



## ELECTORAL REGULATION RESEARCH NETWORK/DEMOCRATIC AUDIT OF AUSTRALIA JOINT WORKING PAPER SERIES

### **WHO VOTES EARLY IN VICTORIA? ASSESSING THE DEMOGRAPHIC CORRELATES OF EARLY VOTING IN PERSON AT VICTORIAN STATE ELECTIONS, 2006 TO 2014<sup>1</sup>**

Nathaniel Reader (PhD Candidate, Swinburne Institute for Social Research)

WORKING PAPER NO. 31 (AUGUST 2015)

---

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Professor Brian Costar, Swinburne University of Technology, and Dr Aaron Martin, University of Melbourne, for their helpful comments and suggestions.

## **Abstract**

This article investigates the demographic correlates of early voting in person at the 2006, 2010 and 2014 Victorian state elections. Between 2006 and 2014 the rate of early voting in person increased 300 percent at Victorian state elections. These elections followed the first reforms to Victoria's electoral legislation in 100 years, including amendments to the provisions for early voting in person. Using data from the 2006 and 2011 Australian Census of Population, in conjunction with voting data from the Victorian Electoral Commission, the article demonstrates a positive association between the level of early voting in person in a Legislative Assembly District and the number of people who changed address in the five years preceding the relevant Census. The article also demonstrates a negative association between early voting in person in a Legislative Assembly District and two demographic characteristics; the number of people born overseas, and a weaker association with the number of people who report having no religion. These findings suggest that one of the better accepted ideas in the US-centric convenience voting literature – that reforms increasing access to early voting tend to draw in voters from higher socio-economic backgrounds – may also apply in Victoria.

## **Introduction**

In 2005 Berinsky reviewed the impact of major electoral reforms that occurred in the United States in the mid-1980s and 1990s. He investigated whether the reforms – including President Clinton's 1993 'motor voter' national electoral registration initiative and the introduction of early voting, absentee voting and vote-by-mail in several states – had ultimately reduced traditional barriers to electoral participation and turnout. Berinsky's findings have been influential. Whilst his is essentially a review of other scholarly works, he found reform had had a 'perverse' effect. Instead of easing barriers to turnout, Bersinky demonstrated that electoral reform merely exacerbated existing socio-economic biases in the electorate (Berinsky 2005, p.473).

As part of his analysis, Bersinky specifically examined the impact of early voting. In 2004 early voting was permitted in 14 US states up to three weeks before an election. Today, more than 33 states and the District of Columbia permit early voting in person, 13 have total bans and Colorado, Oregon and Washington State conduct all-mail elections, eliminating the need to vote in person at all (NCSL 2015). Despite these figures, Berinsky's findings remain clear; citing studies by Stein (1998), Stein and Garcia-Monet (1997) and Neely and Richardson (2001), he found that early voters were similar to election day voters, as conceived by Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980). In other words, Bersinky demonstrated that the type of elector 'stimulated' by electoral reforms designed to increase participation in a non-compulsory voting context was typically wealthier, older and interested in politics; in short, politically engaged, habitual voters.

Unlike the US, in Australia there has been little scholarly interest in flexible voting practices. Orr (2014) recently considered the impact of convenience voting on the rituals and traditions underpinning elections, echoing Thompson's (2004) concerns about the normative challenges of early voting for traditional concepts of democratic parity. Orr's analysis is nevertheless broad, focusing on convenience voting in the US and United Kingdom<sup>2</sup>. Elsewhere, the Australian Electoral Commission (2014) has conducted 'in house' research into the socio-demographic determinants of pre-poll voting and postal voting at Commonwealth elections. Once again, these findings have limited use; much of the data is drawn from unpublished AEC sources, making replication difficult. The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) (2007; 2011) and the NSW Electoral Commission have completed similar studies.

Using aggregate analysis as a starting point – in the same way the first, detailed studies focused on the impact of US early voting reforms – this article assesses the demographic correlates of early voting in person at the past three Victorian state elections in 2006, 2010 and 2014. As is fully explained in the next section, there are a number of reasons why we should be interested in who votes early in Victoria, foremost of which is that Victoria has seen the greatest increases in early voting in person of any Australian jurisdiction besides the Australian Capital Territory in the past decade. This analysis thus makes an important, timely contribution to the Australian political science literature. US scholars might also find Australian evidence interesting, given the historical links between US and Australian practice and the need for more research focusing on early voting in countries with compulsory voting.

This paper proceeds as follows. It first discusses the incidence and history of early voting in person in Victoria, outlining key reforms to Victoria's electoral legislation and the recent, unsuccessful Rigoni / Palmer United Palmer Supreme Court petition seeking to void the 2014 Victorian state election, on the grounds of the VEC's alleged misapplication of early voting procedures. It then positions this discussion in relation to the literature on voter turnout and convenience voting. I then outline my data and methodology, and finally, findings and discussion.

## **Early voting in Victoria**

Early voting in person is when an elector casts their ballot at an early voting centre. Some psephologists and electoral commissions call this pre-poll voting; internationally, in Canada early voting is known as advance polling and in the US, early voting is when a voter visits an election official's office and casts a vote in person without offering an excuse for why they are unable to vote on election day (NCSL 2015). In Australia, early voting is for all intensive purposes the same as election day voting. Ballot materials are the same. The only, major differences are that early voting is usually available during business Monday to Friday, up to

---

<sup>2</sup> To be fair, Orr's discussion covers Australia in passing, even citing Les Murray's famous quote about the ballot box being like a 'closet of prayer' (Orr 2014). Orr probably discovered during his research, as I did, that there is little, if any, sustained critical commentary on Australian early voting practices.

two weeks before election day, and that early voters generally require an excuse. Most early voting centres do not have a sausage sizzle, either!

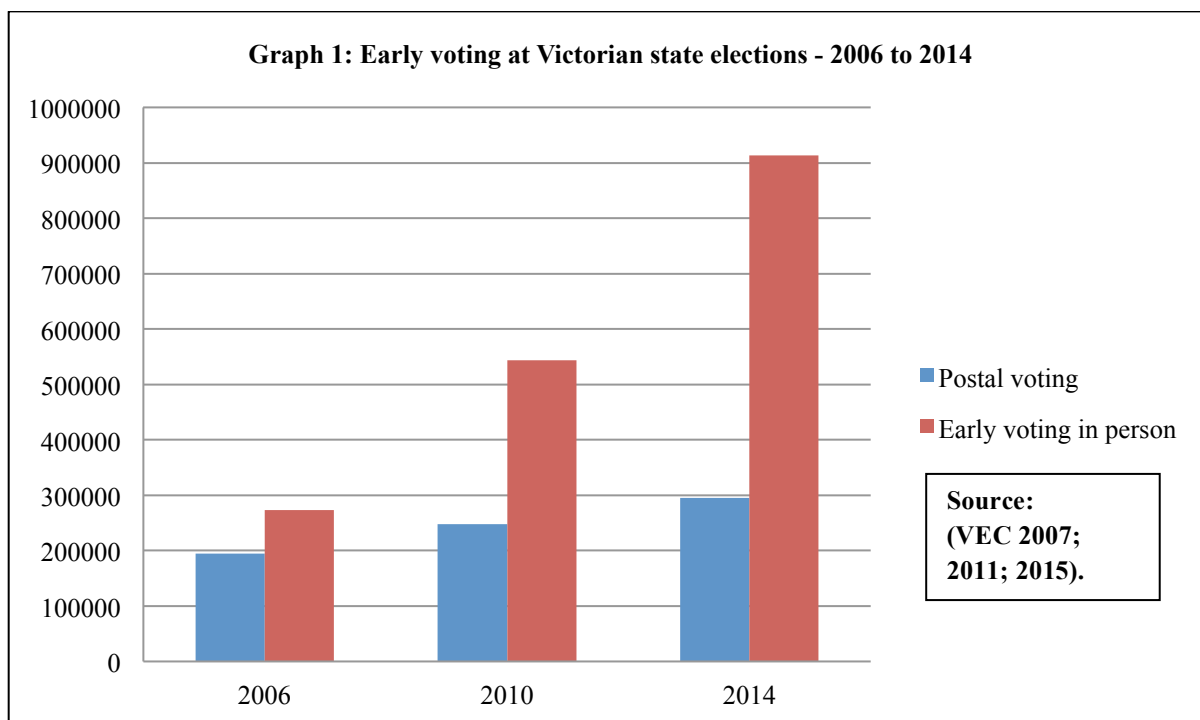
Across Australia, early voting is the newest form of early voting, certainly when compared to postal voting.<sup>3</sup> According to the VEC, Victorian electors have been able to vote early in person from about 1994. It is likely that the VEC tracked the Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) decision to expand declaration voting services by allowing voters to present a Divisional Electoral Office up to two weeks before federal election day. The AEC's decision coincided with the Hawke Government's 1984 electoral reforms (Green 2014, p.2).

There are several reasons why we should study early voting in person at Victorian state elections.

The first is statistical. Early voting is the fastest growing form of electoral participation in Australia, and has been for some time. The trend is national but not uniform; while almost every state and jurisdiction has experienced significant increases in rates of pre-poll voting in the past decade, rates of early voting in person in Victoria have tripled since the 2006 Victorian state election, in just a period of eight years, as shown in Graph One. Victoria has also experienced substantial, localised increases in particular seats. As seen in Table One, three of the top 10 Legislative Assembly Districts for early voting in person recorded 40 percent of electors voting early in person. Considered together, these figures are significant; Paul Gronke, a well-respected academic authority on early voting in the US, has said that early voting rates of 30 percent 'change...the way parties campaigned... in short, the way the whole electoral system [works]' (Roberts 2012, p.1). Given these comments about the broad impact of flexible voting on electoral process, it is interesting that the trend to early voting in person in Victoria has not been predicted. The VEC recently admitted that it had underestimated the demand for early voting in person at the 2014 Victorian state election (ABC 2014; VEC 2015 (2)). In 2012, the Victorian Secretary of the Australian Labor Party (ALP), Noah Carroll, also conceded that the growth of early voting in Victoria had 'crept up' on the party (Parliament of 2012, p.3).

---

<sup>3</sup> Postal voting is the most well-known form of early voting, and has been offered for almost every Commonwealth and state election since Federation. This is when an elector requests a postal vote application from an electoral commission or, in some cases, receives an unsolicited application from a political party. The commission or party then receives the application and returns ballot materials for the elector to complete and post. Postal voting has a long history; as Brent (2008) has shown, it was an integral part of the voting experience in colonial South Australia and contributed to the development of Australia's independent electoral administration tradition. Fredman (1968) has also researched how the Australian 'ballot' – the innovation of the secret vote – spread to and was accepted in the US around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Here, postal voting was seen as an integral part of the Australian reform 'package'.



**Table 1: 'Top 10' Victorian Legislative Assembly Districts by early voting in person, 2014 Victorian state election**

	Total early votes	Total postal votes	Total turnout	Early vote as percentage of turnout
South-West Coast District	19066	1895	42497	44.86
Ovens Valley District	16882	1137	38506	43.84
Bass District	16387	2745	41985	39.03
Mildura District	15240	1150	39199	38.87
Bendigo East District	15663	2664	41761	37.50
St Albans District	14860	1779	41231	36.04
Kororoit District	15200	1631	42500	35.76
Morwell District	14790	1138	42413	34.87
Wendouree District	13274	2630	38195	34.75
Niddrie District	13800	3510	40149	34.37

**Source: (VEC 2015)**

The second reason for this analysis is Victoria's recent reforms to its electoral legislation and electoral administration. In 2002 the Victorian Parliament passed the *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic). The Act was the first, major revision of Victoria's electoral legislation in 100 years. Previously the *Constitution Act 1958* (Vic) was Victoria's principle electoral legislation.

While subject to minor amendments it was not all that different to the Act in its 1890 form. As a result, as noted by the VEC, Victoria's electoral architecture was 'poorly organised, lacking prescription in many areas and not reflective of changing social and administrative practices facing contemporary electoral administration' (VEC 2002, p.9) – 'social' seems a key statement here. The new Act was thus conceived as a one stop shop for Victoria's electoral administrators. It also laid the groundwork for further electoral reforms; in 2003 the Victorian Parliament established a Constitutional Commission to investigate reforms to the Parliament involving constitutional change – the Commission's findings led to the introduction of passing of the *Constitution (Parliamentary Reform) Act 2003* (Vic), introducing four-year fixed term Parliaments, restricting the ability of the Legislative Council to block supply and a new Legislative Council elected by a system of proportional representation, with eight districts electing five members.

Streamlining access to early voting was one of the key features of the 2005 reforms. The first version of the *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic) gave the VEC authority to determine where early voting centres were placed – at the time, some political parties were concerned about queues at election day voting centres (GTV 9 1999). It also established a 10-point criteria for early and postal voting; NSW and Queensland have similar systems today (Queensland Electoral Commission 2015; NSW Electoral Commission 2015). Following this, in 2005 access to early voting in person was further eased with the passing of the *Electoral Legislation (Further Amendment) Bill 2005* (Vic). The Bill amended the Act by shortening the criteria for early voting in person, requiring only that an elector declare verbally that they were unable to vote on election day. We have surprisingly few insights into the rationale for this change: ostensibly, it is possible the then Labor Government simply wanted to 'modernise' Victoria's electoral administration. Attorney-General, Rob Hulls, sold the reform on these grounds in his second reading speech in support of the Bill in Parliament (Victorian Parliament Debates 2005, p.651).

At this point we fast forward to 2014, and the third reason why Victoria's recent history with early voting in person warrants analysis. Until recently, there were few, if any, challenges to Victoria's more 'relaxed' early voting provisions. This changed in early 2015. Maria Rigoni, an unsuccessful Palmer United Candidate for the Northern Metropolitan Region at the 2014 Victorian state election, petitioned the Victorian Supreme Court to overturn the Victorian state election. Rigoni basically argued the election should be voided because the VEC failed to properly apply the provisions for early voting in person in the *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic). Though the petition was dismissed in March 2015, it raised some interesting questions. In his decision, Justice Garde noted the lack of clarity around the decision to weaken Victoria's early voting provisions. He accepted that 'in some instances, there [was] non-compliance with s98(b)' and that some people voted early when they were, in reality, perfectly capable of voting on Saturday (VSC97 2015, 65) – Rigoni supplied several affidavits from Victorian electors to this effect.

Interestingly, Justice Garde also explained his interpretation of the non-compliance:

‘I conclude on the basis of the evidence of the witnesses for the petitioner that there were instances of non-compliance with s98(b), where electors were not asked whether they were unable to attend an election day voting centre during the hours of voting on election day. I also conclude on the basis of the Commission’s evidence as well as that of the petitioner that intending early voters were not advised that they had to make an oral declaration to an election officer that they were unable to attend an election day voting centre during the hours of voting on election day.’ (VSC97 2015, 65).

In my view, Justice Garde’s decision reads like a de facto questioning of s98 of the *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic) – indeed, the decision almost implies that he was contemplating who should be voting early, and what impact the 2005 legislative amendments had on the Victorian franchise. To this extent, I wonder if Justice Garde wanted to ask: did the easing of Victoria’s early voting provisions directly result in the substantial increases in early voting in person seen since 2006? Without individual-level survey data, we cannot answer this.<sup>4</sup> However, the next best question is: what are the demographic correlates of early voting in person at Victorian state elections since the 2005 reforms to the *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic)? To test this, I refer to existing theories explaining voter turnout, and the convenience voting literature.

### **Theories of voter turnout and convenience voting**

Researchers have long tried to explain why people choose to vote. Downs (1958) developed the first voting calculus model, explaining the decision to vote as a rational one by citizens who perceive benefits from doing so. Building on this idea, Riker and Ordeshook (1968) argued that voters participate in elections because it allows them to publicly express their support for a political party or ideology, thereby affirming their allegiance to a particular party or cause. Over two decades later, Aldrich (1993) suggested that people vote due to a flawed logic – to Aldrich, ‘the marginality of the decision to turnout to vote provides an opportunity for political leaders and groups to affect turnout through their strategic actions’ (Aldrich 1993, p.274). In essence, for Aldrich, turnout is a marginal decision, based on low costs and low expected benefits for the majority of voters, and perhaps easily manipulated.

In terms of studies focusing on early voting, the theoretical framework of these studies assumes there is a calculus to voting and that voters participate in elections after weighing up the costs and the benefits. Some of these costs include the time it takes to register to vote (this is obviously more important in a non-compulsory voting context), the time it takes to get to a polling place, to queue, as well as the time it takes to consider candidates/choices on the ballot. Using these principles, Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) developed their famous profile of an election day voter, suggesting that for individuals with higher socio-economic status, the costs of voting are less. Based on these ideas, Stein and Garcia-Monet (1997) conducted some of the first studies of the socio-economic background of US early voters, using aggregate data from 224 Texas counties to demonstrate an association between wealth

---

<sup>4</sup> In 2006 and 2010 the VEC, engaged Colmar Brunton, a market research firm, to evaluate their election services, including services to early voters. The study was limited; just 100 contact surveys of early voters were completed on each occasion (VEC 2007; 2011).

and higher levels of early voting. Later, Gronke and Toffey (2008) examined the psychological determinants of early voting. They found that early voters tended to be older, better educated and more cognitively aware of election campaigns and politics (Gronke and Toffey 2008).<sup>5</sup>

By the late 1990s and early 2000s there was increased scholarly interest in the relationship between the traditional, cost/benefits based analysis of voter turnout and the emerging trend of early voting. Following on from Berinsky (2005), studies by Stein (1998) and Kropf (2012) have demonstrated ‘few differences’ between election day voters and early voters. Neely and Richardson (2001) also found that early voters are more politically engaged, and ‘partisans’ who follow elections closely. Says Berinsky of Neely and Richardson’s discussion:

‘...[early voting reforms] did not increase the demographic representativeness of the electorate. Multivariate analysis found no significant demographic differences between early and election-day voters, though bivariate analysis indicated that wealthy voters used early voting at a higher rate than other income groups.’ (Berinsky 2005, p.481)

More recently, some scholars have questioned the Berinsky-based ‘orthodoxy’. Alvarez, Levin and Sinclair (2012) recently demonstrated that not all convenience voters are alike and there are often vast differences between mail, early and absentee voters. President Obama’s election in 2008 also sparked interest in mobilisation and whether the Democrat campaign was comparatively more successful than others at encouraging early voters. Herron and Smith (2012) found that Democratic, African American, Hispanic, younger and first-time voters were ‘disproportionately likely to vote early in 2008 and in particular on weekends, including the final Sunday of early voting’ (Herron and Smith 2012, p.331). Considering this research, it is easy to understand criticism of attempts by some US state legislatures, such as Florida’s, to deliberately curtail access to early voting on partisan grounds (Kam and Lantigua 2012, p.1). Despite these recent advances in US-based research, there is a consensus that early voting reforms have stimulated early voting amongst those already most likely to vote.

### **Australian perspectives**

In contrast to the US, the Australian political science literature says little about the rise of early voting more generally, and the demography of early voting. This has not escaped attention; reflecting on the lack of scholarly research in Australia, in 2012 the Victorian Electoral Matters Committee recommended the VEC conduct research into the impact of

---

<sup>5</sup> During the 1990s these research findings were employed to justify US policy reforms aimed at lessening the costs of voting, thereby increasing turnout at US elections and extending the franchise. As noted by Fullmer (2015), during the 1980s and 1990s 13 US states made election day an official holiday. In the 1980s several states also passed ‘motor voter’ laws meaning a citizen could register to vote when they attempted to change their driver’s license. In addition, the next wave of election reform focused on election day registration and then, later, early voting.



early voting on voter turnout, and the demography of early voters (Parliament of Victoria 2012, p.83).

It is true that we have few, direct insights into Australian early voting behaviour and practices, notwithstanding studies by Reader (2014), Orr (2015) and commentary from Chen (2015). Australia's electoral commissions have shown some interest in early voting. The AEC (2014) found a reasonable correlation between federal Divisions with high levels of early voting, in the form of pre-poll ordinary votes or early votes in person, and populations of middle age and older Australians with average incomes and lower levels of education. In this context it is important to define what a 'pre-poll ordinary vote' is; in 2010 the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (Cwth) was amended by the *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Pre Poll Voting and Other Measures) Bill 2010*. Since then early votes have been treated as ordinary votes for the purposes of vote counting.<sup>6</sup> The AEC also found that pre-poll declaration votes – votes taken when electors vote outside their home Division – are cast predominantly by people from higher socio-economic backgrounds (AEC 2014, p.6).

There is also some critical support for one of the old 'chestnuts' in Australian psephology: that postal voters tend to be older. The AEC's 2014 analysis demonstrated a positive correlation between postal voting and federal electoral Divisions with high proportions of electors aged 65 and above. The ACT Electoral Commission also found a similar association between postal voting and the proportion of electors in an ACT electoral District aged 65 and above (Reader 2014(2), p.11). While there is a well-established link between increasing age and electoral participation, these studies seemingly confirm an otherwise anecdotally accepted feature of Australian voting practice.

Another, useful source of information about Australian early voting behaviour comes from comparable Commonwealth countries. In research commissioned by Elections Canada, Blais et al (2006) examined data from the 2006 Canadian Election Study and found that those who use advance polls (early voting) tend to be older, more political, more likely to identify with a party, and are more likely to have been contacted by a political party. Interestingly, they also found no real link between income and education and advance polling (Blais et al 2006, p.14).

Research into the changing nature of Australian electoral participation, and the drivers of voter turnout in electoral systems with compulsory voting, also offers further insight into who might be voting early at Australian and Victorian elections. There is a well-established link between social tenure – as defined by how long an individual has lived in a community – and electoral participation (Geys 2006, p.643). Theory suggests that the longer someone lives in a community, the more chance they have of being 'connected' to their neighbours and peers. As Dowding, John and Rubenson (2012) show, this connection helps individuals feel invested in where they live, local issues and governance. On a practical level it also increases familiarity with the mechanisms of voting, such as the location of polling places. Necessarily,

---

<sup>6</sup> Given the substantial increase in early voting in person at the 2014 Victorian state election, there have been calls for the VEC to begin counting pre-poll votes on election night (Johnston 2014, p.1). At present counting of early votes does not commence until after polling day.

a key aspect of social tenure is how long a person has lived at the same address, how often they have moved, how far, and the impact of this mobility on their social functions (ABS 2010, p.1). To this end, Hoffman and Lazaridis (2013) demonstrated a strong association between the level of 5-year population stability in Australian State electoral districts and voter turnout.

As noted by Hoffman (2013) and Brent (2008), population stability is a sign of relative affluence in many Australian cities. Housing mobility varies greatly across different social groups and we know that people move for any number of reasons (ABS 2010, p.p. 3-4). In 2010 the ABS and the University of Melbourne analysed the Australian Social Trends circular 4102.0 – Moving House. The report found that around two in five (43%) people aged 15 years and over were recent movers in 2007-2008. However, some groups were more mobile, including people in young households without children (90%), parents in couple families with dependent children only where their eldest child was under five years (72%) and lone parents with dependent children (59%). The research also identifies why people do not move. People who are renting public housing move less in comparison to private renters, with only 43 percent of public renters moving in the past five years (ABS 2010, p.4). Similar findings explain why other people ‘plan to move but don’t’; moving house is usually associated with a high financial cost (72 percent said they could not afford to buy a new dwelling, and 14 percent said they could not afford the costs associated with moving) (ABS 2010, p.4). In this context, a District with high levels of population movement can be considered affluent.

Having school-age children has a similar, positive impact on electoral participation. Parents of school-age children will know this draws the family into the wider community, involving the school and local organisations. Mackay (2009) explored this in detail. These observations align nicely with the little we know about Australian voters’ reasons for voting early. While the few surveys of Australian early voting behaviour suggest that early voters vote early for convenience (VEC 2007), anecdotal accounts also suggest that early voters vote early because they have busy weekends. Having children certainly explains this. According to the ABS more than 1.7 million Australian children compete in organised sports (ABS 2012, p.1); the most popular of these, soccer and football, traditionally schedule Saturday competitions. Facing a hectic Saturday morning, voters may decide to get voting out of the way during the week.

In line with the research and theory outlined above, it is possible to develop some hypotheses about what the demographic correlates of early voting in person at the past three Victorian elections might be:

- a) That Victoria early voters (in person) are likely to share similar demographic characteristics with early voting populations in jurisdictions without compulsory voting; and

- b) Consistent with the voter turnout literature, the traditional socio-economic determinants of voter turnout, such as employment and education, are likely to be strong predictors of the level of early voting in person in a Victorian electoral District.

## **Data and Method**

I develop an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model to assess the demographic correlates of early voting in person at the 2006, 2010 and 2014 Victorian state elections. OLS is used widely in the social sciences. It is used to ‘predict values of a continuous response variable using one or more explanatory variables and can also identify the strength of the relationships between these variables (these two goals of regression are often referred to as prediction and explanation)’ (Hutcheson 1999). It is also a popular research method in the US convenience voting literature: Stein (1998), Neely and Richardson (2001) and Gronke and Toffey (2008) use multivariate methods to model early voting behaviour.

The data for this study come from two separate sources. The dependent variable is the total number of early votes in person cast at an early voting centre in each of the 88 Victorian Legislative Assembly Districts at the 2006, 2010 and 2014 Victorian state elections. This data is from the VEC’s ‘Virtual Tally Room’. During tabulation slight discrepancies were detected between the numbers of early votes recorded at the District level versus the total recorded for each Legislative Council Region. In light of this I opted to refer to the Legislative Assembly sources.

For the independent variables, the data comes from the 2006 and 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics’ Australian Census of Population and Housing at the SED (State Electoral District) Level. A SED roughly equates to one of the 88 Victorian Legislative Assembly Districts. For each SED profile, the ABS collates data on a range of demographic and socio-economic characteristics, broadly reflecting age, employment, ethnicity, dwelling composition, income, labour force information and other important indicators. The data has been randomised by the ABS to ensure confidentiality of any cells where there are three or less respondents.

Combined, this dataset is unique. It offers a sustained, time-series view of three Australian state elections recorded in close proximity to a Census of Population and Housing. Such conditions mean that observations about the effect of an independent variable on the dependent variable can be compared over multiple election cycles. In addition, the explanatory power of the data is enhanced by the relative stability of Victoria’s electoral boundaries during 2006 and 2014. The 2013 electoral redistribution was the first for the Parliament of Victoria since 2001, owing to a complex set of timings related to Victoria’s 2003 constitutional reforms, as discussed earlier, and established legislative triggers relating to when the redistribution could be held; basically, after the 2006 reforms, the first available date was November 2012 (Electoral Boundaries Commission 2013, p.2).

As can be seen in Table Two, the model consists of seven independent variables. These were selected based on the research and theoretical frameworks discussed above, the convenience voting literature, literature on voter turnout and studies examining the decline in Australian electoral participation. In terms of measurement, each independent variable represents the raw number of people corresponding to that measurement in a Legislative Assembly District. With the dependent and independent variable sharing the same unit of measurement, we can have a greater level of confidence in interpreting results from the unstandardised coefficients.

During analysis, the model was trimmed to reflect the fact that socio-economic data are often highly correlated with electoral indicators. One example of this is the bivariate relationship between median income and turnout in Australian electoral Districts (Hoffman and Laziridis 2013, p.35). A similar correlation was detected in this dataset. Removing these variables presented a catch 22: while such deliberate intervention introduces bias into model selection I opted to remove highly correlated variables due to the relative inability of an OLS model to respond to over fitting, and in an attempt to mitigate obvious methodological concerns around multicollinearity. Where possible, a similar, less correlated variable measuring a broadly commensurate socio-economic indicator is used: for instance, in the case of median income, employment is substituted. As can be seen in all three regression figures, the variance inflation factor (VIF) for each of the seven independent variables exceeds 3 on only one occasion with a non-statistically significant variable. Following the work of Voss (2004), as a further precaution I have also taken care with effect size. Voss suggests that measuring significance at less than the .005 level may ameliorate the influence of multicollinearity. By doing this I compensate for aggregate data analysis, which tends to produce high standard errors – I note the constant in each of the three regression tables is high. Given the inherent potential for high multicollinearity in my data sources, I am comfortable with the final output.

Another factor worth considering is that the Census data at the SED level are varying measures of similar characteristics. As seen in the model below, one of the Census measures is the total rate of people born overseas in an electoral District. From the same pool of 69 potential Census variables, the ABS also measures foreign births from a range of regions and countries. Correlation aside, I find the general measure more appropriate for this analysis.

**Table 2: List of independent variables – Australian Census of Population and Housing, 2006 and 2011**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Measurement</b>	<b>Discussion</b>
Tertiary qualifications	Raw number of people in SED	Number of people holding at least a bachelor degree
Changed address since 2001	Raw number of people in SED	Number of people who have changed address in the five year period since the last Census
Born overseas	Raw number of people in SED	Number of people in the SED not born in Australia
Aged 5-14	Raw number of people in SED	Number of people aged 5-14
No religion	Raw number of people in SED	Number of people reporting having no religion
Employment	Raw number of people in SED	Number of people in full-time employment, as measured by 35 hours per week
Indigenous	Raw number of people in SED	Number of people who identify as Indigenous

**Source: ABS 2006; 2011**

## Findings and discussion

Testing the model across the 2006, 2010 and 2014 Victorian state elections, I find a significant, positive association between early voting in person and the number of people in a Legislative Assembly District who changed address in the 5-year period prior to the relevant Census. The association holds over the three Victorian elections in question and increases with each election; as seen in Tables 4-6, the unstandardised coefficient of .261 for the 2014 Victorian state election is almost double that for the 2006 Victorian election of .132. The variable is statistically significant at the .005 (except .006 in 2010) level for all three elections. Put another way, interpretation of the unstandardised coefficient reveals that for every 100 extra voters who changed address in a Victorian Legislative Assembly District in 2006, one could expect to see an extra 13.6 early voters. This increased to 26.1 early voters in 2014 per 100 electors who changed address.

In contrast, I find a negative association between early voting in person at all three Victorian state elections in question, and the number of people born overseas in a Legislative Assembly District. This association is not unexpected. In Australia we know that people from migrant backgrounds, especially those newly arrived in Australia, face significant barriers to electoral participation, including language issues, lack of knowledge of Australia's political system and misunderstanding of the roles of Australia's three tiers of government (ECCV 2012, p.2). Through analysis of informal ballot papers, the VEC has also demonstrated a positive bivariate correlation between Victorian Legislative Assembly Districts with high populations of electors from non-English speaking backgrounds, and rates of informal voting (0.568 at the 2010 Victorian state election) (VEC 2011, p.66). As noted by the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria (ECCV 2012, p.3), migrants often struggle with Australia's preferential voting system. Given the VEC's stated commitment to community engagement for people from migrant backgrounds, and what we know about how migrant communities are mobilised in terms of electoral participation (usually through community newspapers and radio), we might expect migrants who vote, including establishing migrants, to do so on election day.<sup>7</sup>

While these findings neither directly confirm either of my two hypotheses, they do offer strong support for the key tenants of this article; that there are similarities between early voting populations in compulsory and non-compulsory voting systems, and that the traditional socio-demographic determinants of voter turnout help explain who votes early in person at Victorian elections. This requires some clarification. As we have seen, the rate of address change in a District has not been strictly regarded as a 'traditional' determinant of voter turnout. However, we have seen those with greater socio-economic resources tend to change address at higher rates than others in the community, as theorised by the ABS.

These observations are further reinforced by Census data. As seen in Table Three, in the 2006 and 2011 Census the top five Victorian Legislative Assembly Districts with the highest

---

<sup>7</sup> The VEC worked hard to provide a favourable voting experience for migrants and culturally and linguistically diverse communities on election day, including employing staff who speak languages other than English relevant to community profiles in the District. In 2010 the VEC hired 522 multilingual staff. See: (VEC 2011, p.43).

population mobility in the five years to the last relevant Census all rank in the top in terms of household median income, with the notable exception of Narre Warren South District in 2006 and Cranbourne District in 2001. While we cannot read too much into this, nor naturally assume causality from any findings in this paper, Table Three suggests that mobility, at least in Victoria, is associated with households with greater resources. Table Three also provides some insight into where we might expect to see greater levels of early voting in person in future, if these Districts continue to experience significant levels of population change.

<b>Table 3: ‘Top 5’ Victorian Legislative Assembly Districts by percentage of persons who have changed address since last Census, 2006 and 2011 Census</b>				
<b>2006 Census data</b>				
	<b>District</b>	<b>Party Hold</b>	<b>Percentage of total population who changed address</b>	<b>Rank, Median Income</b>
1	Melbourne	ALP	56.6	16
2	Albert Park	ALP	51.3	4
3	Prahran	ALP	49.4	6
4	Richmond	ALP	46.9	10
5	Narre Warren South	ALP	42.1	42
<b>2011 Census data</b>				
	<b>District</b>	<b>Party Hold</b>	<b>Percentage of total population who changed address</b>	<b>Rank, Median Income</b>
1	Melbourne	ALP	62.1	14
2	Prahran	LIB	55.3	6
3	Albert Park	ALP	54.3	4
4	Cranbourne	ALP	50.9	49
5	Richmond	ALP	49.2	7
<b>Source: ABS 2006; 2011</b>				

It is important to address the issue of policy intention, not because we can predict policy but because it is central to the idea of early voting as an electoral reform. Even with access to Hansard, it is not clear the then Labor Government foresaw the impact of the 2005 legislation changes to early voting in person – although, one suspects the ALP would happily support the table above. I suspect that the VEC was equally unaware. This is an intriguing paradox; on the one hand, Australia’s electoral commissions are aware of underlying factors driving to popularity of early voting in person – in 2011 the AEC was told by the Electoral Commissioner’s advisory board on electoral research (CABER) that voters were demanding convenient, flexible voting practices (AEC 2011, p.4). The AEC was convinced enough to report the finding. On the other, I find it difficult to accept that most Australian electoral commissions, which, notwithstanding the ‘missing votes’ episode from the 2013 federal election, are almost universally internationally lauded for their professionalism and research associations, have not been aware of the broad consensus in the US literature that flexible voting reforms can exaggerate socio-economic biases in the electorate.

Electoral reforms, therefore, have unintended consequences, just as Berinsky said in 2005 of the flexible voting reforms in the US. The CABER’s research for the AEC hints at another;

that convenience voting might have a negative effect on voter turnout (AEC 2011, p.4). Despite Australia's compulsory voting laws, it is well established that turnout at periodic elections in Australia has declined in real terms in the past decade (Brent 2008). While we cannot draw definitive conclusions without further analysis, this paper has shown that the strongest demographic correlate of early voting in person in Victoria is the number of people who have changed address in a District in the past five years. As seen in Table Three, two of the Districts featured are two, inner-city Melbourne electorates; Melbourne District and Albert Park District. It is interesting that there have been recent by-elections in both Melbourne District and Albert Park District. Both elections saw record low levels of voter turnout – at the 2012 Melbourne District by-election, only 68 percent of eligible electors voted, a record low for a Victorian by-election. At the 2007 Albert Park District by-election, just 70 percent of electors participated. Notwithstanding the fact that by-elections tend to record lower rates of turnout than general elections, Table Three, at the least, raises the intriguing, but perhaps concerning, notion that there is a link between Districts with low levels of voter turnout, high levels of people who have recently changed address and early voting in person.

## **Conclusion**

Having established that affluent Victorians have benefited from easier access to early voting in person, I accept this analysis has limitations. Echoing Stein's own concerns about her own aggregate analysis of early voting behaviour (1998), some might say that this article suffers from an obvious ecological fallacy; that I use aggregate-level data to describe early voting in person, an individual-level phenomenon. In response to this, at this point in time, I reason that Australian understanding of early voting behaviour is probably about where the US was in 1995. Without individual-level surveys of early voters and the highly-detailed, publicly available electoral records from US electoral authorities, aggregate data is the best measure we have.

I also accept that my model could be strengthened by comparisons with other Australian jurisdictions. NSW and Queensland have more prescriptive criteria for early voting in person, similar to the criteria in the first version of the *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic). As noted earlier, recent amendments to Commonwealth electoral legislation offer interesting grounds for research. However, I support this analysis on the grounds that it offers a unique, time-series view of a particular Australian jurisdiction's policy developments in relation to early voting in person, matched with appropriate voting and Census data.

This analysis once again reminds us that Australian electoral participation is changing. Consistent with general findings in the literature, traditional efforts to stimulate electoral participation, and Australia's twin compulsion initiatives – voting and enrolment – are less effective as a result of changing social, cultural and work practices. In a similar way, the 2005 reforms easing access to early voting in person in Victoria did not have the effect of extending the early voting franchise; indeed, they may have made early voting more

appealing to Victorians who already have high levels of electoral participation. On this basis, it would be difficult to restrict access to flexible voting services, as proposed by some political parties like the Nationals Victoria and the Australian Greens. At a time when Australia's key electoral indicators are trending negatively – higher informal voting, lower turnout and declining enrolment as a percentage of the eligible population – it may also be prudent not to; for the types of voters who have come to rely on flexible voting services, \$74 (the current fine for not voting in Victoria) might seem a fair price in lieu of an hour of their Saturday. This calculus has strong parallels with US-like convenience voting behaviour.

In order to explore these questions more thoroughly, we need individual-level, broad scale survey data about early voting.<sup>8</sup> If the next Australian Election Study were to include specific questions about when a person voted, rather than a question focusing on a voter's interest in more flexible voting methods, we could use this data to assess the political attitudes of early voters, whether they are partisan or more interested in politics. This information would allow us to develop a broader understanding of why early voting is Australia's fastest growing form of electoral participation. This research must be a matter of priority; with just 60 percent of voters casting their vote on election day at the 2014 Victorian state election, it is only a matter of time before there are Australian state and federal elections where the majority of electors vote early, either by post or in person, mirroring the early voting figures seen across much of the United States since the 1990s.<sup>9</sup> This would amount to the most dramatic shift in Australian voting behaviour since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1924.

---

<sup>8</sup> Professor Thad Kousser from UCLA San Diego and I are working on a project to this end based on data from the 2015 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, with results expected in mid-2016.

<sup>9</sup> Perhaps in recognition of this, the VEC has publicly flagged its intention to begin counting early votes on election night at future Victorian state elections, in order to avoid potential delays to election results.



## Early voting in person at 2006, 2010 and 2014 Victorian state elections – regression models

<b>Table 4: Early voting in person at 2006 Victorian state election, as regressed by model from 2006 Census</b>					
	<b>B</b>	<b>S.E</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>VIF</b>
Tertiary qualifications	.019	.037	.087	.608	3.165
Changed address since 2001	.132	.045	.543	.004	3.667
Born overseas	-.097	.024	-.58	.000	2.228
Aged 5-14	.075	.08	.126	.351	2.002
No religion	-.136	.059	-.368	.024	2.814
Employment	-.022	.052	-.076	.665	3.419
Indigenous	.1	.502	.026	.843	1.899
Constant	3243.24	885.06 (RSE 27%)		.000	
Adjusted r2	.210	1065.107			
N	88	(number of Legislative Assembly Districts)			

<b>Table 5: Early voting in person at 2010 Victorian state election, as regressed by model from 2011 Census</b>					
	<b>B</b>	<b>S.E</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>VIF</b>
Tertiary qualifications	-.064	.066	-.206	.339	4.703
Changed address since 2006	.199	.070	.489	.006	3.000
Born overseas	-.109	.044	-.427	.016	3.070
Aged 5-14	.124	.184	.097	.503	2.128
No religion	-.059	.095	-.108	.539	3.155
Employment	.011	.107	.020	.916	3.673
Indigenous	.826	.697	.154	.240	3.000
Constant	3914.981	2206.8 (RSE 56%)		.081	
Adjusted r2	.296	1798.6955			
N	88	(number of Legislative Assembly Districts)			

<b>Table 6: Early voting in person at 2014 Victorian state election, as regressed by model from 2011 Census</b>					
	<b>B</b>	<b>S.E</b>	<b>Beta</b>	<b>Sig.</b>	<b>VIF</b>
Tertiary qualifications	-.114	.080	-.269	.155	4.555
Changed address since 2006	.261	.083	.461	.002	2.803
Born overseas	-.155	.049	-.489	.002	3.038
Aged 5-14	-.102	.225	-.058	.652	2.114
No religion	-.379	.111	-.530	.001	3.109
Employment	.215	.127	.277	.093	3.445
Indigenous	1.108	.844	.154	.193	1.797
Constant	8624.524	2641.7 (RSE 30%)		.002	
Adjusted r2	.330	2303.1420			
N	88	(number of Legislative Assembly Districts)			

## References

- Aldrich, J, 1993. 'Rational Choice and Turnout', *American Journal of Political Science*, 37(1).
- Alvarez, R. M, Levin, I, Sinclair, J. A, 2012. 'Making Voting Easier: Convenience Voting in the 2008 Presidential Election'. *Political Research Quarterly*, 2012, 65(2).
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2010. 'Australian Social Trends December 2010 – Moving House', 4102.0.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012. 'Year Book 2012 – Sport and Physical Recreation', 1301.0
- Australian Electoral Commission, 2011. *AEC Research Directions: Recommendations from CABER*, Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra.
- Australian Electoral Commission, 2014. 'Early voting in Australia: Causes and Consequences', paper prepared for the Australian Political Science Conference, Sydney, 29 September 2014.
- Berinsky, A. J, 2005. The perverse consequences of electoral reform in the United States. *State Politics and Policy Quarterly*, 5(3).
- Blais, A, Dobrzynska, A, Loewen, P, 2006. 'Potential impact of extended advance voting on voter turnout', Elections Canada, Working Paper series.
- Brent, P, 2008. *The rise of the returning officer: how colonial Australia developed advanced electoral institutions*. Doctoral thesis: Australian National University.
- Chen, P, 2015. 'Early voting hits new highs in NSW and Australia, but is it a good idea', *The Conversation*, 8 August.
- Constitution (Parliamentary Reform) Bill*, 2003, Explanatory Memorandum, 27 February 2003.
- Dowding, K, John, P, Rubenson, D, 2012. 'Geographic Mobility, Social Connections and Voter Turnout', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 22(2).
- Downs, A, 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Harper, New York.
- Electoral Boundaries Commission, Victoria, 'Report on the 2012-2013 redivision of electoral boundaries', Electoral Boundaries Commission, Melbourne.
- Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, 2012. Submission to Victorian Electoral Matters Committee, *Inquiry into the 2010 Victorian state election and matters related thereto*, Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne.

- Fredman, L, 1968. *The Australian Ballot: The Story of an American Reform*, Michigan State University Press, East Lansing.
- Fullmer, E, 2015. 'Early voting: do more sites lead to higher turnout', *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy*. June 2015, 14(2).
- Geys, B, 2006. 'Rational' theories of voter turnout', *Political Studies Review*, 4(1).
- Green, A, 2014. 'Is it time for a fundamental review of the Senate system', Australian Senate Occasional Lecture Series, 14 February 2014, Canberra.
- Gronke, P, 2008. 'Early Voting Reforms and American Elections'. *William and Mary Law Review*, 17(2).
- Gronke, P, Toffey, D, 2012. 'The Psychology and Institutional Determinants of Early Voting', *Journal of Social Issues*, 64(3).
- GTV 9 Melbourne Telecast, '1999 Victorian state election'. Retrieved 15 June 2015 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4jQcMpj4fnE>.
- Herron, M, Smith, D, 2012. 'Souls to the Polls: Early voting in the shadow of House Bill 1355'. *Election Law Journal*, 11(3).
- Hoffman, R, Laziridis, D, 2013. 'The Limits of Compulsion: Demographic Influences on Voter Turnout in Australian State Elections'. *Australian Journal of Political Science*, 48(1).
- Hutcheson, G, 1999. *The Multivariate Social Scientist*, Sage, London.
- Johnston, M, 2014. 'ALP wants pre-poll votes counted on election night', Herald Sun, Melbourne, 26 November 2014.
- Kam, D and Lantigua, J, 2012. 'Former Florida GOP leaders say voter suppression was the reason they pushed new election law', Palm Beach Post, 25 November 2012.
- Mackay, H, 2009. *Real Communities*, Griffith Review, 24.
- Mills, P, 2015. Forthcoming evaluation and survey research on NSW early voting practices commissioned by NSW Electoral Commission.
- National Conference of State Legislatures, 2015. 'Absentee and Early Voting'. National Conference of State Legislatures. Retrieved 15 June 2015 from <http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/absentee-and-early-voting.aspx>.
- Neeley, W, Richardson, L, 2001. 'Who is Early Voting? An Individual-level Examination', *Social Science Journal*, 38.

- NSW Electoral Commission, 2015. 'Before Election Day', NSW Electoral Commission, Sydney. Retrieved 15 June 2015 from [https://www.elections.nsw.gov.au/voting/before\\_election\\_day](https://www.elections.nsw.gov.au/voting/before_election_day).
- Orr, G, 2014. 'Convenience voting: The end of election day?', *Alternative Law Journal*, 39(3).
- Parliament of Australia, Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters, April 2015. 'The 2013 Federal Election: Report on the conduct of the 2013 federal election and matters related thereto', Parliament of Australia, Canberra.
- Parliament of Victoria, Electoral Matters Committee, *Transcript of Evidence*, Noah Carroll, Secretary, Australian Labor Party Victoria, 12 March 2003, p.3.
- Queensland Electoral Commission, 2015. 'Before Polling Day: Voting Options', Queensland Electoral Commission, Brisbane. Retrieved 15 June 2015 from <http://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/voting/votingoptions/before-polling-day>.
- Reader, N, 2014. Submission to ACT Parliament, *Inquiry into amendments to the 1992 Electoral Act*. Retrieved 15 June 2015 from [http://www.parliament.act.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0003/604308/Submission-14-Mr-Nathaniel-Reader.pdf](http://www.parliament.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/604308/Submission-14-Mr-Nathaniel-Reader.pdf).
- Reader, N, 2014(2). 'Early voting at Australian elections', paper presented at 2014 Australian Political Science Conference Annual Meeting, University of Sydney, 26 September 2014.
- Riker, W, Ordeshook, P, 1968. 'A Theory of the Calculus of Voting', *The American Political Science Review*, 62(1).
- Roberts, A, 2012. 'By the numbers: early voting', CNN, Turner Broadcast Systems, 25 October 2012.
- Stein, R. M, 1998. 'Introduction: early voting'. *Public Opinion Quarterly*. 62.
- Stein, R. M, Garcia-Monet, P. A, 1997. 'Voting early but not often'. *Social Science Quarterly*. 78.
- Thompson, F. D, 2004. 'Election Time: Normative Implications of Temporal Properties of the Electoral Process in the United States'. *American Political Science Review*, 98(1).
- Victorian Electoral Commission, 2003. *Report to Parliament on the 2010 Victorian state election*, Victorian Electoral Commission, Melbourne.
- Victorian Electoral Commission, 2007. *Report to Parliament on the 2010 Victorian state election*, Victorian Electoral Commission, Melbourne.
- Victorian Electoral Commission, 2011. *Report to Parliament on the 2010 Victorian state election*, Victorian Electoral Commission, Melbourne.

Victorian Electoral Commission, 2015. 'Virtual Tally Room', Victorian Electoral Commission, Melbourne.

Victorian Electoral Commission, 2015 (2). 'Reflections', VEC newsletter, Victorian Electoral Commission, Melbourne, p.1.

Victorian Parliamentary Debates, Legislative Assembly, 21 April 2005, p.651.

Voss, S, 2004. 'Multicollinearity', entry prepared for Encyclopaedia of Social Measurement. Retrieved 15 June 2015 from <http://www.uky.edu/~dsvoss/docs/multic.pdf>.

Wolfinger, R, Rosenstone, S, 1980, *Who votes?*, New Haven, Yale University Press.