ECCV Submission
on
the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Electronic Voting
July 2016

About ECCV

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria Inc. (ECCV) is the voice of multicultural Victoria and the peak policy advocacy body for eight regional ethnic community councils and up to 220 members including ethnic and multicultural organisations across Victoria since 1974. For over 40 years, we have been the link between multicultural communities, government and the wider community.

Introduction

ECCV is pleased to be invited to contribute to the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Electronic Voting and applauds the Victorian Electoral Commission's (VEC) commitment to expand access to electronic voting for Victorians. ECCV has a strong history in advocating for the rights of multicultural communities, including on issues regarding democratic participation. For example, we contributed to the inquiry on the conduct of the 2014 Victorian State Election and on the review of local government elections by the Local Government Electoral Review Panel.[1]

Building on our previous activities, ECCV would like to reiterate some points about improving access to elections in Australia and provide a number of specific comments on electronic voting in Victoria. This submission will also refer to the Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils of Australia's (FECCA) recent report on digital government service delivery and access and equity for multicultural communities. Based on consultations with culturally diverse communities, the report explores how to bridge the digital access and equity gap for culturally diverse service users and improve access to government services.

Barriers to improving access to electronic voting

ECCV acknowledges the VEC's efforts to engage with culturally diverse communities on exercising their participation rights in election processes. This includes specific initiatives to provide electronic voting options to improve access for Victorians with limited English language literacy. However, any efforts to expand electronic voting options for culturally diverse communities need to address the following challenges:

- ***Lack of knowledge about electronic voting in Victoria***

There is a continuing broad lack of knowledge and awareness about enrolment, voting and the Australian electoral system among many culturally diverse communities in Victoria. In 2012, the VEC's research found that the vast majority of research participants from multicultural communities

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[1] ECCV, *Submission to the Conduct of the 2014 Victorian State Election Inquiry* July 2015; and ECCV, *Submission on the Local Government Electoral Review the Local Government Electoral Review Panel* Oct 2013.

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had never heard of electronically assisted voting. [2] A number of them also mistakenly assumed that electronic voting meant voting online at home, which is yet to be trialled in Victoria and will be considered for the 2018 election.

- *English language literacy and digital literacy*

A significant number of migrants and refugees are still disadvantaged when it comes to accessing government services digitally. While ECCV has not yet conducted specific consultations on digital voting in Victoria, we have consulted with culturally diverse communities on digital access to government services, for example, on the Consumer Affairs Victoria's (CAV) online portal *MyCAV* to register new incorporated associations. [3] The feedback from this showed that many ethnic community members are challenged by moves to digitise government services, particularly culturally diverse seniors who do not own computers or have email addresses. Importantly, this group emphasised their wish to remain independent and not rely on others to help them. These findings are consistent with a recent FECCCA study[4] which confirmed that older migrants and refugees have difficulty 'due to limited digital literacy and English language proficiency'. The VEC's study mentioned above also found that those from culturally diverse communities found certain technology, like iPads, difficult to navigate[5]

Limited electronic voting options in Victoria

There are currently very limited electronic voting options in Victoria. To date, the VEC has provided only non-remote electronic voting at selected kiosks in some early voting centres.[6] This option was aimed at encouraging participation for population groups, such as people with insufficient literacy or language skills (which includes culturally diverse communities). However, non-remote electronic voting has had a low uptake (only 1121 votes in 2014 and 961 votes in 2010) and a recent Attorney-General review[7] noted the difficulties of expanding *vVote* and super centres (due to distance to centres and lack of staff training). This is in stark contrast to NSW where remote voting (available via the internet at home) has seen a large scale implementation with a high uptake (47,000 in 2011 and 280,000 in the 2015 NSW state election).[8]

Opportunities to expand electronic voting to improve access

Encouragingly, there is evidence that multicultural communities are interested in receiving training and support to access government services digitally, particularly if the training is provided at preferred locations such as community centres or through 'train the trainer' models.[9] Initiatives such as providing detailed training materials, like how to vote cards and candidate information in community languages or allowing corrections and verbal instructions in community languages, also appear to have a positive impact.[10]

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[2] VEC, *Barriers to enrolment and voting and electronic voting, among Arabic-speaking and Turkish communities.* Full Report, 2012.

[3] ECCV, *Feedback received at initial CAV community consultation in September 2014*, [Internal Policy Brief].

[4] FECCA, *Digital Access and Equity for Multicultural Communities*, 2016.

[5] VEC, *Barriers to enrolment and voting and electronic voting, among Arabic-speaking and Turkish communities.* Full Report. 2012.

[6] Electoral Matters Committee, *Inquiry into the conduct of the 2014 Victorian state election*, 2016.

[7] Victorian Auditor General, *Performance Audit: Victorian Electoral Commission 2015/16*, Victorian Auditor General, Melbourne, February 2016, p. xxii.

[8] Electoral Matters Committee, *Inquiry into the conduct of the 2014 Victorian state election,* 2016.

[9] FECCA, *Digital Access and Equity for Multicultural Communities*, 2016, p. 12.

[10] VEC, *Barriers to enrolment and voting and electronic voting, among Arabic-speaking and Turkish communities*. Full Report, 2012, p. 4.

There is therefore significant scope for the Victorian government to improve and expand its electronic voting system to increase its accessibility to vulnerable Victorians (including those with English as their second language who are more likely to vote incorrectly). Given the limited options and low uptake in Victoria, ECCV believes that multicultural communities will benefit from both the expansion of non-remote voting options while addressing barriers like distance, support and training, and the introduction of remote voting to allow faster and more convenient access, particularly for young people from culturally diverse groups.

Specific opportunities to enhance access and usability of electronic voting

In addition, ECCV believes there are a number of specific opportunities for VEC to help transition culturally diverse communities successfully to electronic voting:

Additional funding to include culturally diverse perspectives

The mandate of the new government agency, Service Victoria, is to 'create a new whole of government service capability to enhance the delivery of government services and to support Victorians to effectively interact with government'. The 2016-17 State Budget provides an additional $81 million[11] to the agency to 'improve access to government services, including new technological systems and digital platforms'.

ECCV welcomes this initiative and the allocated investment. We propose that a proportion of this significant new investment be used to fund initiatives that improve digital access for culturally diverse communities, including exercising their voting rights through technology. For example, further consultations are required to hear directly from communities what they need to fully exercise electronic voting rights. These consultations need to occur before, during and after the expansion or development of any new electronic voting systems and technologies to ensure they are accessible and user-friendly.

Options include funding a position within Services Victoria to focus on ensuring the whole of government service platform delivers for culturally diverse consumers, including their access to voting. The VEC could also provide funding for one or several positions within a multicultural community organisation to work in partnership with Services Victoria to conduct the necessary consultations and feed this back to government.

Recommendation 1

That any electronic voting options are designed with the active involvement of culturally diverse communities through two newly funded positions in Service Victoria and a multicultural Victorian community organisation respectively. These positions could work together to ensure culturally diverse community perspectives are an integral part of any new electronic voting system.

Improve digital literacy, access to technology and understanding of voting rights

To address current lack of knowledge, existing resources about electronic voting (for example on VEC's website) should be actively promoted and made available in community languages, particularly through working with ethno specific organisations and their members. For example, if

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[11] Department of Treasury and Finance, *Victorian Budget 16/17, Service Delivery*, Budget Paper No. 3, p. 103.

the VEC's "All About Voting" kit, which targets newly arrived communities, would include information on any electronic voting then this will help ensure those from culturally diverse communities already have some awareness of the option to vote electronically in Victorian elections. Further, VEC's 'A Virtual Voting Experience' video could be supplemented by brief information videos in community languages that explain electronic voting options, particularly for people from ethnic backgrounds with oral traditions or limited literacy in their own language. There is precedent for many such culturally appropriate resources being developed across government on other issues, such as CAV's recent resources on renting in Dari.

To increase expertise and maximise investment, the VEC could also partner with the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship (OMAC) to pool knowledge and resources to co-create resources. These resources could then be used online or delivered through ethno specific organisations providing targeted information and education at community forums. Providing face to face training will particularly benefit communities with limited digital literacy or access to technology.

Recommendation 2

That culturally appropriate educational resources in community languages, either in print, online or audio-visual are developed by government to increase knowledge and awareness of electronic voting options, among culturally diverse communities.

Partner with multicultural organisations to raise awareness and train VEC staff

The VEC's CALD Education and Engagement Program aims to ensure that all culturally diverse communities understand their rights and responsibilities in Victoria's electoral process. Ethno specific organisations are well placed to train and help raise awareness by VEC staff about specific issues facing their communities, particularly given their connections to 'hard to reach' communities. Multicultural advocacy bodies like ECCV can help provide high-level policy or advocacy, such as through the VEC's CALD Advisory Group, or help broker partnerships between the VEC and specific multicultural groups. This would address the training gaps identified in the Attorney-General's February 2016 review.

Culturally diverse Victorian community organisations could also be funded by the VEC to conduct direct targeted outreach to 'hard to reach' community groups, such as first generation migrants and new and emerging communities.

Recommendation 3

That VEC engages with ethno-specific and multicultural organisations to train VEC staff and funds these community organisations to conduct direct outreach to 'hard to reach' communities. Multicultural advocacy bodies like ECCV could support this through policy and advocacy e.g. on the CALD Advisory Group or playing a liaison role between VEC and ethno specific organisations.

ECCV Community Consultation Strategies

As there is still limited knowledge about what culturally diverse communities think about electronic voting, ECCV is planning to conduct consultations to better understand this issue, in order to support greater participation in the democratic process. Based on the findings from these consultations, ECCV will develop a position paper to inform VEC and the wider community on the barriers and opportunities to expanding electronic voting for culturally diverse communities in Victoria.

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