# Informal voting

## 2016 House of Representatives elections

AEC
Australian Electoral Commission

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→ The informality rate is a key measure of democratic health. It is the proportion of all votes cast that were deemed informal and consequently not included in the count leading to the election result.

→ Analysis of the levels and types of informal voting is fundamental to the AEC's role in supporting electoral integrity.

→ Between the 2013 and 2016 federal elections, House of Representatives (HoR) informality decreased from 5.9 per cent to 5.1 per cent, while Senate informality increased from 3.0 per cent in 2013 to 3.9 per cent.

→ HoR informality rates decreased in every state and territory other than the Northern Territory.

→ For the first time since the 2001 federal election, not all of the divisions recording the ten highest informality rates at the 2016 HoR elections were in Sydney. In 2016, these top ten informality divisions included the division of Murray (Victoria) and the division of Longman (Queensland).

# Summary

- At the state and territory level:
  - The highest levels of HoR informality were in the Northern Territory (7.35 per cent), New South Wales (6.2 per cent) and Victoria (4.8 per cent).
  - The lowest levels of HoR informality were in the Australian Capital Territory (2.8 per cent), Western Australia and Tasmania (both 4.0 per cent).
- For the first time since 2001, the ten Commonwealth electoral divisions with the highest levels of HoR informality were not all located in Sydney.
  - Eight of these divisions were in Sydney (Lindsay, Blaxland, Watson, Fowler, McMahon, Parramatta, Werriwa and Barton).
  - The two other divisions were located in Victoria (Murray) and Queensland (Longman).
- While HoR informality rates for declaration votes are lower overall than those for ordinary votes (3.5 per cent compared to 5.4 per cent), there is a wide range of informality within declaration votes.
  - Pre-poll declaration votes and postal votes have the lowest levels of informality of any vote type (3.6 per cent and 2.1 per cent, respectively), and provisional votes have the highest (7.2 per cent).

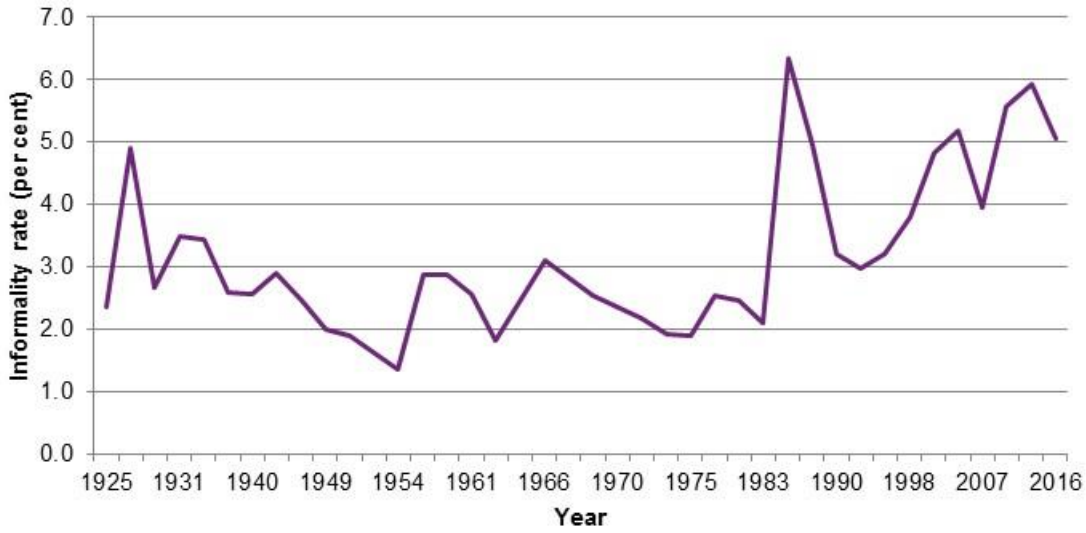
- There are many factors that appear to affect informal voting at the HoR. Previous AEC analyses have found that:
  - Higher levels of informality are likely to be associated with higher levels of social exclusion or relative disadvantage.
  - A change in the number of candidates between elections is a significant predictor of changes in informal voting.
  - Voter confusion about the differences between state and federal electoral systems may be contributing to some categories of informal ballots (particularly for HoR ballots with incomplete numbering or where ticks and crosses have been used as the first preference).
  - As some informal votes are cast intentionally rather than representing an error on the part of the voter, voters' attitudes to and opinions of the electoral system or politics in general will also likely influence informality.
- These factors will be explored again for the 2016 federal election as well as a number of new analyses to examine the potential impact of the 2016 changes to Senate voting on HoR informality.

# Key findings

At every federal election, some of the votes cast are not filled out in accordance with the requirements of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Electoral Act). These votes are deemed informal and cannot be included in the count of votes leading to the election result.[1] Together with the enrolment rate and voter turnout, the informality rate is a key measure of democratic health in Australia as it provides an indication of elector understanding of, and engagement with, the electoral process.

Between the 2013 and 2016 federal elections, the HoR informality rate (informal votes as a proportion of all votes cast) decreased from 5.9 per cent (811,143 informal votes) in 2013 to 5.1 per cent (720,915 informal votes). While volatility in informal voting means that it is difficult to reliably determine trends, HoR informality has increased at seven out of the twelve federal elections held since the introduction of major electoral reforms in 1984.

**Figure 1. Informality rates, 1925–2016 House of Representatives elections**




(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016c)

Notes:

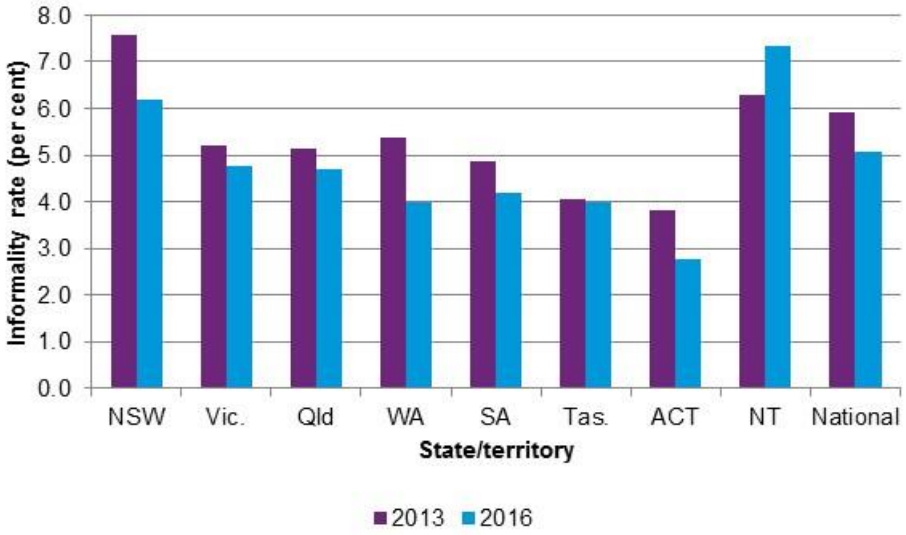
- The dramatic peak in HoR informality and drop in Senate informality in 1984 is associated with the introduction of 'above the line' (ATL) voting for Senate elections.[2]
- Table 1 on page 17 shows national informality rates for HoR and Senate elections held between 1925 and 2016.

# Informal voting by state/territory and division

At the state and territory level, the highest informality rates at the 2016 HoR elections were in the Northern Territory (7.3 per cent), New South Wales (6.2 per cent), and Victoria (4.8 per cent), while the lowest informality rates were in the Australian Capital Territory (2.8 per cent), Tasmania and Western Australia (both 4.0 per cent).

HoR informality rates decreased in every state and territory other than the Northern Territory, where it increased by 1 percentage point (from 6.3 per cent in 2013 to 7.3 per cent in 2016). The largest decreases were in New South Wales (down by 1.4 percentage points), Western Australia (1.4 percentage points) and the Australian Capital Territory (1.1 percentage points).

**Figure 2. Informality rates by state/territory, 2013–2016 House of Representatives elections**




(Australian Electoral Commission, 2013; 2016e)

Note: Table 2 on page 18 shows informality rates by state and territory for HoR and Senate elections held between 1984 and 2016.

## Divisions with the highest levels of informal voting

For the first time since the 2001 federal election, not all of the divisions recording the ten highest HoR informality rates were in Sydney. The ten divisions with the highest levels of informal HoR voting in 2016 were:

- Lindsay (11.8 per cent),
- Blaxland (11.6 per cent),
- Watson (10.7 per cent),
- Fowler (10.4 per cent),
- McMahon (9.9 per cent),
- Parramatta (9.3 per cent),
- Murray (8.8 per cent),
- Werriwa (8.8 per cent),
- Longman (8.5 per cent), and
- Barton (8.4 per cent).

Seven of these ‘top ten’ divisions were also in the top ten divisions with the highest informality rates at the 2013 HoR elections. The remaining three divisions (Lindsay, Murray and Longman) were ranked 14th, 36th and 100th in 2013, respectively.

Note: Table 3 on page 19 shows how divisions with high and low informality at the 2016 HoR elections ranked in previous elections.

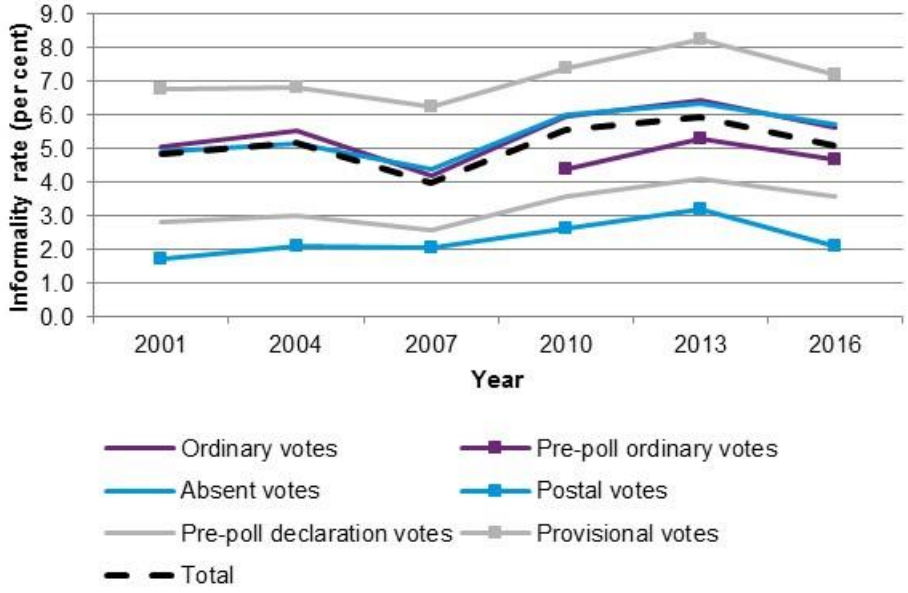
# Informality by vote type

Most electors attend a polling place or pre-poll voting centre in their home division, on or before polling day, and cast an ordinary vote. Ordinary votes cast prior to polling day are termed pre-poll ordinary votes.

The Electoral Act also provides for a number of alternative methods of voting – these are collectively termed ‘declaration’ voting because the elector has declared their entitlement to vote. Declaration votes comprise absent votes, postal votes, pre-poll declaration votes and provisional votes.

Overall, HoR informality rates for declaration votes are lower than those for ordinary votes (3.5 per cent compared to 5.4 per cent in 2016). However, there is a wide range of informality within declaration votes: while pre-poll declaration votes and postal votes have the lowest levels of informality of any vote type (3.6 per cent and 2.1 per cent in 2016, respectively), provisional votes have the highest (7.2 per cent in 2016).

**Figure 3. Informality rates by vote type, 2001–2016 House of Representatives elections**




(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016c)

Note: Table 4 on page 20 shows informality rates by vote type for HoR elections between 2001 and 2016.

# Categories of informal votes

Informal HoR ballots are assigned to informality categories as part of an Informal Ballot Paper Study (IBPS) conducted following the election. The IBPS analyses the levels and types of informal voting, with findings from this study informing education and information strategies and providing an evidence base for reforms to the electoral system (for example, by analysing the potential impact of optional preferential voting, and aligning savings provisions between the HoR and Senate).

The 2016 IBPS for HoR elections has not yet been conducted – results from this study are currently expected to be available in mid-2017.

The most recent IBPS (conducted for the 2013 HoR elections) found that the most commonly found categories of informal HoR ballots were:

- Ballots with incomplete numbering (36.2 per cent), including 29.4 per cent with a number '1' only
- Totally blank ballots (20.9 per cent)
- Ballots with scribbles, slogans or other protest vote marks (14.5 per cent)
- Ballots with non-sequential numbering (14.4 per cent)
- Ballots with ticks or crosses (10.5 per cent).

Analyses for the 2016 IBPS will include consideration of the potential impact of the 2016 changes to Senate voting on HoR informality.

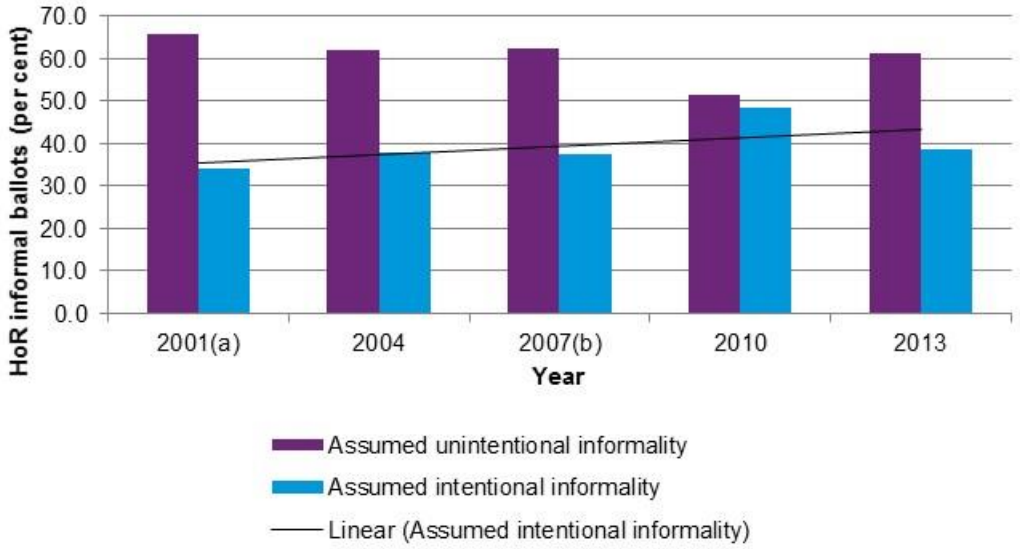
## Assumed unintentional vs. assumed intentional informality

Knowing the assumed intentionality of an informal ballot paper provides some indication of electors' levels of understanding and engagement with the electoral system. This aids the design of policies, programs and, potentially, legislation to address informality.

While informality categories reflect the key characteristics of informal ballot papers, these characteristics do not necessarily indicate the voters' intentions in casting these ballots. For example, some HoR ballots with incomplete numbering may reflect a deliberate intention to vote informally, while some blank ballots may be due to linguistic difficulties or a lack of understanding of the electoral system rather than representing a deliberate protest vote. As a result of this, AEC analyses discuss the intent behind informal ballots in terms of *assumed unintentional informality* and *assumed intentional informality*.

Previous AEC research suggests that while most informal ballots continue to be cast unintentionally, there may be an increasing trend towards intentional informality. This will be examined further in the 2016 IBPS.

**Figure 4. Assumed unintentional and intentional informality, 2001–2013 House of Representatives elections**




(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016a)

Notes:

- This graph uses intentionality definitions that applied prior to the 2013 IBPS[3], where only those ballot papers with incomplete numbering, non-sequential numbering, ticks and crosses and those where the voter had been identified were assumed to be unintentionally informal. All other informal ballot papers were assumed to be intentionally informal.
    a. For the 2001 IBPS, ballots with incomplete numbering (other than a number '1' only) were counted as 'Other' informal ballots and are therefore included within counts of ballots assumed to be intentionally informal.
    b. The 2007 IBPS was not conducted in respect of three polling places in the division of Melbourne. A total of 219 informal ballot papers were therefore not assigned to informality categories.
- Table 5 on page 20 shows assumed unintentionality and assumed intentionality by informality category at the 2013 HoR elections.

# What's influencing informal voting?

There are many factors that appear to affect the levels and/or types of informal voting at federal elections. However, the complex linkages and interrelationships between these factors, as well as the secret ballot and unique environment for each election mean that it is sometimes is not possible to accurately quantify – or even separately identify – the impact a particular factor may have. Previous AEC analysis of HoR informality has indicated that:

- A wide range of socio-demographic and socio-economic factors are associated with geographic areas recording higher informality. When taken together, these could be

associated with higher levels of social exclusion or disadvantage (for example, due to poor English language skills or a lack of education).

- A change in the number of candidates between elections is a significant predictor of changes in informal voting.
- Voter confusion about the differences between state and federal voting systems may influence the number of ballots with incomplete numbering or ticks and crosses in some states and territories.

While many of the factors influencing HoR informality will also influence Senate informality, differences in voting methods (full preferential vs. optional preferential) and savings provisions that apply to Senate ballot papers mean that the impact of particular factors may vary between the houses.

## Informal voting as a deliberate choice

As an intentionally informal vote represents a deliberate choice, voters' attitudes to and opinions of the electoral system or politics in general may contribute to (or even override) any of the other factors influencing unintentional informality.

A variety of surveys provide some insight into electors' general attitudes towards voting and politics. Key among these is the Australian Election Study (AES) survey conducted by the Australian National University since 1987. The 2016 AES found that there was a record low level of voter interest in the 2016 federal election, and record low levels of satisfaction with democracy and trust in government.

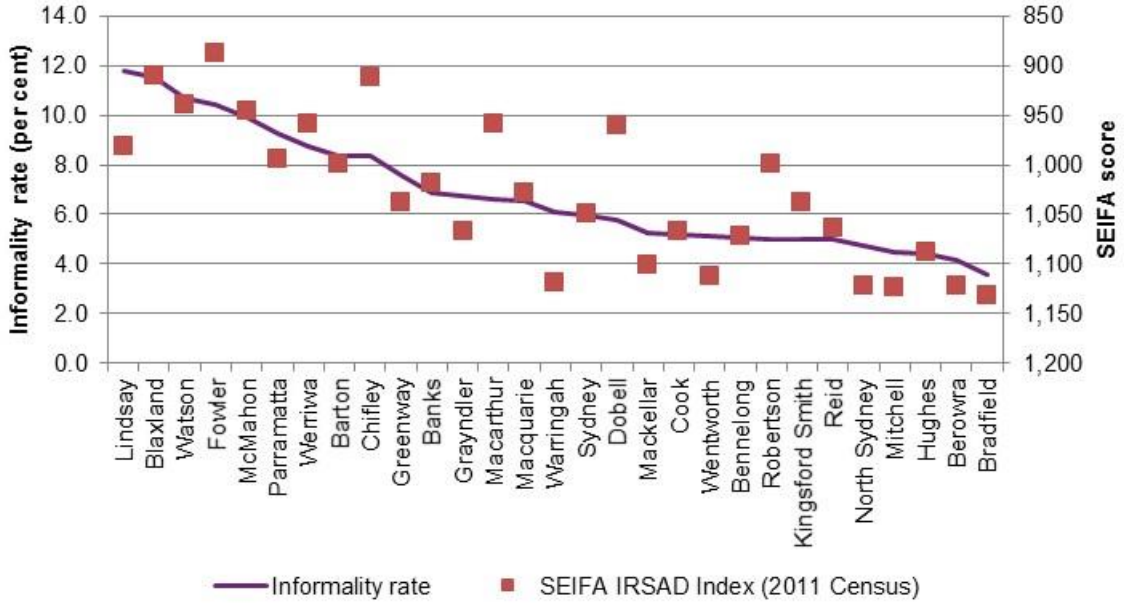
- Only 30 per cent of respondents took a good deal of interest in the 2016 federal election, down from to 33 per cent in 2013, 34 per cent in 2010 and 40 per cent in 2007.[4]
- 40 per cent of respondents were not satisfied with democracy in Australia, the lowest level since the 1970s.[5]
- About one in five respondents (20 per cent) believed that who people vote for won't make any difference, up from 17 per cent in 2013, 14 per cent in 2010 and 13 per cent in 2007.[6]
- The ANU study also found some weakening in the perception that people in government can be trusted to "do the right thing".[7]

While analyses of assumed intentional and unintentional informality at the 2016 HoR elections has not yet been conducted, decreasing levels of interest in the election and trust in government could contribute to increases in the numbers of voters casting intentionally informal votes.

## Social exclusion and disadvantage

Consistent with findings from the 2013 federal election, preliminary analyses of divisional-level informality indicate that social exclusion and disadvantage[8] were associated with higher levels of informal voting at the 2016 HoR elections. For example, a correlation analysis conducted for Sydney divisions suggested that 65 per cent of the variation in informality rates was explained by relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage.[9]

**Figure 5. Informality rate and Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD), Sydney electorates, 2016 House of Representatives elections**




In addition to a socio-economic effect between divisions, similar analysis of total informality rates at the 2016 HoR elections by polling place catchment areas also showed evidence of an effect within many divisions.[10]

There are many Census characteristics that may be associated with social exclusion and disadvantage, and these may vary depending on whether or not an informal vote was cast intentionally. For example, analyses of results from the 2013 IBPS showed that areas with higher levels of unintentional informality appeared to be associated with characteristics such as higher proportions of people speaking a non-English language at home and lower levels of educational attainment (particularly females who had not attended school). Similar analyses using 2011 Census characteristics will be conducted when 2016 IBPS results are available. Analyses using 2016 Census characteristics will be conducted when relevant 2016 Census results are released.

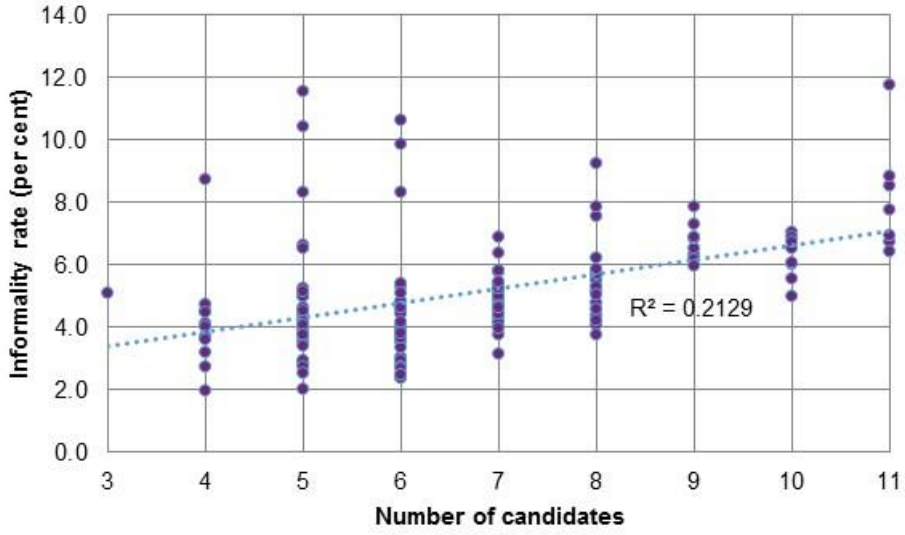
## Number of candidates

Voters are required to allocate a preference to every candidate on the HoR ballot paper for their division. At the 2016 HoR elections, the number of candidates ranged from a low of 3 (in the division of Gorton) to a high of 11 (in the divisions of Batman, Dunkley, Grayndler, Lindsay, Longman, Murray and Solomon).

Logically, having more candidates on a ballot paper increases the likelihood that a voter will make an error while marking the ballot, or simply decide to stop numbering at a given point. However, while the relationship between candidate numbers and informality is logical, any effect it may have does not appear as strong as other factors.

Analyses of results from the 2010, 2013 and 2016 HoR elections shows that the number of candidates on a ballot paper is a relatively poor predictor of the informality rate.[11] While there is a somewhat stronger relationship between changes in the number of candidates between elections and swings in informality[12], the variation found in results indicates that other factors are likely to be involved.

**Figure 6. Numbers of candidates and informality rates, 2016 House of Representatives elections**




Analysis of the 2013 IBPS indicated that a higher number of candidates is likely to increase the number of ballot papers ruled informal due to non-sequential or incomplete numbering, and that voters were more likely to make an error in their numbering than they were to simply stop numbering their ballot paper.[13] Similar analyses will be carried out when results from the 2016 HoR IBPS are available.

## Differences between electoral systems

Previous AEC research has looked at a possible relationship between informal voting at HoR elections and the different formality requirements for state and territory lower house elections. In theory, if requirements differ between state or territory and federal elections, electors may become confused and cast their vote according to the wrong system. The probability of any confusion would presumably be higher when elections based on different systems are held close to one another.

Key differences between state/territory electoral systems and HoR elections that may impact on HoR elections relate to:

- The minimum number of preferences required to be shown[14], and
- Whether a tick or cross is acceptable as a first preference.[15]

Analysis of results from the 2013 HoR elections indicated that higher proportions of ballot papers with a number '1' only, or showing a tick or cross as the first preference may be influenced in part by state and territory electoral systems.[16]

Analysis of results from the 2013 HoR elections indicated that higher proportions of ballot papers with a number '1' only, or showing a tick or cross as the first preference may be influenced in part by state and territory electoral systems.

Given the time periods involved (for example, the most recent state or territory election being held 182 days prior to the 2013 federal election), AEC generally conducts minimal analysis of the proximity between state/territory events and HoR informality. Proximity analysis of informality at the 2013 federal election also provided some contradictory results when looking at the two jurisdictions with the most recent state or territory events (Western Australia and the ACT). Specifically, while formality rules at ACT elections are substantially different from those at federal elections and Western Australian formality rules are functionally similar to those at federal elections, HoR informality rates for the ACT are consistently lower than those for Western Australia. These results suggest that the presence of a recent state or territory event may have little impact, or that other factors have a stronger influence on HoR informality.

The closest state or territory election held prior to the 2016 federal election (held on 2 July 2016) was the 2015 New South Wales state election held on 28 March 2015 (that is, 462 days before the federal election). The next closest election was the 2015 Queensland state election on 31 January 2015 (that is, 518 days before the federal election). Given the time periods involved, it is unlikely that proximity between state/territory and federal electoral events had any significant effect on HoR informality in 2016.

Note: Table 6 on page 21 shows the most recent state/territory election dates prior to the 2016 federal election.

# What's next?

The sheer number and variety of factors associated with informal voting emphasises that there is no simple solution to reduce the numbers of informal votes cast. However more detailed analyses may help to inform targeted strategies aimed at improving formality in particular areas, or for particular groups within the population.

In addition to the continuing analysis of election results from the AEC Tally Room, future analyses of informal voting at the 2016 HoR elections will incorporate results from the 2016 HoR Informal Ballot Paper Study (IBPS). Socio-demographic and socio-economic analysis conducted using the 2016 IBPS will use the 2011 (and, when available, 2016[17]) Census of Population and Housing.

## 2016 House of Representatives Informal Ballot Paper Study

An IBPS is conducted following each general election for the HoR to analyse the levels and types of informal voting. The 2016 IBPS includes a number of significant procedural changes (most notably the use of scanned ballot paper images) aimed at improving data quality and enabling more extensive analysis than has been possible for previous informality studies.

Scanning of informal ballot papers from the 2016 HoR elections commenced in February 2017, scanning of informal ballot papers has commenced, with subsequent processing, validation and analysis work expected to be completed by mid-late 2017. As has been the case for previous elections, the 2016 IBPS will be used to conduct analyses relating to:

- categories of informal HoR ballots,
- assumed intentionality/unintentionality for the HoR, and
- socio-demographic analyses using informality categories and intentionality.

A number of new analyses will be included in the 2016 IBPS to examine the potential impact of the 2016 changes to Senate voting on HoR informality. These will include:

- analyses of informal HoR ballots with incomplete numbering and six preferences shown (i.e. HoR ballots where voters had numbered 1-6 only, similar to the ATL instructions for the Senate), and
- analyses of the potential impact of party logos on informality (e.g. informal ballots where the first preference was for the Nick Xenophon Team and was marked with a 'X', as per the NXT logo).

A detailed AEC research report on informal voting at the 2016 HoR elections is expected to be publicly released in late 2017. This detailed report will include (and, where possible, expand upon) analyses included in this document and findings from the 2016 IBPS.

# Appendices

## Appendix A. Key terms

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| Above the Line (ATL) voting | Since 1984, Senate ballot papers have been classified as either 'above the line' (ATL) or 'below the line' based on the preferences used for the purposes of counting. Under ATL voting, voters place the required number of preferences in the upper section of the ballot paper in order to adopt the order of preferences shown within a particular party or group.<br>Prior to the 2016 federal election, ATL voting was also known as 'ticket' voting, and electors could provide a single mark above the line to adopt a complete ballot paper preference order lodged by a party or group. |
| Absent vote | A declaration vote cast at a polling place located outside the division, but within the state or territory, for which the elector is enrolled on polling day. |
| Assumed intentional informality (HoR) | From the 2013 IBPS, this refers to all HoR informal ballots papers where there is no clear first preference. At the 2013 HoR elections, about half of all ballot papers assumed to be intentionally informal were totally blank, while a little over a third contained scribbles, slogans or other protest vote marks. |
| Assumed unintentional informality (HoR) | From the 2013 Informal Ballot Paper Study (IBPS), this refers to all HoR informal ballot papers where there is a clear first preference. At the 2013 HoR elections, about six in ten ballots assumed to be unintentionally informal had incomplete numbering, one in five had non-sequential numbering and one in seven had ticks and crosses. |
| Below the Line (BTL) voting | See Above the Line voting. Voters may cast a BTL vote by recording the required minimum number of preferences below the line on a Senate ballot paper. |
| Declaration vote | Declaration votes are those where the ballot paper is sealed in a declaration envelope signed by the elector and counted after election night. Declaration votes comprise absent votes, postal votes, pre-poll declaration votes and provisional votes.<br>A preliminary scrutiny process is applied to all declaration votes, whereby the voter's declaration envelope is checked for a range of requirements. The requirements allow the declaration envelope to be opened and the ballot papers within to be admitted to the count. Requirements vary by vote type, but include that the elector is enrolled and that the declaration vote envelope has been appropriately signed and witnessed. |
| Formality rate | The proportion of ballot papers marked according to the rules of the election (and can therefore be counted towards the election results). |
| Informal vote | A ballot paper which has been placed in the ballot box but was incorrectly completed or not completed at all. Informal votes are not counted in the election of a candidate. |

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| Informality rate | The proportion of ballot papers not marked according to the rules of the election (and cannot therefore be counted towards the election). |
| Ordinary vote | Ordinary votes comprise:<br>■ *Ordinary vote* – a vote cast by a voter on polling day at a polling place in the elector's enrolled (home) division.<br>■ *Pre-poll ordinary vote* – a vote that is cast as an ordinary vote before polling day. Eligible electors are issued ballot papers that, once completed, are placed directly into a ballot box and are counted as ordinary votes on election night. |
| Postal vote | A declaration vote, returned to the AEC through the postal system. |
| Pre-poll declaration vote | A declaration vote lodged at a divisional office or pre-poll voting centre when the elector is unable to be marked off the roll. For pre-poll voting, an elector may not be marked off the roll if their name cannot be found on the roll, or if they are outside of their home division. |
| Pre-poll ordinary vote | See ordinary vote. |
| Provisional vote | A declaration vote cast by a person at a polling place when:<br>■ his or her name cannot be found on the certified list,<br>■ his or her name is marked on the certified list to indicate that he or she has already voted,<br>■ the relevant polling official has doubts regarding the voter's identity, or<br>■ the voter is registered as a 'silent elector' whose address does not appear on the certified list. |
| Savings provisions | Administrative rules which allow votes which would otherwise be ruled informal to be admitted to the count as formal votes where the voter may have made an unintentional mistake on their ballot paper. |
| Scrutiny | The counting process for any votes at an Australian federal election. Ballot papers entering scrutiny are all those accepted into the count. |
| Turnout | The proportion of the eligible population who have cast a vote. This is measured as the total number of ballot papers entering scrutiny divided by the final enrolment figure, expressed as a percentage. |

# Appendix B. Tables

## Table 1. Informal votes and informality rates, 1925–2016 House of Representatives and Senate elections

| | House of Representatives | | Senate | | | House of Representatives | | Senate | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Year | no. | % | no. | % | Year | no. | % | no. | % |
| 1925 | 70,587 | 2.36 | 209,951 | 6.96 | 1969 | 159,493 | 2.54 | .. | .. |
| 1928 | 133,775 | 4.90 | 318,667 | 9.88 | 1970 | .. | .. | 584,930 | 9.41 |
| 1929 | 78,297 | 2.65 | .. | .. | 1972 | 146,194 | 2.17 | .. | .. |
| 1931 | 114,477 | 3.48 | 332,980 | 9.60 | 1974 | 144,762 | 1.92 | 798,126 | 10.77 |
| 1934 | 126,375 | 3.43 | 420,747 | 11.35 | 1975 | 149,295 | 1.89 | 717,160 | 9.10 |
| 1937 | 95,960 | 2.59 | 416,707 | 10.63 | 1977 | 204,908 | 2.52 | 731,555 | 9.00 |
| 1940 | 102,111 | 2.56 | 383,986 | 9.56 | 1980 | 208,435 | 2.45 | 821,628 | 9.65 |
| 1943 | 122,936 | 2.89 | 418,485 | 9.73 | 1983 | 185,312 | 2.09 | 872,626 | 9.84 |
| 1946 | 109,227 | 2.45 | 356,615 | 8.01 | 1984 | 589,423 | 6.34 | 397,998 | 4.27 |
| 1949 | 93,580 | 1.98 | 505,275 | 10.76 | 1987 | 480,354 | 4.94 | 395,633 | 4.05 |
| 1951 | 88,671 | 1.90 | 339,678 | 7.13 | 1990 | 326,126 | 3.19 | 349,178 | 3.40 |
| 1953 | .. | .. | 219,375 | 4.56 | 1993 | 324,082 | 2.97 | 279,453 | 2.55 |
| 1954 | 62,506 | 1.35 | .. | .. | 1996 | 360,165 | 3.20 | 395,442 | 3.50 |
| 1955 | 130,365 | 2.87 | 473,069 | 9.63 | 1998 | 436,138 | 3.78 | 375,462 | 3.24 |
| 1958 | 148,088 | 2.87 | 529,050 | 10.29 | 2001 | 580,590 | 4.82 | 470,961 | 3.89 |
| 1961 | 139,011 | 2.56 | 572,087 | 10.62 | 2004 | 639,851 | 5.18 | 466,370 | 3.75 |
| 1963 | 101,965 | 1.82 | .. | .. | 2007 | 510,822 | 3.95 | 331,009 | 2.55 |
| 1964 | .. | .. | 387,930 | 6.98 | 2010 | 729,304 | 5.55 | 495,160 | 3.75 |
| 1966 | 182,578 | 3.10 | .. | .. | 2013[a] | 811,143 | 5.91 | 409,142 | 2.96 |
| 1967 | .. | .. | 359,241 | 6.10 | 2016 | 720,915 | 5.05 | 567,806 | 3.94 |

(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016c)

[a] During a recount of results from the 2013 Senate election for Western Australia, 1,370 ballot papers were found to be missing and the result of this election was subsequently declared void. A new election was held on 5 April 2014. However, as comparisons using the 2014 Senate results may be potentially misleading (due to the unusual nature of this election), figures in this table refer to the 2013 Senate election for Western Australia.

## Table 2. Informality rates by state/territory, 1984–2016 House of Representatives and Senate elections

| Year | NSW % | Vic. % | Qld % | WA % | SA % | Tas. % | ACT % | NT % | Total % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| House of Representatives | | | | | | | | | |
| 1984 | 5.73 | 7.54 | 4.45 | 7.05 | 8.22 | 5.86 | 4.71 | 4.61 | 6.34 |
| 1987 | 4.57 | 5.25 | 3.41 | 6.56 | 6.84 | 4.95 | 3.48 | 5.77 | 4.94 |
| 1990 | 3.12 | 3.54 | 2.23 | 3.70 | 3.68 | 3.27 | 2.95 | 3.38 | 3.19 |
| 1993 | 3.10 | 2.83 | 2.62 | 2.52 | 4.06 | 2.73 | 3.35 | 3.10 | 2.97 |
| 1996 | 3.62 | 2.93 | 2.56 | 3.16 | 4.08 | 2.35 | 2.82 | 3.39 | 3.20 |
| 1998 | 4.01 | 3.51 | 3.33 | 4.18 | 4.54 | 3.09 | 2.87 | 4.16 | 3.78 |
| 2001 | 5.42 | 3.98 | 4.83 | 4.92 | 5.54 | 3.40 | 3.52 | 4.64 | 4.82 |
| 2004 | 6.12 | 4.10 | 5.16 | 5.32 | 5.56 | 3.59 | 3.44 | 4.45 | 5.18 |
| 2007 | 4.95 | 3.25 | 3.56 | 3.85 | 3.78 | 2.92 | 2.31 | 3.85 | 3.95 |
| 2010 | 6.83 | 4.50 | 5.45 | 4.82 | 5.46 | 4.04 | 4.66 | 6.19 | 5.55 |
| 2013 | 7.59 | 5.19 | 5.13 | 5.38 | 4.85 | 4.04 | 3.83 | 6.30 | 5.91 |
| 2016 | 6.17 | 4.77 | 4.70 | 3.99 | 4.18 | 3.98 | 2.76 | 7.35 | 5.05 |
| Senate | | | | | | | | | |
| 1984 | 5.22 | 3.65 | 2.72 | 4.17 | 5.01 | 5.68 | 3.07 | 2.80 | 4.27 |
| 1987 | 4.88 | 4.01 | 3.14 | 3.30 | 3.76 | 3.83 | 2.39 | 3.72 | 4.05 |
| 1990 | 4.17 | 3.60 | 2.45 | 2.86 | 2.52 | 3.09 | 2.36 | 2.80 | 3.40 |
| 1993 | 2.65 | 3.06 | 2.04 | 2.11 | 2.31 | 2.56 | 1.60 | 2.84 | 2.55 |
| 1996 | 3.75 | 3.55 | 3.27 | 3.49 | 3.27 | 3.16 | 2.47 | 2.75 | 3.50 |
| 1998 | 3.31 | 3.78 | 3.04 | 2.68 | 2.81 | 3.05 | 1.97 | 1.99 | 3.24 |
| 2001 | 3.54 | 5.61 | 2.95 | 3.58 | 3.06 | 3.29 | 2.34 | 2.76 | 3.89 |
| 2004 | 3.47 | 5.13 | 2.79 | 3.54 | 3.53 | 3.37 | 2.46 | 3.12 | 3.75 |
| 2007 | 2.24 | 3.28 | 2.34 | 2.42 | 2.38 | 2.63 | 1.70 | 1.94 | 2.55 |
| 2010 | 4.17 | 3.94 | 3.50 | 3.18 | 3.12 | 3.23 | 2.55 | 3.69 | 3.75 |
| 2013[a] | 3.32 | 3.37 | 2.16 | 2.86 | 2.65 | 2.46 | 1.98 | 2.67 | 2.96 |
| 2016 | 4.53 | 4.20 | 3.40 | 3.35 | 3.33 | 3.48 | 2.21 | 3.33 | 3.94 |

(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016c)

[a] During a recount of results from the 2013 Senate election for Western Australia, 1,370 ballot papers were found to be missing and the result of this election was subsequently declared void. A new election was held on 5 April 2014. However, as comparisons using the 2014 Senate results may be potentially misleading (due to the unusual nature of this election), figures in this table refer to the 2013 Senate election for Western Australia.

## Table 3. Informality history of divisions with the highest and lowest levels of informality[a] in 2016, 2001–2016 House of Representatives elections

| Division (state/territory) | 2001 % | 2004 % | 2007 % | 2010 % | 2013 % | 2016 % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Divisions with the ten highest informality rates in 2016** | | | | | | |
| Lindsay (NSW) | 6.14 | 7.45 | 5.54 | 8.17 | 8.21 | 11.77 |
| Blaxland (NSW) | 9.78* | 10.70* | 9.49* | 14.06* | 13.67* | 11.55 |
| Watson (NSW) | 7.52* | 9.10* | 9.05* | 12.80* | 13.95* | 10.65 |
| Fowler (NSW) | 12.75* | 9.11* | 7.67* | 12.83* | 13.93* | 10.41 |
| McMahon[b] (NSW) | 8.99* | 9.24* | 7.73* | 10.84* | 11.35* | 9.89 |
| Parramatta (NSW) | 6.21 | 8.53* | 6.56* | 8.65* | 10.52* | 9.26 |
| Murray (Vic.) | 3.53 | 4.18 | 5.24 | 5.83 | 6.33 | 8.84 |
| Werriwa (NSW) | 8.51* | 7.98* | 6.53* | 10.35* | 12.87* | 8.76 |
| Longman (Qld) | 5.27 | 5.64 | 3.47 | 7.29 | 5.07 | 8.53 |
| Barton (NSW) | 6.59 | 6.96 | 5.56 | 9.82* | 12.04* | 8.35 |
| **Divisions with the ten lowest informality rates in 2016** | | | | | | |
| Canberra (ACT) | 3.41 | 3.40 | 2.26† | 4.88 | 3.94 | 2.71 |
| Jagajaga (Vic.) | 3.64 | 3.98 | 2.45† | 3.97 | 3.73† | 2.71 |
| Deakin (Vic.) | 2.56† | 3.06† | 2.09† | 3.58 | 4.33 | 2.66 |
| Tangney (WA) | 4.04 | 4.44 | 2.73 | 3.48† | 4.17 | 2.55 |
| Melbourne (Vic.) | 3.77 | 3.27† | 2.80 | 3.62 | 5.95 | 2.48 |
| Goldstein (Vic.) | 2.77† | 3.40 | 2.42† | 3.13† | 3.33† | 2.46 |
| Ryan (Qld) | 2.86† | 3.80 | 2.14† | 2.87† | 3.25† | 2.39 |
| Brisbane (Qld) | 3.72 | 4.22 | 2.96 | 3.76 | 3.88 | 2.39 |
| Curtin (WA) | 3.30 | 3.52 | 1.91† | 2.93† | 3.25† | 2.02 |
| Kooyong (Vic.) | 2.57† | 2.90† | 2.10† | 2.78† | 3.39† | 1.99 |

* Division was also one of the ten highest informality divisions in this year.

† Division was also one of the ten lowest informality divisions in this year.

(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016c)

[a] Comparisons of informal voting in this table will be impacted by redistributions of electoral boundaries for New South Wales (in 2005, 2009 and 2016), Victoria (in 2002 and 2010), Queensland (in 2003, 2005 and 2009), Western Australia (in 2008 and 2016) and the Australian Capital Territory (in 2005 and 2016). (Australian Electoral Commission, 2016d)

[b] As part of the 2009 redistribution of electoral boundaries in New South Wales, the division of Prospect was re-named 'McMahon' (Australian Electoral Commission, 2009). Figures for 2001, 2004 and 2007 refer to the division of Prospect.

## Table 4. Informality rates by vote type[a], 2001–2016 House of Representatives elections

| Vote type | 2001 % | 2004 % | 2007 % | 2010 % | 2013 % | 2016 % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Ordinary votes* | *5.06* | *5.51* | *4.18* | *5.82* | *6.23* | *5.38* |
| Ordinary votes | 5.06 | 5.51 | 4.18 | 5.96 | 6.43 | 5.59 |
| Pre-poll ordinary votes | .. | .. | .. | 4.36 | 5.29 | 4.68 |
| *Declaration votes* | *3.52* | *3.64* | *2.99* | *4.12* | *4.35* | *3.47* |
| Absent votes | 4.89 | 5.13 | 4.39 | 6.01 | 6.33 | 5.68 |
| Postal votes | 1.69 | 2.10 | 2.02 | 2.63 | 3.17 | 2.07 |
| Pre-poll declaration votes | 2.81 | 3.00 | 2.58 | 3.56 | 4.08 | 3.58 |
| Provisional votes | 6.73 | 6.82 | 6.24 | 7.36 | 8.23 | 7.20 |
| **Total** | **4.82** | **5.18** | **3.95** | **5.55** | **5.91** | **5.05** |

(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016c)

## Table 5. Assumed unintentional and assumed intentional informality, 2013 House of Representatives elections

| | Assumed unintentional informality (clear first preference) | | | Assumed intentional informality (no clear first preference) | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Category | Number no. | Proportion % | Informality rate[b] % | Number % | Proportion % | Informality rate[b] % |
| Totally blank | .. | .. | .. | 169,351 | 20.9 | 1.23 |
| Incomplete numbering – number '1' only | 238,691 | 29.4 | 1.74 | .. | .. | .. |
| Incomplete numbering – other | 55,299 | 6.8 | 0.40 | .. | .. | .. |
| Ticks and crosses | 75,773 | 9.3 | 0.55 | 9,610 | 1.2 | 0.07 |
| Other symbols | 4,142 | 0.5 | 0.03 | 2,765 | 0.3 | 0.02 |
| Non-sequential numbering | 91,277 | 11.3 | 0.66 | 25,372 | 3.1 | 0.18 |
| Scribbles, slogans and other protest vote marks | .. | .. | .. | 117,502 | 14.5 | 0.86 |
| Illegible numbering | 3,817 | 0.5 | 0.03 | 2,569 | 0.3 | 0.02 |
| Voter identified | 205 | 0.0 | 0.00 | .. | .. | .. |
| Other | 6,089 | 0.8 | 0.04 | 8,681 | 1.1 | 0.06 |
| **Total** | **475,293** | **58.6** | **3.46** | **335,850** | **41.4** | **2.45** |

(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016a)

[a] Informal votes as a proportion of all votes cast under this vote type.

[b] Informal votes as a proportion of all votes cast.

## Table 6. Most recent state/territory election dates prior to the 2016 federal election

| State/territory | Most recent state/territory election date | Days prior to 2016 federal election no. |
|---|---|---|
| NSW | 28 March 2015 | 462 |
| Vic. | 29 November 2014 | 581 |
| Qld | 31 January 2015 | 518 |
| WA | 9 March 2013 | 1,211 |
| SA | 15 March 2014 | 840 |
| Tas. | 15 March 2014 | 840 |
| ACT | 20 October 2012 | 1,351 |
| NT | 25 August 2012 | 1,407 |

(Australian Electoral Commission, 2016b)

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# End notes

[1] Under section 268 of the Electoral Act, ballot papers cast in House of Representatives elections are informal if:

- they have not been authenticated by the initials of the presiding officer or the issuing officer, or by the presence of the official mark, and the Divisional Returning Officer is not satisfied that the ballot paper is authentic,
- the ballot paper has no vote indicated on it,
- subject to the exceptions noted below, the ballot paper does not indicate the voter's first preference for one candidate, and an order of preference for all the remaining candidates,
- the ballot paper has any mark or writing on it by which, in the opinion of the Divisional Returning Officer, the voter can be identified, or
- the ballot paper is not for the division being counted, and is not contained in an envelope bearing a declaration made by the elector under subsection 222(2) or (1A) of the Electoral Act.

If there are only two candidates on the ballot paper and the voter has placed a '1' in the box beside a candidate and either left the second box blank or inserted a number other than '2' in it, the ballot paper is formal (that is, the voter is deemed to have indicated an order of preference for all candidates).

Ticks or crosses are not acceptable forms of voting for House of Representatives elections, and ballot papers containing ticks and crosses are informal.

Alterations to numbers will not make a ballot paper informal, provided the voter's intention is clear (for example, a number can be crossed out and another number written beside it). However, if a number is overwritten in a way that makes it impossible to read, the ballot paper is informal.

[2] Of the informal ballots at the 1984 HoR elections, 44.6 per cent contained a unique first preference but had insufficient numbers, while 30.7 per cent contained ticks, crosses or some numbers (but no first preference) and 16.8 per cent were totally blank. While statistics on ballots with a '1' only are not available, the high proportion of ballots with incomplete numbering is likely to be due in part to voter confusion resulting from the introduction of above the line voting in the 1984 Senate elections. (Australian Electoral Commission, 1985)

[3] From the 2013 IBPS, all informal HoR ballot papers showing a clear first preference were assumed to be unintentionally informal, while all those not showing a clear first preference were assumed to be intentionally informal. Using these definitions, more than half of all informal ballot papers in 2013 (58.6 per cent, or 475,293 ballots) were assumed to be unintentionally informal. The remaining 41.4 per cent (335,850 ballots) did not show a clear first preference and were therefore assumed to be intentionally informal.

[4] Since 1993, the AES has asked respondents *'And how much interest would you say you took in the election campaign overall?'*. Response categories are *'A good deal'*, *'Some'*, *'Not much'* and *'None at all'*. (McAllister & Cameron, 2016)

[5] Australian National Political Attitudes Surveys conducted in 1969 and 1979 asked respondents *'On the whole, how do you feel about the state of government and politics in Australia. Would you say that you were very satisfied, fairly satisfied or not satisfied?'*. 23.4 per cent of respondents in 1969 and 44.5 per cent in 1979 indicated they were not satisfied.

The 1996 AES asked respondents *'On the whole, are you satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia'*.

Since 1998, the AES has asked *'On the whole are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Australia?'*. In the 2016 AES, 29.7 per cent of respondents were not very satisfied and 10.2 per cent were not at all satisfied. (McAllister & Cameron, 2016)

[6] Since 2001, the AES has asked respondents *'Some people say that no matter who people vote for, it won't make any difference to what happens. Other say that who people vote for can make a big difference to what happens. Using the scale below, where would you place yourself?'* A five point scale is used, with 1 being *'Who people vote for can make a big difference'* and 5 being *'Who people won't make any difference'*. At the 2016

AES, 10.1 per cent of respondents recorded a 4 and another 10.1 per cent recorded a 5. (McAllister & Cameron, 2016)

[7] Since 1993, the AES has asked respondents *'In general, do you feel that the people in government are all too interested in looking after themselves or do you feel that they can be trusted to do the right thing nearly all the time?'* Response categories are *'Usually look after themselves'*, *'Sometimes look after themselves'*, *'Sometimes can be trusted to do the right thing'* and *'Usually can be trusted to do the right thing'*. (McAllister & Cameron, 2016)

[8] Social exclusion is a concept of *relative* deprivation and community disadvantage, and is therefore more productively examined on a divisional or regional basis, rather than looking at state, territory or national totals. Sydney electorates were defined as those whose population is largely within the Statistical Division of Sydney.

[9] This divisional level analysis uses the Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas (SEIFA) Index of Relative Socio-economic Advantage and Disadvantage (IRSAD) from the 2011 Census, adjusted to reflect 2016 electoral boundaries. Analyses using SEIFA indexes based on 2016 Census results cannot be conducted until these indexes are released in 2018. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016)

Pearson product-movement correlation coefficients (denoted by $r$, with a value between –1 and +1) are used to measure the strength of the linear relationship between two variables. The square of the Pearson's $r$ (denoted by $r^2$) measures the proportion of the total variation in one variable that is explained by variation in the other variable. Analysis of the relationship between total HoR informality rates at the divisional level for Sydney divisions and 2011 SEIFA IRSAD indexes showed an $r^2$ value of 0.65, meaning that 65 per cent of the variation in informality was explained by relative socio-economic advantage and disadvantage.

[10] The strongest socio-economic effects within Sydney divisions at the 2016 HoR elections appeared to be in Warringah ($r^2$ of 0.54), Sydney ($r^2$ of 0.50) and Parramatta ($r^2$ of 0.48).

[11] While analysis of results from the 2016 HoR elections found a relatively weak (but statistically significant) relationship between the numbers of candidates on the ballot paper and the informality rate recorded in that division ($r^2$ of 0.21), analyses conducted for the 2013 and 2010 HoR elections found no significant relationship between candidate numbers and overall informality.

[12] Regressions conducted in respect of the 2010 HoR elections suggested that a change in the number of candidates explained around 15 per cent of the change in informality. Similar analyses conducted for the 2013 and 2016 HoR elections showed that the fit of this model improved with a change in the number of candidates explaining around 31 per cent and 34 per cent of the change in informality, respectively.

[13] Regressions indicated that the number of candidates explained around 61 per cent of the level of ballot papers with non-sequential numbering, and around 26 per cent of the level of ballot papers with incomplete numbering.

[14] Optional preferential voting (OPV) applies at New South Wales Legislative Assembly elections. Until recently, it also applied at Queensland Legislative Assembly elections (Burke 2016). Partial preferential voting applies at House of Assembly elections for Tasmania and at Legislative Assembly elections for the Australian Capital Territory.

[15] Ticks or crosses are allowed as a first preference at Legislative Assembly elections in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland and at House of Assembly elections in South Australia. Ticks and crosses are not explicitly provided for at Legislative Assembly elections in Western Australia.

[16] At the 2013 HoR elections, the highest proportions of ballots with a number '1' only were in New South Wales, Queensland and the ACT. As New South Wales and Queensland elections around that time used optional preferential voting (OPV) it is likely that some voters may have used the state systems when casting their HoR ballots. While OPV is not used in ACT Legislative Assembly elections, it is possible that New South Wales how to vote information may have carried over to some ACT residents due to the close proximity of these jurisdictions.

[17] The major (second) release of Census information will commence in June 2017, with Community Profiles expected to be released in October 2017. SEIFA indexes based on the 2016 Census are expected to be released in 2018. (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016)