

There appears to be a view being pressed by vested political interests that the availability and length of pre polling in the 2019 Federal election was undesirable and undemocratic. On the contrary, it seems to me the calls to limit pre-polling are themselves undemocratic and antediluvian.

Submissions follow:-

1. Pre-polling availability – whatever may have been the situation in the past, the reality today is that there are many reasons why voting on a single Saturday is not practical. The list is obvious but includes people who have to work, families with school sport commitments (often conflicting), people who travel, people with limited transport options or who are ill, and so on. Pre-polling gives them the opportunity to exercise their democratic rights in a calm and considered way at a time that is convenient to them. There is no reason in this day in age where exercise of democratic rights should be seen as an inconvenience.
2. Pre-Polling Eligibility – apart from identity checks to counter voter fraud, there should not be a requirement to ‘prove’ eligibility to pre-poll. It should be ‘as of right’. It should not be the function of polling officials to police whether or not a voter meets some eligibility criteria. First, how are they going to check the veracity or otherwise of the claim to eligibility. Secondly, what process would there be to appeal a decision by an ‘official’ polling officer and how practical would that process be? Thirdly, there are already claims by some that people are pre-polling without ‘reasonable grounds’. Reasonable to whom and who are the complainants to judge? None of these things need be an issue by allowing pre-polling ‘as of right’.
3. Incomplete Information – politicians have argued that with pre-polling, voters are acting on incomplete information, especially as the parties release policies toward the end of the campaign period. First, there is an implicit and arrogant assumption that voters cannot and should not make up their minds in advance of the designated poll date. If voters want to or have made up their minds, it is not for politicians to say they shouldn’t. That is the democratic right of the voter. Secondly, there is a good argument to say politicians should have set out their policy agenda well in advance of a poll and certainly very early in the campaign. It is politicians who should change their approach and not the electorate. There might also be a disincentive to conduct ‘scare campaigns’ to influence voters at the last moment. Thirdly, it has been suggested that it in some cases it deprives politicians of the chance to get into their electorate locally and around the country (presumably to put their case). With respect, that is not an argument. Politicians in Federal Parliament don’t exactly sit 365 days per year and have more than ample opportunity to get before their electorate between elections. If they have not done so, then that is their failing and not a reason to curtail pre-polling. Maybe pre-polling will force them to do what they should be doing in the first place, namely communicating with their electorates and country during term and not just at election time.
4. Robot Calls and Scare Campaigns – at a minimum, there should be an ability for voters to opt out of robo calling. The claim that it allows politicians to get their message to the electorate is all very well but it runs against privacy principles that are applied in most other contexts. It is another example of politicians seeing themselves as somehow special and different to everyone else (which only feeds the existing cynicism of politicians). It is in fact an intrusive invasion of privacy. Worse, no matter how outrageous or outlandish the claims made in the calls, there is no right of reply. That is profoundly undemocratic. If not outlawed, there should be severe penalties for misleading & deceptive calls and an ability to opt out of robot calling. By all means call to the end of the campaign period, but again the ability to do so should it be determinant of the availability or length of a pre-polling period.
5. Changing Nature of Elections – it is also claimed that pre-polling is redefining elections. That may be true but so what? That might be called progress in a democracy. It is not a reason to prohibit change that accommodates the reality of modern life. Politicians should adjust to

new realities like everyone else, rather than trying to stop progress and keep processes and process in place from a bygone era.

6. Electronic Voting – in line with bringing Federal election processes into the 21st century, electronic voting should be introduced. It works very well in NSW and democracy has not been compromised. It is an irony that (on the one hand) an advocate of curtailing pre-polling (on the other hand) seems to endorse, or at least accept the principle of, electronic voting. It carries with it many of the same issues as pre-polling but as already noted, NSW seems to manage just fine.