

Democracy in Australia – Automatic enrolment at the age of 18 and automatic correction of voter addresses

According to research carried out by Brent and Jackman (2007), growth of the Australian Electoral Roll has slowed to well below the growth of eligible voters in Australia. This under-enrolment of Australian citizens is made up of under-enrolment of new voters (mostly Australian citizens who turn 18), and of voters who are removed from the roll by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) when they change address but fail to re-enrol.

A limited electoral roll that is not representative of the whole population is a significant deficit in democratic practice. Advanced democracies such as Canada practice automatic, or “direct”, enrolment both for new voters and for voters who have changed their address.

Flaws in current practice

Currently, the AEC relies on newly eligible voters initiating action to join the electoral roll. Peter Brent claims that many young Australians believe that, since voting is compulsory, they go on to the electoral roll automatically once they turn eighteen. In fact, they must fill out and return an enrolment form to the AEC with proof of identity, well before the announcement of any election.

The AEC partially automates maintenance of the Electoral Roll by practising a “Continuous Roll Update” (CRU) system. This integrates information from various Commonwealth, State and Territory databases. It then carries out “habituation checks” at addresses for which it believes it may have incorrect voter information. Brent and Jackman argue that this practice makes the AEC more efficient at removing voters from the roll than adding voters to it, since no action is necessary from voters before they are removed from the roll, but completion of a paper form is necessary to re-enrol at a new address.

Automatic or “direct” enrolment

In direct enrolment, electoral agencies access information from other trusted agencies to change their records without direct action from the voter.

The AEC made a submission to the 2007 Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, suggesting a change to direct enrolment. Commission noted that community expectations, especially of young people eligible to enrol for the first time, conflict with legislative requirements for joining the electoral roll and that direct enrolment is a practice which shifts the responsibility for maintaining electoral rolls from the individual to the agency. The Commission claims that direct enrolment is a method more compatible with both the expectations of Australians and with Government practices in other, equally sensitive, agency activities such as those of the Australian Tax Office.

Direct (automatic) enrolment is compatible with the legal obligation of compulsory enrolment in Australia and is practised in the majority of European democracies.

Corrections to existing enrolments

The AEC already uses information from other agencies, motor vehicle licensing agencies for example, to carry out a check when a voter has changed address. This allows them to initiate an “objection” and remove a voter from the roll if no action is taken by the voter. As already noted, however, re-enrolment requires action from a voter. The AEC may take the initiative to send re-enrolment forms to the voter’s new address but may only enrol the voter at that address if the voter makes an application in writing.

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Direct enrolment would allow the AEC to correct their records when they receive this external information. One option is to ask new applicants for motor vehicle licences to consent to the AEC making an update when their address changes. But since voting is compulsory in Australia it could be argued that consent is unnecessary.

Early closing of the electoral roll

The passing of the “Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Bill 2005”, means that the electoral roll is now closed at the end of the day the writs are issued. The consequence is that new voters or those who have been removed from the roll or whose address has changed since the last election are unlikely to have time to amend their status before an election.

Automatic enrolment would overcome this problem as well as ensure that the electoral roll was as fully representative as possible of the Australian population.

The Second Green Paper on Electoral Reform

The Rudd Government’s second green paper on Electoral Reform of September 2009 includes discussion on the management of the electoral roll. It notes that the primary purpose of the electoral roll is to allow citizens to exercise their franchise. The green paper includes the recognition that electoral practices must change with the practices and expectations of Australians, and it uses enrolment as an example. Another important argument in the green paper is that changes to electoral systems that make it more difficult for citizens to vote should only be implemented if they are well justified and if there are no alternatives which lessen the difficulty. The Green Paper includes the claims of some members of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Reform that the move to an earlier close of rolls in 2006 took place despite the absence of evidence that the change would decrease fraud or indeed that fraud existed.

The Green Paper invites submissions on changes to enrolment practices by late 2009.

Sources

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