

ECCV Submission to the Victorian Electoral Matters Committee on the Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Participation

July 2017

A. 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 over 200 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.

B. Introduction

ECCV is pleased to contribute to the Electoral Matters Committee's (EMC) Inquiry into Civics and Electoral Participation. We applaud the Victorian Electoral Commission's (VEC's) commitment to enhance electoral and civics education and increase electoral participation amongst community groups that traditionally experience barriers, including multicultural Victorians.

ECCV has a strong history in advocating for the rights of culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including on issues such as democratic participation. For example, we contributed to the inquiry on the conduct of the 2014 Victorian State Election, to reviews of local government elections and more recently on VEC's inquiry into electronic voting.¹

Building on this previous work and recent consultations, ECCV would like to reiterate previous comments and make additional points in response to the Inquiry's Terms of Reference as follows:

C. Response to the EMC Inquiry's Terms of Reference 1 – 4

1. Electoral and civics education

a. Barriers to participation in state elections and the voting process

For those who are not familiar with voting procedures in Australia, voting can be a complex process. ECCV believes that VEC should consider how ethnic communities, particularly voters who are voting for the first time, can be adequately informed on how to participate effectively in Victorian elections. This includes an awareness that many culturally diverse voters are not familiar with the Westminster model of government and electoral systems like Australia's.

Recent community feedback indicated that new and emerging communities in particular are still not adequately informed about participating in elections and on how to vote. For example, many culturally diverse community members who became Australian citizens more recently don't know how to enrol for the first time or get back onto the roll. This includes those who came to Australia through humanitarian settlement programs. These people have often only been exposed to the voting systems in their countries of origin which can be very different. Many are, however, interested to vote, particularly if they have been in refugee camps or displaced for longer periods and couldn't participate in elections caused by their circumstances.

¹ ECCV, [Submission to the Conduct of the 2014 Victorian State Election Inquiry](#) July 2015; ECCV, [Submission on the Local Government Electoral Review the Local Government Electoral Review Panel](#) October 2013; and ECCV, [Submission on the Electoral Matters Committee's Inquiry into Electronic Voting](#), July 2016.

b. Engage with ethno-specific and multicultural organisations and train community leaders/members

The VEC's culturally and linguistically diverse education and engagement programs aim to ensure that all ethnic voters understand their rights and responsibilities in Victoria's electoral process.

To this end, ethno-specific and multicultural organisations could be engaged and funded by the VEC to conduct targeted outreach to 'hard to reach' community groups, such as first generation migrants and new and emerging communities. Also, ECCV consultations confirm that not all people who are active in their local multicultural communities are likely to have heard about VEC's active citizenship workshops for community leaders² and other engagement programs. Feedback by community leaders suggests that, in the past, they haven't necessarily been approached by the VEC nor participated in VEC's community education. Community leaders consider these workshops as very useful as they enable the dissemination of any received information to other local organisations and their communities.

Through direct outreach, VEC needs to continue to target community members from 'hard to reach' communities to participate in future education programs, which they can then promote further to their communities. This method is likely particularly successful given many community leaders consider it as their civic duty to assist fellow community members to participate in public life.

Recommendation 1

That VEC engages with ethno-specific and multicultural community organisations and funds these organisations to conduct direct outreach to ethnic communities that have not yet been engaged.

Recommendation 2

That VEC continues to target community leaders and other active community members to attend and participate in VEC's community engagement programs, to undertake work in collaboration with VEC's outreach team and to promote accessible election and voting resources in their communities.

c. Access to culturally appropriate information and community education

To address the discussed persisting knowledge gap within ethnic communities, existing resources (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.³ For example, VEC's '*A Virtual Voting Experience*' video could be supplemented by brief information videos in community languages that explain available 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 responsive resources being developed across government on other issues, such as some of Consumer Affairs Victoria's resources.

² Victorian Electoral Commission website, [Active citizenship workshop for community leaders](#), [accessed 30.07.2017].

³ Positive examples are VEC's awareness raising posters distributed at the 2016 local government elections which were available in 10 different community languages.

As previously recommend by ECCV, the VEC could also partner with the Office of Multicultural Affairs and Citizenship (OMAC) to maximise investment through pooling knowledge, expertise and resources to co-create resources. These resources could be used and promoted online or delivered through ethno specific organisations providing targeted information and face to face education at community forums.

Importantly, any new technologies and tools that are used by the VEC, particularly newly introduced tools, need to be explained to culturally diverse community trainers, for example through ‘train the trainer’ programs. In addition, ECCV and the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) could assist in identifying appropriate target groups in the community and assist in informing them on an ongoing basis through their communication channels.

Recommendation 3

That VEC works in conjunction with relevant agencies and the community to develop culturally appropriate educational resources in all relevant community languages to increase knowledge and awareness of electoral information.

2. Informal voting at Victorian state elections

a. Informal voting in culturally diverse communities

This Inquiry’s Terms of Reference states that it will only consider informal voting reduction strategies that are not related to the voting *system*.

However, election research confirms correlations between large numbers of candidates on ballot papers and the rate of informal voting as well as a strong correlation between informal voting rates and the proportion of culturally and linguistically diverse voters.⁴ ECCV therefore believes that any discussion about reducing informal voting within multicultural communities should include addressing the existing barriers to cast a valid vote within the current voting *system*, including preferential voting rules and resulting informal voting rates.

In 2015, ECCV gave evidence at a public hearing which highlighted the relationship between districts with high numbers of candidates and the potential confusion caused to culturally diverse voters.⁵ Recent consultations confirmed that the issue of how to avoid informal voting is still considered a complex and critical issue. Many community members don’t know what informal voting means and how they can avoid having their vote being considered “invalid”. There are perceptions that the current *preferential* voting system is too complicated and that culturally diverse communities are prevented from participating equitably in Australian elections. As mentioned, there is a lack of understanding why voters can’t just cast a vote for the most preferred candidate on the ballot paper. A considerable number of culturally diverse voters are hesitant to mark candidates other than their preferred candidate – and they will therefore to have their vote considered invalid.

⁴ ABC website, Antony Green’s Election Blog, 4. September 2015, [Vote Type and Informal Vote Trends at the 2014 Victorian Election](#) [accessed 30.07.2017].

⁵ At the Electoral Matters Committee’s public hearings in August 2015, ECCV spoke in support of *optional* preferential voting for the Victorian Legislative Assembly.

b. Resources and strategies to reduce informal voting

As discussed above, the issue of informal voting among culturally diverse communities continues to be a critical and persistent issue. This is the case despite the fact that election research identified that ‘many of the apparently culturally-related factors associated with higher levels of informal voting appear to be associated with assumed unintentional informal voting’.⁶

Recent ECCV consultations confirmed that one appropriate response is the need for more training on how to reduce informal voting in elections. Better awareness could be achieved through targeted education campaigns which include detailed information on informal voting, which could be integrated into general state election training.⁷ Information should also be made available in community languages (see Recommendation 3), including printed handouts that can be revisited later when convenient.

In addition, culturally diverse community members could be trained up specifically on informal voting and then employed by VEC to work as casual employees. For example, ‘community ambassadors’ from each identified target group could participate in training sessions. These participants can then be prepared to run community forums in their local communities, for example, mock voting sessions with a focus on how to avoid informal voting. Given appropriate resources, these sessions could be replicated by other community organisations and delivered at multiple community events.

Importantly, community ambassadors who deliver these sessions need to be remunerated for their participation and training before and during election time. In addition, training participants should be provided with incentives for committing their time to learn about the state election process.

TV programs during election time would also help with short messages that focus on how to avoid casting invalid votes. For example, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) could deliver programs in community languages as part of ethno-specific TV programs. Similarly, local community newspapers, like ‘Leader’ which cover all of Victoria, should be used in the lead up to elections to display easily accessible information on informal voting. This is particularly important in regions where only limited assistance is available at polling centres.

Recommendation 4

That VEC implements specific education and information strategies for the 2018 Victorian State election to reduce informal voting rates within vulnerable ethnic community populations, including through the provision of culturally responsive information through a range of culturally appropriate communication mediums.

⁶ Australian Electoral Commission, March 2016, *Analysis of informal voting 2013 House of Representatives elections*, Research Report Number 13, p. 11.

⁷ ECCV is pleased that recent VEC education workshops focussed on preferential voting and how to avoid informal voting.

3. Employment of casual electoral staff and recruitment

a. Employment of casual election staff

On its website, the VEC states its commitment to ‘employ and develop people who represent the diversity of the Victorian community’⁸. The three most recent VEC Reports to Parliament on the 2006, 2010 and 2014 Victorian State elections all placed an emphasis on highlighting VEC’s efforts to attract and employ culturally and linguistically diverse staff with appropriate community languages for relevant areas.⁹

ECCV commends VEC on these engagement efforts. However, recent consultation feedback showed that Victoria’s multicultural communities are still largely unaware of these employment opportunities.

To attract a more culturally diverse workforce, the VEC needs to reach out into the communities most disadvantaged by language and digital literacy barriers, for example, recent citizens from new and emerging communities. Depending on further support and resources, VEC could also partner with ethno-specific organisations to raise awareness about upcoming casual electoral staff employment opportunities, particularly given their connections to ‘hard to reach’ communities. Multicultural peak organisations and migrant resource centres are also suitable recruitment partners with established connections to culturally diverse communities. For example, ECCV has well-established links with regional areas through eight regional Ethnic Communities Councils in Victoria.

Recommendation 5

That VEC provides opportunities to employ casual electoral staff from culturally diverse communities during Victorian state elections, including by partnering with and resourcing ethno-specific organisations.

b. Staff training

It is important that all culturally diverse staff employed by the VEC during state elections is adequately trained on how to best assist voters from non-English speaking backgrounds before and during election time. In addition, ECCV believes that the criteria for staff ‘to speak and read English well’ should not be defined too narrowly as this could prevent otherwise suitable candidates from applying.

Also, ECCV consultation has confirmed the need for staff from culturally diverse backgrounds to be assisted to work with potentially new technologies, such as electronic voting systems, with a view to ensuring such technologies are accessible and easy to use. Younger cohorts, for example international students, are well placed to assist as they are often familiar with digital services and can be up-skilled quickly. To this end, international student service providers could play a role to promote VEC’s employment opportunities.

⁸ Victorian Electoral Commission website, [Employment](#), [accessed 29.07.2017].

⁹ Victorian Electoral Commission website, [State Election Reports](#), [accessed 29.07.2017].

Recommendation 6

That VEC puts a specific focus on providing adequate training and support for culturally diverse staff from new and emerging communities that have not previously participated in elections or worked as casual electoral staff.

4. Strategies to increase electoral participation amongst multicultural Victorians

a. General comments on engagement and outreach strategies

Generally, support for democracy in Australia has been steadily declining and has dropped to record lows.¹⁰ To reverse this trend it will be important for government and its institutions to stronger engage with voters, including directly with communities from culturally diverse backgrounds.

ECCV's recent consultations confirmed that there is a perception that VEC should be more proactive in engaging with multicultural communities. Consultation participants, for example, stated that VEC's present work needs to be complemented by active community outreach and involvement. For example, VEC staff could hold promotional stalls at local festivals, events and other meetings to promote their educational resources and materials.

Also, community leaders mentioned that there needs to be more financial and material support for those multicultural events and programs that could host VEC's outreach activities. They stated that culturally diverse communities will be committed to support VEC's engagement if more efforts are made to engage with ethnic voters.

Recommendation 7

That VEC's 2018 State Election Outreach Plan includes providing adequate funding for community events which host VEC's outreach activities, including stands and other engagement activities at community festivals and meetings.

b. Specific comments on engagement and outreach strategies

ECCV's consultation also found that many multicultural voters are not aware about VEC's information on its website, including resources like the *All About Voting* resource that targets culturally diverse communities.

Consultation participants stated that VEC should promote culturally diverse information on their website more actively, for example by using interactive and engaging online training modules, to target communities with lower valid voting rates. This is in addition to a generally more proactive promotion of VEC's website to community organisations.

Further, while not all participants were aware of VEC's Democracy Ambassador program, they considered the up-skilling of community members to deliver electoral information to their local communities as a positive and promising initiative. They also emphasised that this initiative needs to continue to work closely with ethnic community organisations to identify suitable candidates.

¹⁰ ABC website, Henry Belot, updated 20 Dec 2016, [Confidence in democracy hits record low as Australians 'disaffected with political class'](#), [accessed 29 July 2017].

Finally, it is equally important to identify those communities who are most in need of these sessions and that are likely to be most receptive to such an approach to ensure high attendance.

Recommendation 8

That the VEC continues to deliver the Democracy Ambassador Program and identifies and implements additional strategies to increase enrolment among communities most at risk of lower election participation rates.

D. Conclusion

ECCV acknowledges and commends the VEC on its ongoing efforts to engage with culturally diverse communities to participate in electoral processes. While significant progress has been made, as acknowledged by a performance audit by the Victorian Auditor General¹¹, ECCV's recent consultations have identified ongoing issues and opportunities which form the basis of our recommendations. ECCV looks forward to continuing our work with VEC on these recommendations, in order to achieve better results for raising awareness and ultimately improving the effectiveness of electoral participation among culturally diverse communities.

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¹¹ Victorian Auditor-General, February 2016, *Victorian Electoral Commission, 2015/2016*, Melbourne, p. x.