

Blind Citizens Australia

Inquiry into the Conduct of
the 2013 Federal Election
March 2014 Submission



The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600
Submitted via email to:
em@aph.gov.au

This submission is available in large print, audio, Braille and in electronic formats upon request.

About Blind Citizens Australia

Blind Citizens Australia is the peak national representative organisation of people who are blind or vision impaired. Our mission is to achieve equity and equality by our empowerment, by promoting positive community attitudes, and by striving for high quality and accessible services which meet our needs.

Blind Citizens Australia is funded by the Department of Social Services (DSS) to provide policy advice to the Australian Government and relevant agencies relating to people who are blind or vision impaired. As a national peak body, we have over 3,000 members and 16 branches nationwide in metropolitan, regional and rural locations. Blind Citizens Australia is also affiliated with 12 other organisations which represent the interests of Australians who are blind or vision impaired.

Background

Securing a method of casting a secret, independent and verifiable vote for people who are blind or vision impaired has remained at the top of Blind Citizens Australia's policy agenda for several years. The 2013 Federal Election brought us one step closer to this goal, with the introduction of the Blind and Low Vision Telephone-Assisted Voting Service. Our submission will focus on this component of the 2013 election proceedings, as it is of most relevance to the experience of people who are blind or vision impaired.

We greatly value the opportunity to provide input to this inquiry and communicate the very important experiences and future needs of electors who are blind or vision impaired.

The User Experience of the Blind and Low Vision Telephone-Assisted Voting Service

For some people who are blind or vision impaired, the concept of having to physically cast a vote from a polling centre can be extremely daunting. Having to navigate a largely unfamiliar environment and then negotiate crowds of people presents a significant access barrier for people with mobility difficulties; a process which is greatly simplified through the availability of remote voting.

The Blind and Low Vision Telephone-Assisted Voting Service that was made available for the 2013 Election allowed electors to be able to cast their vote over the telephone from any location. This service was far more inclusive of the needs of people who are blind or vision impaired than previous systems, which resulted in greater uptake of accessible voting amongst the blind and vision impaired

community. Two thousand eight hundred and thirty two people cast their vote using the Blind and Low Vision Telephone-Assisted Voting Service at last year's federal election. During the previous federal election, however, telephone-assisted voting was only made available in 126 locations around Australia, resulting in just 410 individuals casting their vote using this service.

The user response to telephone-assisted voting was positive overall, with individuals recognising that although this system did not reflect a vote that was 100 per cent secret, independent and verifiable (as it involved them having to communicate their vote to a third party), it was a step in the right direction which would pave the way for the introduction of a platform that would allow for greater independence in the future.

Blind Citizens Australia President, Mr Greg Madson, also a user of the Blind and Low Vision Telephone-Assisted Voting Service said:

“As someone who is blind, I really did appreciate the opportunity to cast my vote, in person, along with other Australians. For me this is a great step forward in civil liberty; recognising that just because I am blind doesn't mean I can't take my place in the democratic process.

The process leading up to my assisted voting gave me confidence that a PIN number would mask my identity. Obtaining that PIN number was easy and straight forward for me; a great solution to protect my privacy.

On the day I cast my vote I found the people on the other end of the phone professional and unobtrusive.

For the future, the ultimate step would be for me to be able to cast my vote over the phone using some sort of automated computerised system to give me a truly independent vote.”

In particular, Blind Citizens Australia commends the Australian Electoral Commission for the way in which call centre staff were instructed to record votes. Leading up to the Federal Election, Blind Citizens Australia asserted that it was important for electors who are blind or vision impaired to have access to the full range of options that were available to any sighted elector that was completing a ballot paper; including the ability to cast an invalid or informal vote. We have since been contacted by several of our members who have informed us of how empowering it was to be able to cast their vote in this way.

Blind Citizens Australia would also like to commend the Australian Electoral Commission on its efforts in ensuring that Candidates Lists and the Official Guide to the Election were made available to electors in audio CD, braille, large print, e-text and MP3 upon request. We have been contacted by many of our members who informed us of how grateful they were to have been provided with this

information in advance, as it enabled them to make more informed decisions about the candidates they were voting for and allowed those voting below the line to be more prepared.

The Shortfalls of the Blind and Low Vision Telephone-Assisted Voting Service

Although the Telephone-Assisted Voting Service opened up the electoral process to a greater number of people who are blind or vision impaired than ever before, many felt that this was not a true representation of a secret, independent and verifiable vote — as it required them to communicate their vote to a third party. As expressed by one of our New South Wales members:

“The best is what every other Australian who is eligible to vote gets — a vote that is secret, verifiable, and independent. What we get this election is none of these. Yes, we don't have to tell a family member or friend, but our vote is known by two AEC staff so it is not secret.

My definition of secret is that my vote is not known by anyone else, regardless of whether my name can be connected to it or not. But if you feel its secret since they don't know your name, its worth remembering that they do know your electorate. And there are 150 electorates and only a few thousand blind people. So no secrecy. We cannot verify our vote ourselves, so no verifiability.

And we are not independently voting, so no independence. What we have this year is just a more convenient version of what we've almost always had.”

In 2002, the Australian Electoral Commission published a report entitled *Evolution not Revolution*; which described various overseas trials of electronic voting in various guises and reported on public reaction to them. One of the recommendations that came out of this report was that:

“The Federal, State and Territory Parliaments should amend their Electoral Acts to enable a trial of e-voting to be implemented at Federal, State and Territory elections for:

- *Antarctic electors;*
- *Electors in other remote locations;*
- *Electors with a disability;*
- *Overseas electors and*
- *As an option for the return of postal votes.”*

In response to this recommendation, in 2011, The NSW Electoral Commission introduced an electronic voting system called ‘iVote’ for the NSW State Election.

This system provided the elector with the option to cast their vote either online or over the telephone and did not involve a third party physically recording the vote. Instead, the process for telephone voting was similar to that used for phone banking, using prompts that had been pre-recorded in human speech. The internet system also boasted a high level of accessibility and complied with government standards. At the time of registering for iVote, individuals were asked to supply a six digit PIN. Once the electoral roll had closed, the voter was supplied with an additional eight digit iVote number, which could be obtained via email, SMS or telephone. Voters were given 12 hours to complete their vote once commencing the process, with the system automatically remembering where they were up to during this time. The voter had the opportunity to review their completed ballot paper prior to submitting it and, once the vote had been submitted, the voter was issued with a receipt number which they could use at a later date to confirm that their vote had been counted.

The iVote service was very well received by the blind and vision impaired community. Below are just a few comments that our members have made about the service:

“iVote is the best thing that was ever thought of. For a very long time I have not seen any reason why internet and/or phone voting could not have been done, given that the last census was able to be done through the internet, and with the technology available today for security purposes, I could not see why this shouldn't have been done several elections ago. Hopefully, this will be a permanent arrangement, as it makes things even easier than the voting system implemented at the last federal election, with the computer type voting system at different polling booths, as this way it can be done from home, with total independence, and was totally screen reader friendly. I would call it a roaring success.”

“I used iVote and overall had a very positive experience. The system was clear and easy to use, very convenient and my vote went through without any glitches.”

We also recorded the following feedback from members who had utilised the iVote system as well as telephone-assisted voting and were able to compare the two options:

“I much preferred the iVote system, as it was fully automated and had several features which were very useful; including allowing you to leave your vote and come back to it at any time within a 12-hour period, as well as do a trial run before casting your actual vote.”

“I prefer to vote below the line, so the iVote system allowed me to be more in control of this process as it was fully automated. I didn't really like the idea of having to relay my vote to another person, even though my identity was not

divulged. For me, although I was able to cast my vote from home, I could not really see the difference between this and a postal vote as I was still required to rely on a third party in order to complete my ballot paper. “

The iVote system that was used during the 2011 NSW State Election is currently the only system in Australia which is considered by our members to be 100 per cent secret, independent and verifiable. It is this platform that we would like to see the Australian Electoral Commission work towards for the 2016, and subsequent federal elections.

The Future Pathway for Accessible Voting and the Election Process in Australia

While in principle, Blind Citizens Australia supports the future implementation of the iVote system that was used at the NSW State Election back in 2011; we feel that it is important for there to be a range of options available to electors to create a system that is more inclusive. The NSW Electoral Commission has advised that, for the 2015 State Election, it will be offering the two modes of voting that were available in 2011, as well as a third option which will replicate the telephone-assisted voting service that was adopted for the 2013 Federal Election. Blind Citizens Australia endorses this approach, as it allows for a vote that is 100 per cent secret, independent and verifiable while still recognising that there may be older Australians or individuals with learning or cognitive difficulties that may find it more useful to speak to someone in real time.

Recommendation:

Blind Citizens Australia recommends that the following three options be made available for use by people who are blind or vision impaired for the 2016 Federal Election:

1. The option of casting a vote over the telephone using automated key prompts;
2. The option of casting a vote over the telephone by speaking to an AEC staff member;
3. The option of casting a vote securely over the internet, using an interface that is fully screen reader accessible.

Additionally, it is important that these options be extended to all people with disabilities and not be isolated to people who are blind or vision impaired. Especially for people who are confined to a wheelchair, it can be a difficult task to find a wheelchair accessible polling centre within close proximity. It has also been shown that, on some occasions, locations that are cited as being wheelchair accessible on the AEC's website have, in fact presented some difficulties for electors with disabilities. The availability of remote voting would

eliminate many of these barriers and make the Australian electoral process more inclusive overall.

Recommendation:

Blind Citizens Australia recommends that any options that are explored to allow people who are blind or vision impaired to cast their vote remotely in the future also be extended to people with other disabilities.

History tells us that often, making systems accessible for people with disabilities will also have a number of flow-on benefits for the wider community. Blind Citizens Australia feels that the introduction of a new remote voting platform for people with disabilities may pave the way towards a full reform of the electoral system in Australia. At the time of preparing this submission, the cost expenditure for the 2013 Federal Election had not been released. As referenced on the Australian Electoral Commission's website, however, expenditure for the 2010 Federal Election totalled \$161 342 861. In light of this fact, Blind Citizens Australia urges the Australian Electoral Commission and, the Federal Government to give full consideration to the range of benefits that remote voting could offer, including:

- A system that is more convenient for electors, both with and without a disability;
- A system that would reduce the overall expenditure for the federal government;
- A system that encompasses principles of sustainability and is more friendly for the environment.

Recommendation:

Blind Citizens Australia recommends that the Australian Electoral Commission consider using a remote voting platform (extended to all persons with disabilities for the 2016 Election) as a trial of a system to be offered to the broader community in future federal elections.

Conclusion:

Blind Citizens Australia commends the Australian Electoral Commission for the steps that it has taken to make the electoral process more inclusive for people who are blind or vision impaired, while at the same time recognising that there is further work to be done to secure a system for voting that is 100 per cent secret, independent and verifiable. We would greatly value the opportunity to work more closely with the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in the future to make full and independent participation in the electoral process a reality for Australians who are blind or vision impaired.