of voting on everyday life. When completed, this research will form the evidence base for a communication, education, and engagement strategy ahead of the next federal election and beyond.

The new education program is due to commence on 1 July 2024.

### Deadly Democracy

Deadly Democracy is a youth engagement program designed to increase electoral awareness and understanding among Indigenous youth. The program partners with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations nationwide to recruit Indigenous participants aged 18 to 24 years old. The program upskills participants in project management, cultural skills, and electoral education to empower them to deliver an electoral-based education projects in their community.

## DEADLY DEMOCRACY IN PRACTICE

Participants in Deadly Democracy produced electoral participation activities including:

- a community trivia night on voting and First Nations electoral participation
- the development of a 'Why Voting is Important' video, which included stories of why voting is important for young First Nations people
- a magazine with original characters, which provided information for young people about voting and history of First Nations right to vote
- a Community Art Project that included artwork from schools on voting
- *a community sports games, where participants voted and debated their favourite sport, to illustrate how preferential voting works and how political decisions are made*
- *voting workshops delivered in schools.*

## Localised stories

The AEC is collaborating with community members and partner organisations to create localised stories on electoral participation. Stories are centred around electoral participation and include subjects such as:

- history of the Indigenous vote
- importance of participating in democracy
- Elders' reflections on voting rights
- youth participation in elections and democracy.

Stories are produced through a variety of formats determined by community expertise and are tailored to the stories being told and the community involved. This includes oral storytelling, visual art, dance, and a combination of audio/visual media.

### Local stories in practice

The AEC collaborated with a partner across Ngaanyatjarra Lands in Western Australia to develop in-language videos titled 'My Voting Story'. Made in each community, they featured an Elder talking about the importance of participation and how to vote. This information was distributed to people across the Ngaanyatjarra Lands by the partner.

## Enrolment

The AEC recognises there are complex factors that contribute to enrolment challenges for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, particularly for those living remotely. Examples include people not having sufficient identification for enrolment, language barriers, limited knowledge of democratic processes, and limited postal and internet services.

The AEC continues to address these. For example, since 17 February 2023, Australians can enrol to vote, or update their enrolment, using their Medicare card as evidence of identity.

### Key fact

- Between 17 February 2023 and 30 April 2024, **321,951** people enrolled using their Medicare card as identity.

The AEC has conducted direct enrolment trials through our Federal Direct Enrolment Update program, which have proved successful. Direct enrolment is used to assist many Australians meet their enrolment obligations by applying trusted third-party information, without the need for that person to complete an enrolment application. This program is now also regularly delivered to remote communities.

Remote engagement conducted by AEC staff and partners is also increasing enrolment, as is enrolment communication. This includes advertising campaigns, audio and video educational resources in more languages, more enrolment and education activities, and more identified positions being allocated for temporary election workforce staff.

### Key fact

- At the beginning of 2023, the estimated number of 'unenrolled' Indigenous Australians fell below 100,000 for the first time to just under **87,000**. In June 2023 that figure was **33,319**.
- The estimated enrolment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples is **94.1%** (as at 30 June 2023), up from **74.7%** in 2017.

### Estimated electoral roll Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, 2017–2023

2017	2019	2020	2022	REF23
74.7%	76.6%	78%	81.7%	94.1%

## Support at polling places

In addition to working closely with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples throughout the electoral cycle, the AEC provides support at polling places to ensure participation including:

- instructions on how to correctly complete a ballot paper in plain English, shown through illustration, is at every polling place
- a short explanatory video in 22 First Nations languages is available in remote polling places
- temporary election workers at polling places that reflect the diversity of the local community. For example, at the referendum we employed:
  - **2,149** First Nations people
  - **242** bilingual and **943** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander polling assistant positions
  - **230** Local Assistants who worked in remote polling places and were members of their local community. In many cases, they were bilingual
- Expanded remote voter services to provide the greatest opportunity for participation. For the referendum the AEC delivered voting in **585** remote localities across **801** premises.

### Story of change

When the AEC's remote mobile polling team visited Ngurtuwarda Community in WA, a group of young children were curious about the cardboard booths set up under the trees. Once all adults had voted, the team explained to the children what the adults were doing and set them up with a notebook and pencils to do drawing in the booth. This is an example of ways the AEC staff help young people feel comfortable to vote when they're old enough.

## Supporting electoral participation of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds

### Engaging multicultural community leaders

The AEC meets regularly with multicultural leaders around Australia to discuss barriers, ways electoral participation can be encouraged, and to upskill leaders in electoral processes.

#### Key facts

- In 2023 the AEC met with **226 community leaders** representing **136 organisations**.
- This year, as of 31 March 2024, the AEC has met with **157 representatives** across **76 organisations** (noting many are sustained engagements from the previous year).
- A survey found **95 percent of community leaders** the AEC met with shared materials within their communities and networks. This demonstrates the goodwill towards the AEC.

As a result, the AEC is enhancing multicultural community education programs (see below).

### Story of change

AEC staff engaged youth leaders from CALD communities for the referendum as they are influential in sharing information with their families. During sessions, many reflected on the low literacy levels of their elders and took sample ballot papers away to help family members practise correctly completing the ballot.

New citizens were particularly thankful for the community education prior to the 2023 referendum. They spoke of their mixed experiences of democracy from their home countries, and wanted to ensure they got the process right when they voted in Australia for the first time.

## Community education sessions

In Australia, just over 7 million people, or 28 percent of the population, were born overseas. Newly arrived migrants and voters with low English language proficiency are faced with additional challenges understanding Australia's complex voting system and the wider political landscape.

In recognition of this, the AEC ran **117 community education** sessions in over **35 languages** in multicultural communities ahead of the 2023 referendum. The sessions explained the Constitution, the referendum process, ballot paper formality, how the results of a referendum are determined, and provided participants with assistance to enrol or update details, and information on temporary employment with the AEC.

The success of this program has now become a core component of our community engagement, and the AEC aims to increase the number of multicultural community education sessions around Australia between now and the next federal election.

The AEC's community education is delivered in places where multicultural communities meet – such as men's and women's groups, playgroups, and neighbourhood community events. These are informed by insights from community leaders to ensure they are culturally suitable.

The AEC recognises that more targeted approaches are required to reach multicultural women, youth and elderly voters and these groups are reached through our tailored engagement and education efforts.

### Key fact

For the referendum, after attending a referendum community education session:

- **96.8%** of attendees were more confident about their ability to participate in the referendum
- **98.7%** said they learned something new about the process.

## Assisting new citizens to participate in Australia's democracy

The AEC is maintaining high enrolment rates for new citizens and continues to refine and monitor opportunities to efficiently improve new citizens' enrolment rates. We work closely with the Department of Home Affairs to ensure new citizens have information and access to enrolment services.

In 2023–24 the AEC attended 248 citizen ceremonies. Through the Department of Home Affairs, the AEC also distributed electoral enrolment information sheets with QR codes. The codes link new citizens to the AEC's new citizen enrolment webpage, including information translated into 37 languages. This approach aligns with the AEC's move to user-centric, self-serve approaches for enrolment.

The AEC attends significant citizenship events including those held on or around Australia Day, Citizenship Day, Harmony week and Refugee week.

### Key fact

- From October to December 2022, there were around 27,000 new citizens, and more than **11,700** used the Online Enrolment Service (OES) to enrol.
- By early April 2023, all new citizens who did not utilise the OES from October to December 2022 to enrol, were included in federal direct enrolment uplift cycles and of these, **92 percent** were enrolled.

## **Multicultural Community Electoral Participation Officer pilot**

As a pilot, Multicultural Community Electoral Participation Officers (Multicultural CEPOs) will be employed during this election cycle to deliver culturally suitable electoral education and outreach in their community. They will be based in 10 electoral divisions in NSW and Victoria that have persistently low formality and low turnout. These divisions are predominantly in Western Sydney and include the suburbs of Canterbury-Bankstown, Cumberland, Parramatta, Fairfield, Liverpool, and Blacktown. Based on countries of birth and languages spoken. All selected divisions are considered culturally diverse.

Multicultural CEPOs will primarily engage the top three language communities in each selected division, be bilingual, and a member of, and live in, the community they are representing. They will be supported by a network of local partners who will help facilitate community outreach.

The AEC appreciates that for those unfamiliar with the democratic process, the importance of voting and the role of an individual vote also needs to be emphasised to encourage active participation. Meeting this need will be an important objective of the pilot.

### **Information in language**

The AEC's extensive translations and interpreting services are an important way to ensure people with low English proficiency can access information on the electoral process. We:

- produce information, advertising, and videos in up to 34 international languages
- deliver community education in up to 35 international languages
- have 19 dedicated phone numbers for access to translation services. There's an additional line for international languages beyond the 19, dependant on availability of translators.

### **Voter research**

This year, the AEC commissioned an extensive body of multicultural voter research to understand:

- knowledge and attitudes towards voting
- reasons for informal voting
- low voting attendances
- voters' understanding of disinformation
- voters' experiences using the in-language assistance that the AEC provides.

This research will further inform the design of accessible and culturally suitable electoral education, information, and services, and will assist the AEC to identify targeted interventions to increase formality and turnout.

### **Key fact**

- Research was conducted in **27 languages** to ensure experiences of people with low English proficiency was captured.

### **Support at polling places**

While every effort is taken to ensure people from a culturally and linguistically diverse background feel confident in participating prior to election day, the AEC provides additional supports at polling places.

These include prominent 'Languages spoken here' signs at polling places, and every polling place has a flipbook with instructions on how to correctly complete a ballot paper. This is available in 34 international languages.

In addition, the AEC works hard to ensure the temporary election workforce reflects the diversity of the local community. For example, bilingual polling assistant positions are filled in divisions with high proportions of voters with low English proficiency.

For the referendum:

- **11 percent** of temporary election workforce positions were filled by people who identified that they were from a non-English speaking background
- **230 bilingual polling assistants** were employed.

## Supporting electoral participation of people with disability

The AEC has a long history of working with the disability community to improve equity of access and support people with disabilities to actively participate in electoral services and events.

Current services include:

- accessibility assessment of all 7000+ polling places, published on the AEC website
- secure telephone voting for people who are blind or have low vision
- mobile polling for people unable to access polling places, such as residential aged care and residential mental health facilities
- assistive technology in polling places including text to speech pens, hearing loops and virtual Auslan interpreters
- information available in Easy Read format
- supporting electors vote who may be in the carpark of polling place but who are unable to enter. This is done with the support of AEC staff and scrutineers/party workers who must witness this process to meet the legislative requirements
- education and information materials to meet the needs of Australians living with disability – for the next federal event, this will include provision of community education in Auslan, and education programs developed for people with cognitive or intellectual disability
- availability of information in large print, e-text, MP3 audio files/CD, DAISY, and Braille.

## Disability Advisory Committee

The Disability Advisory Committee collaborates with leaders and peak bodies to:

- seek feedback from Australian peak disability organisations on AEC service offerings
- understand new and emerging issues of concern for people with disability
- collaborate with the Electoral Council of Australia and New Zealand (ECANZ) partners in the delivery of accessible electoral services across jurisdictions
- promote relevant AEC initiatives to members.

Three new working groups falling under the Committee have recently been established:

- accessibility of polling places
- providing education sessions in Auslan
- engagement with and education for people with intellectual and cognitive disability.

## Story of change

The AEC visited Goulburn Options in Victoria – an organisation that supports people with disability through community connections, collaboration and learning opportunities.

The AEC set up mock polling booths for clients and explained voting processes, enrolments, secret ballot, and employment opportunities. Afterwards, participants said they felt more comfortable about voting and were excited to vote at the next electoral event.

## Supporting electoral participation of people experiencing homelessness

The AEC supports voters who are experiencing homelessness, living in crisis or in safe housing by providing a 'no fixed address' enrolment form on the AEC website. A self-paced online learning tool is also available, which was accessed by 331 people between July – October 2023.

For the 2023 Referendum, community engagement, information and enrolment sessions were delivered, resulting in 499 updated enrolments for people with no fixed address.

Where feasible, the AEC's mobile polling teams delivered voting at homelessness facilities. Where in-person voting was not possible, our staff contacted the service to help them support residents to engage with the electoral process. This approach will be continued for the next federal election.

### Story of change

In the leadup to the Dunkley by-election, the AEC visited Angus Martin House, a supported residential service run by Wintringham Australia.

The residents had many questions for the AEC team, mostly around safety of their personal information. AEC staff explained the process of becoming a silent elector. The residents felt better informed, and they and the facility manager were very grateful for the AEC's support. The AEC was invited to return after a new cohort of residents had arrived.

## Supporting electoral participation of people in prison

The AEC works closely with corrective services agencies in each state and territory to ensure people in prison are supported to participate in electoral activities.

Guided by the corrective services agency in each jurisdiction, the AEC has improved and updated prisoner-specific resources. Ahead of the Referendum, some states were able to conduct in-person enrolment sessions before the close of rolls, which resulted in **654 enrolments** being processed for people in prison.

The AEC has also been working in collaboration with Departments of Corrections to improve mobile polling services provided to correctional facilities.

### Key fact

For the Referendum:

- **43** mobile polling teams visited **49 prisons** across the country. This resulted in over **7400 prisoners voting**. By comparison, only 274 prisoners voted in the 2022 federal election
- **654 enrolments** were processed for people in prison, including 101 new enrolment or re-enrolments and 553 updates.

## 4. Legitimacy of electoral information

### This section addresses the following Terms of Reference

- The mechanisms available to assist voters in understanding the legitimacy of information about electoral matters; the impact of artificial intelligence, foreign interference, social media, and mis- and disinformation; and how governments and the community can prevent or limit inaccurate or false information influencing electoral outcomes.

### Maintaining trust and confidence

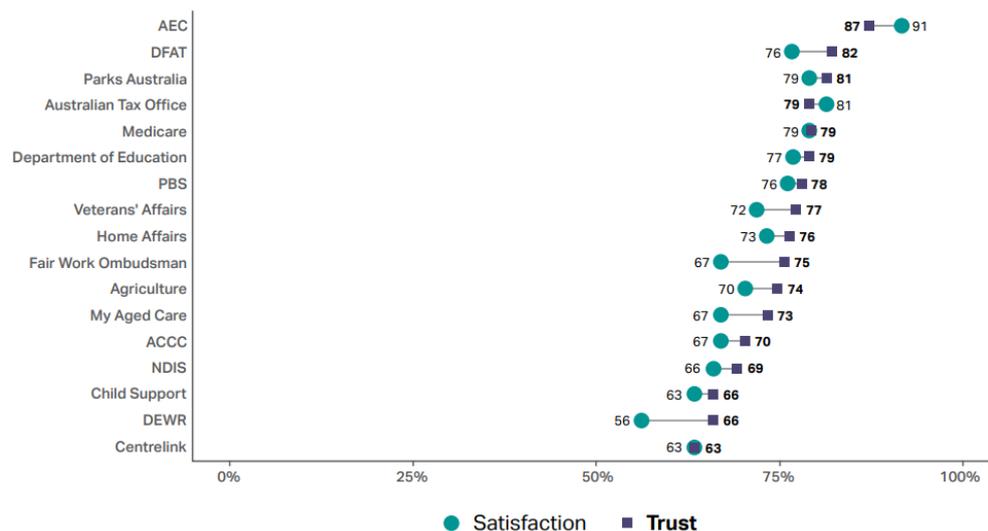
Trust in electoral processes and electoral management bodies is vital for a strong democracy.

Recent research conducted post Referendum shows **nine out of ten Australians trust the AEC** and the AEC is respected both domestically and internationally for its excellence in electoral management.

#### Key facts

- **87 percent** agreed the AEC conducted the referendum in a neutral, fair, and impartial way.
- **90 percent** were confident in the AEC’s ability to deliver referendum voting services.<sup>2</sup>

The [APSC’s Survey of Trust in Australian public services](#) demonstrated the AEC has the highest levels of trust and satisfaction among APS agencies. These results reflect the AEC’s delivery of lawful, impartial, and transparent federal electoral events over many years.



Source: Australian Public Service Commission, *Trust in Australian public services, 2023 Annual Report*, November 2023, p 7.

<sup>2</sup> Wallis Social Research, *Referendum Voter Survey 2023*, December 2023, p 131.

## Stop and consider campaign

To combat mis- and disinformation, prior to and during every federal electoral event since 2019, the AEC has run a 'Stop and Consider' campaign. It encourages voters to think critically about sources of electoral information, to avoid being deceived or misled by mis- and disinformation and to support public understanding of electoral processes.

The AEC delivers some of the largest education campaigns across the Australian government, regularly sharing and promoting information about how eligible Australians can enrol to vote, and how to cast a formal vote in an election or referendum.

### Key fact

- The Stop and Campaign has been remarkably successful, reaching large numbers of Australians. Research indicates about **20 per cent** of the community recognises the campaign and a significant proportion of those modify their behaviours as a result.

## Social media

Social media across society, including its potential use during electoral events, continues to evolve rapidly. The AEC monitors those developments to ensure the provision of fact-based information regarding electoral processes from reliable sources is as prominent as it can be.

In response to this changed environment, the AEC is increasingly focusing on pre-bunking potential areas of electoral disinformation and proactively posting information to AEC social media channels.

The AEC continues engagement with social media platforms ahead of the next federal election, but it is more likely requests for content removal or moderation will only be successful where a specific breach of Australian law can be clearly cited in relation to a piece of content.

Unfortunately, current legislative settings are not sufficient for some electoral integrity matters such as misinformation about electoral process. For example, false claims that Dominion voting machines are used in Australian federal elections do not constitute an offence under provisions in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* or *Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act 1984*.

## Defending Democracy Unit

The Defending Democracy Unit (DDU) was established in 2022, ahead of the federal election, and was cemented as an enduring capability to safeguard the integrity of the AEC's processes. Through the DDU, the AEC responds in a coordinated and consistent manner to threats to electoral integrity and broader Australian democracy. This includes maintaining an awareness of evolving information, domestic and international environments, and an understanding of changing community and stakeholder expectations.

The DDU advances the AEC's approaches to maintaining electoral integrity, including through measures such as 'pre-bunking'. Unlike debunking, which corrects misinformation narratives after-the-fact, pre-bunking builds voter resilience to misinformation prior to exposure. An example is the 'Stop and Consider' campaign, which encourages voters to check the source of electoral communications they encounter.

These structural and procedural changes, including the implementation of an all-encompassing, agency-wide Reputation Management System, ensures the AEC can continue to uphold Australia's enviable electoral reputation. The AEC anticipates that, as already complex operational and information environments continue to evolve, the role and importance of the Defending Democracy Unit will evolve to meet these challenges.

## Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce

The [Electoral Integrity Assurance Taskforce](#) (the Taskforce) includes relevant agencies across government, working together to provide information and advice to the Electoral Commissioner on matters that may compromise the real or perceived integrity of federal electoral events.

Potential threats to electoral integrity can arise in the form of cyber or physical security incidents, mis- or disinformation campaigns, and foreign interference in electoral processes. Public trust in the integrity of an electoral event can be undermined by the realisation or perceived realisation of such threats.

The Taskforce ensures information about these threats is efficiently referred to the relevant agencies, facilitates cooperation and coordination between these agencies, and enables them to work together to take any appropriate action.

## Disinformation Register

In response to the changing information environment, and to help defend the Australian electoral process from the harms of mis- and disinformation, the AEC established an online disinformation register prior to the 2022 federal election. That register, now a permanent feature of each federal electoral event, lists prominent pieces of disinformation regarding the electoral process, alongside the correct, fact-based information.

The AEC is not the arbiter of truth regarding issue or political communication and does not seek to censor debate. However, when it comes to the electoral process, the AEC has a responsibility to ensure voters have access to factual information, so they can fully participate in the Australian democratic process. By listing and correcting electoral mis- and disinformation, the AEC is assisting to both de-bunk and pre-bunk false narratives about the electoral process, encouraging voters to stop, consider and assess the reliability of the information they are consuming.

## Cyber security

The AEC and its security partners detected no targeted or disruptive cyber-attacks against AEC systems during the most recent electoral event, the 2023 Referendum.

The AEC maintains strong working partnerships with relevant security agencies who provide additional operational assurance. This includes close engagement with the Australian Cyber Security Centre, which assisted with assurance for the referendum.

Prior to the referendum, the AEC completed activities to strengthen the security of its systems:

- assurance activities of the AEC's cyber security posture to meet set targets
- penetration testing of critical systems and supporting IT infrastructure
- operation of the AEC's cyber security monitoring service
- completion of Infosec Registered Assessors Program assessments for multiple critical electoral systems.

This was undertaken in alignment with the AEC's cyber security governance program to ensure the risks associated with systems and applications are known, remediated where appropriate, and ultimately accepted by the organisation.

## 5. Where to from here?

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The AEC has a unique role in engaging with and educating the Australian community on the electoral process, and helping voters understand and fulfil their legal right and obligation to vote.

This submission demonstrates the work the AEC undertakes to:

- support electoral participation, with a focus on ensuring equity of access
- provide additional support for Australians who experience barriers to electoral participation.

While this work forms a critical part of our duty to uphold and defend Australia's democratic processes, new threats and risks to democracy have emerged. Recent national and international events have demonstrated the range of emerging challenges in delivering impartial and independent elections. Internal and external environments remain complex and, in some cases, extremely volatile.

In addition to increased complexity surrounding electoral delivery, Australia is subject to the same global trends relating to cyber and physical security, misinformation, disinformation, and electoral integrity that complicate elections in other democracies.

In this context, our education and engagement activities are more critical than ever.

They will help defend against the potential threat presented by generative artificial intelligence (AI). Artificial intelligence will assist, both in terms of ease and scale, those who wish to damage trust in elections and undermine electoral integrity through electoral disinformation. Giving Australian voters the information to be able to detect mis- and disinformation, particularly if supercharged by AI, is far more effective than trying to counteract or respond to each piece or each campaign of electoral mis- and disinformation.

The AEC supports any efforts from government and civil society to invest in a national digital literacy campaign. Electoral management bodies cannot do it alone and isolated electoral campaigns no longer suffice.

Throughout its 40-year history, the AEC has adapted to meet changing community and stakeholder needs. The AEC's education and engagement functions must continue to transform into the future. While initiatives such as our National Electoral Education Centre in Canberra are highly successful and internationally renowned, we must ensure that electoral education from the AEC reaches into all schools in Australia to ensure future voters are ready to effectively participate when they reach voting age.

Similarly, while AEC community engagement efforts have reached deep into communities all over Australia in recent years, this can only be achieved as much as resourcing will allow. The AEC is looking forward to further leveraging technology, expanding partnerships and trialling innovations to try and further extend our reach, particularly into remote and CALD communities.

As a world leader in electoral management, the AEC also seeks to be world-leading in pioneering innovative education and engagement activities that uphold public trust in our democracy and ensure every individual can meaningfully participate in the electoral process.