
The Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia

Report on the 2007 federal election electronic voting trials

**Interim report of the inquiry into the conduct of the 2007 election
and matters related thereto**

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

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Chair's Foreword

One feature of the 2007 election was the conduct of two electronic voting trials; the first a trial of electronically assisted voting for blind and vision impaired electors; and the other, a trial of remote electronic voting for selected Australian Defence Force (ADF) personnel serving overseas.

The trials had their origins in recommendations that the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters of the 41st parliament made in its review of the 2004 election.

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and its partners, including the Department of Defence and non-government organisations representing or providing services to people who are blind or have low vision, should be recognised for their work in delivering the trials. The committee acknowledges that there was a sustained effort over a relatively short period to develop solutions to a number of technical, logistical, administrative and legislative issues.

The combined costs of the trials was over \$4 million, with an average cost per vote cast of \$2,597 for the trial of electronically assisted voting for blind and low vision electors and \$1,159 for the remote electronic voting trial for selected defence force personnel serving overseas. This compares to an average cost per elector at the 2007 election of \$8.36.

The committee has recommended that electronically assisted voting for blind and vision impaired electors and remote electronic voting for Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas be discontinued due to a combination of the unsustainable costs involved in the delivery of these solutions along with more general concerns about the low level of participation experienced during the trials and the ready availability of suitable alternate solutions.

It is clear to the committee that there is a strong value placed by some electors who are blind or have low vision on the ability to cast an independent and secret vote.

The committee recognises that those who support the continuation of electronically assisted voting will be disappointed in these recommendations. In this respect the committee expresses a degree of regret that it is unable to support

continuation, however, the committee encourages the AEC and relevant advocacy organisations to explore other avenues for providing sustainable solutions to these problems into the future. In the interim, the committee has recommended that electronic magnifiers be deployed at sites where there is likely to be a demand for them.

In respect of remote electronic voting for ADF personnel serving overseas, the committee accepts that electronic voting systems require substantial paper-based backup and that the use of two full systems, one electronic and one paper-based, places an unrealistic burden on the ADF. However, the committee remains concerned to ensure that all ADF personnel are provided with the opportunity to cast votes in federal elections where operational circumstances permit.

The Assistant Returning Officer model under which pre-poll and postal voting arrangements will be facilitated appears to provide a realistic alternative to electronic voting and builds on processes already used effectively in the past. The committee recommends therefore that the ARO model proposed jointly by the AEC and Defence be utilised for future elections and that the legislative changes required to enable its use be made.

The committee notes also that there have been suggestions that remote electronic voting may be used to allay difficulties faced by electors in remote areas of Australia who have been disenfranchised because of delays experienced in the return of postal votes to the AEC. The committee has taken much evidence on this particular aspect of postal voting at the 2007 federal election and possible solutions will be canvassed in the committee's final report into the conduct of the 2007 federal election and related matters.

Daryl Melham MP
Chair

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Membership of the Committee

Chair Mr Daryl Melham MP

Deputy Chair Mr Scott Morrison MP

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	Hon Bruce Scott MP	Senator Bob Brown
	Mr Jon Sullivan MP	Senator Carol Brown
		Senator Steve Hutchins
		Senator the Hon Michael Ronaldson

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Terms of reference

On 27 February 2008, the Special Minister of State requested the Committee to conduct an inquiry with the following terms of reference:

That the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters inquire into and report on the conduct of the 2007 election and matters related thereto.



List of abbreviations

ADF	Australian Defence Force
AEC	Australian Electoral Commission
AFP	Australian Federal Police
ARO	Assistant Returning Officer
DRE	Direct recording electronic [voting machine]
DRN	Defence Restricted Network
EVM	Electronic voting machine
GPV	General Postal Voter



Summary and recommendations

3 Trial of remote electronic voting for Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas

The committee appreciates the work of the Department of Defence and the Australian Electoral Commission on conducting the remote electronic voting trial.

Remote electronic voting may increase the likelihood that a vote cast by personnel serving overseas will be included in the count by avoiding some of the logistical delays that can be associated with the movement of paper-based postal voting systems in areas of operation.

That said, the cost of the trial for the 2,500 Australian Defence Force personnel who were eligible to participate in the trial, at \$1,159 per vote, is relatively high compared to an average cost per elector of \$8.36 at the 2007 federal election. The additional cost associated with electronic voting is not warranted, particularly if overseas deployments do not rise significantly from the current level of around 3,000 personnel across 12 areas of operation.

Further, remote electronic voting imposes a significant additional burden on ADF personnel in operational areas. Under a purely paper-based system, the impact of operations on the likelihood of personnel being able to complete their vote is lower, as personnel have more opportunity to complete their vote without relying on the availability of terminals and a connection to the Defence Restricted Network. However, paper-based postal voting systems will continue to be subject to the potential risks associated with delays in the delivery and return of mail from operational areas.

On balance, a solely paper-based system is more reliable, and imposes fewer burdens on Australian Defence Force personnel in operational areas, than a system based on remote electronic voting which inevitably requires a paper-based backup.

Remote electronic voting for Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas should be discontinued and there should be a renewed focus on making paper-based systems more efficient than they currently are.

Recommendation 1 (paragraph 3.72)

Given the additional burden imposed by remote electronic voting with its paper-based backup systems on defence force personnel in operational areas and the relatively high average cost of voting at \$1,159 per vote compared to an average cost per elector of \$8.36 at the 2007 federal election, the committee recommends that remote electronic voting for defence force personnel should not be continued at future federal elections.

In addition to minimising impacts on operational areas, it is important that voting systems for defence force personnel deployed overseas provide flexibility both within and across areas of operation so that voting opportunities are maximised.

The Assistant Returning Officer model proposed and supported by the Department of Defence and the Australian Electoral Commission appears to provide for maximising voting opportunities at the same time as increasing the likelihood that votes are returned in time to be included in the count.

Such a model also gets the necessary 'buy in' by the Defence into the voting process. While voting will always be subject to operational requirements, it is important that voting receives sufficient attention and priority from the Department of Defence to ensure that systems are in place to facilitate voting wherever possible.

Recommendation 2 (paragraph 3.97)

Given the support of the Department of Defence and the Australian Electoral Commission for the 'Assistant Returning Officer' (ARO) model that is likely to increase the probability that defence force personnel serving overseas can cast a vote and have it included in the count, the committee recommends that the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* be amended to facilitate the implementation of the ARO model for voting by selected Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas. The model should have the following features:

- AROs may be appointed to issue pre-poll votes from static locations and provide mobile pre-poll facilities to smaller out posted camps in areas of operations;
- AROs may be appointed to issue pre-poll or postal votes to electors who are serving on naval ships on overseas deployment where this service is suitable and appropriate;
- AROs may be appointed to receive postal vote applications and issue postal votes to electors within operational areas and may receive completed postal votes from electors in order to facilitate their prompt return to the relevant DRO;
- Registration as General Postal Voter to remain available to all Australian Defence Force personnel serving overseas, in case they are not in the service area of an ARO; and
- Streamlined postal voting procedures should be implemented for those areas of operation where the ARO model will not be utilised.

Recommendation 3 (paragraph 3.98)

Given the importance of gaining full commitment by the Department of Defence to the implementation of the 'Assistant Returning Officer model, the committee recommends that the Department of Defence ensure that an officer at a suitable level of rank be appointed to oversee electoral operations and to ensure those operations are conducted and resourced effectively.

4 Trial of electronically assisted voting for electors who are blind or have low vision

The strong value placed by some electors who are blind or have low vision on their ability to cast a secret and independent vote is recognised by the committee. The ability to cast secret and independent votes in this way should be facilitated where practicable.

That said, electors who are blind or have low vision are still able to cast a vote at an election with the assistance of a person of their choosing. An assisted vote, whilst not a secret and independent vote, still allows electors who are blind or have low vision to participate in the electoral process.

The current cost of delivering electronically assisted voting for electors who are blind or have low vision, at \$2.2 million or \$2,597 per vote, compared to an average cost per elector of \$8.36 at the 2007 federal election, appears to be unsustainable especially given the low participation in the trial.

Extending eligibility to electors with a print disability appears to provide some opportunity to increase participation in electronically assisted voting. However, it does not appear that this can be done in a way that will drive average costs down to sustainable levels.

Recommendation 4 (paragraph 4.80)

Given the high average cost per vote of \$2,597 for electronically assisted voting compared to an average cost per elector of \$8.36 at the 2007 federal election and a concern that participation will not increase to sustainable levels, the committee recommends that electronically assisted voting for electors who are blind or have low vision should not be continued at future federal elections.

For some electors who have low vision, casting a secret and independent vote could be achieved using aids such as electronic magnifiers. The committee considers that electors who have low vision may benefit from the provision of such alternate facilities in accessible locations and should be able to do so where practicable.

Recommendation 5 (paragraph 4.83)

Assisted voting provisions in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* give people who are blind or have low vision the opportunity to seek assistance from a person appointed by them in casting a vote at federal elections and referenda. Electors who have low vision may benefit from the provision of electronic magnifiers. The committee recommends that the government provide sufficient resources to the Australian Electoral Commission for the deployment of electronic magnifiers at sites where there is likely to be demand from electors who have low vision.