



27 October 2022

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

Submitted by email to: em@aph.gov.au

Dear Secretary,

Inquiry into the 2022 federal election

Our thanks to the Committee for the opportunity to provide our reflections on the election and our apologies for this submission being delayed.

We note the broad terms of reference of the Inquiry, and only intend to make submissions narrowly on concerns specific to Older Australians. Many of the solutions and reforms necessary to ensure enfranchisement of persons with a disability under term (f)(i) will be specifically helpful to older people, and we encourage the Committee to pursue the breadth of ideas contained in submissions from disability advocates, as well as ourselves.

Specific areas we ask the committee to consider are:

Accessibility of polling places

The Australian Electoral Commission's communication of the list of more, or less accessible polling places was adequate for those who cared to look. However, community expectations are now that all government facilities will soon be accessible, and many people are surprised to discover that polling places are often hard to access for people with reduced mobility or vision, or the inability to stand in queues for significant times. The committee should recommend that future Federal, State and Local grants programs for community facilities include criteria for ensuring that suitable, accessible facilities are available for every polling place within a decade.

Postal voting, mobile voting, and accessibility for older Australians

A combination of factors is potentially impacting the accessibility of voting for older Australians, and may also be impacting others with a disability. Specifically, three factors have combined to create a problem:

- The reduction in the use of mobile voting teams (related to COVID in 2022).
- Australia Post's long-term reduction of service standards, including the mail moving slower, and reduced density of post boxes.
- The highly successful prioritisation of funding and support for people to age at home, rather than the use of nursing home, with the numbers of people now being cared for at home increasing substantially.

These factors combined to mean that older people whose circumstance would once have received support from a mobile team were directed to postal voting this election. That postal voting service was administratively burdensome to the point of disenfranchising voters:

- Those with low vision, tremors, and other disabilities struggle to fill in the forms concerned.
- Voters are advised that postal votes can be issued and returned within the last three days of the election. That is not realistically achievable, both because of slow post times, but also because getting the return ballot paper into a post box is an incredibly difficult task for a person with low mobility (the reason they need a postal vote in the first place).

- The experience was also quite stressful for some. Older people with cognitive decline often have multiple supports, including professional carers, family, and friends. The level of coordination is often moderate, meaning that multiple people may have attempted to assist the older person to vote, or not. This confusion is stressful for the older person and has also previously been identified as a cause of both plural voting and non-voting at elections.

In preparation of the next election, voting arrangements for Australians with reduced mobility or cognitive decline should be reviewed so that:

- The administrative burden of postal voting (for the voter) is reduced, published and legislated timelines are reviewed, and reasonable expectations are clearly communicated.
- More appropriate forms of accessible voting are created and promoted, possibly including mobile teams conducting home visits, and telephone voting.
- A specific communication campaign for carers, families and friends of the infirmed, making voting responsibilities and processes clear, and reducing stress and ensuring enfranchisement.

As Australians continue to age in larger numbers, maintaining the effective franchise for older Australians will continue to be challenging. Whilst new technology can assist many people, others, especially those with a life experience of disadvantage or cognitive decline, find that technology alienating, rather than empowering. The Australian Electoral Commission should specifically study longitudinal data on turnout among older people, especially for those over 75 and over 85. This data should, where possible, be cross-tabulated with other potential indicators of disenfranchisement such as First Nations status, and socio-economic disadvantage.

Yours sincerely,



Ian Yates AM
Chief Executive

COTA Australia

COTA Australia is the national consumer peak body representing older people. The COTA Federation has over 45,000 individual members and supporters and works with a network of seniors' organisations, which jointly engage the diversity of over 500,000 older Australians. Speaking for the nearly nine million Australians over 50 years old COTA Australia prioritises economic, social, and political participation of older Australians and challenging ageism.

The diversity of older Australians gives COTA Australia a broad policy agenda, currently we are prioritising policies about retirement incomes, aged care, housing, elder abuse, older workers, digital inclusion, health, and social isolation. It advocates within government, business, and society maintaining effective relationships, and is respected as a legitimate, influential voice.

COTA Australia promotes integrity, diversity, promoting equality, and prioritises collaborative engagement. With a membership including State and Territory Councils on the Ageing, COTA Australia has been identifying the needs of, issues affecting, and welfare of older Australians since it was first formed in 1951.