

## Democracy in Australia – Voter IDs

Voting in Australia is based on trust in a system that reflects Australia's democracy, with voters simply having to state their name and have it crossed off the voters roll. After the 2013 election the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) said that it was referring 8000 cases of multiple voting to the Australian Federal Police, up from 19 cases in 2010. More recently the loss of 1400 ballots in Western Australia has resulted in questions being raised both about the integrity of the electoral system itself, and by implication the AEC.

Currently there is a push for voter ID laws. Arguments advanced in favour of requiring voter IDs include the need to:

- protect the integrity of the information contained on the roll;
- deter attempts by voters to impersonate another voter; and
- discourage attempts by a voter to vote more than once.

Australians have a history of resistance to the adoption of any kind of universal ID card that can be legally required to be shown in order to access government services or to confirm one's identity. The arguments against such a card are broadly couched in terms of personal privacy and an aversion to a 'surveillance state'. Problems with the ready availability of IDs among people who are extremely disadvantaged or living in Indigenous communities are also raised as concerns.

In 2014, Queensland introduced its own voter identification laws as part of an electoral reform package. The law is a first for Australia and follows several American states and other Western nations. For state polls, Queensland voters will need to present a current driver's license, passport, recent public utility bill or an ID card issued by the government, such as a Medicare or Senior's Card.

Advocates for voter ID laws claim to be concerned with making elections fairer. While this has a degree of inherent logic in it, electoral experts argue that the instances of voter fraud are "overstated". An Australian government

green paper released in 2009 found similarly, while the Australian Electoral Commission's website notes that since major electoral reforms in 1983, the Court of Disputed Returns has not voided any election on the basis of fraudulent voting. Moreover, even the Queensland government's own discussion paper indicates that voter fraud was not an issue in past Queensland elections and that the introduction of voter ID laws could be "considered a disproportionate response to the risk".

In the case of multiple voting, the way in which it is detected is that once an election is over, the AEC compares the booths' lists to see if some names are crossed out more than once. A vast majority of multiple voting is attributed to confused elderly voters, often English second language speakers. The requirement for a voter ID would address only one of the ways to stop fraudulent voting - the impersonation of other voters. It would not be able to do anything to stop people visiting different booths under their own name, unless the voter lists were electronically aligned and updated in real time, a remedy that, so far, has not been put forward.

The large number of multiple voters referred to the AFP in 2013 could reflect the fact that the AEC is taking the phenomenon more seriously, which may be for political reasons rather than multiple voting is becoming more common. The push for voter IDs is mainly coming from the Coalition side of politics.

A number of developed countries use voter ID laws, including Canada, the United States and the Netherlands. From the United States have come fairly serious criticisms of voter ID laws, where African-American citizens are finding their franchise at risk in a number of states. A judge sitting in the United States Court of Appeal recently admitted he was wrong in his earlier support for the measure, and now believes that instead of preventing voter fraud, voter ID laws suppress voting. In Canada, there has also been some controversy surrounding voter ID laws and Muslim women needing to remove their niqab or burka to prove their identification before being able to cast a ballot.

In sum, notwithstanding the evidence of several studies that has shown that the absence of voter ID laws has not been detrimental to Australia's electoral processes, there remains a body of opinion that insists that the current system is open to abuse, and contends that the system is possibly already being abused by people seeking to skew election results.

## Useful sources

Australian Parliament, *Voter ID*, 4 August 2014

[http://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/VoterID](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/rp1415/VoterID)

Arklay, T., 'Voter ID laws will fail poor, Indigenous and homeless Queenslanders', *The Conversation*, 26 November 2013

<http://theconversation.com/voter-id-laws-will-fail-poor-indigenous-and-homeless-queenslanders-20647>

Berg, C., 'No vote of confidence in ID laws', *The Drum*, ABC, 3 June 2014.

<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-06-03/berg-no-vote-of-confidence-in-id-laws/5495996>

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