

Invisible Citizens: An Exploration of Homelessness and Electoral Participation

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JL **The research project**

‘Electoral participation and homelessness’

Researchers from:

- University of South Australia
- University of Adelaide

Funded by the Australian Electoral Commission

Supported by specialist homelessness services (Hutt St Centre, Baptist Care, Neami National Street to Home)



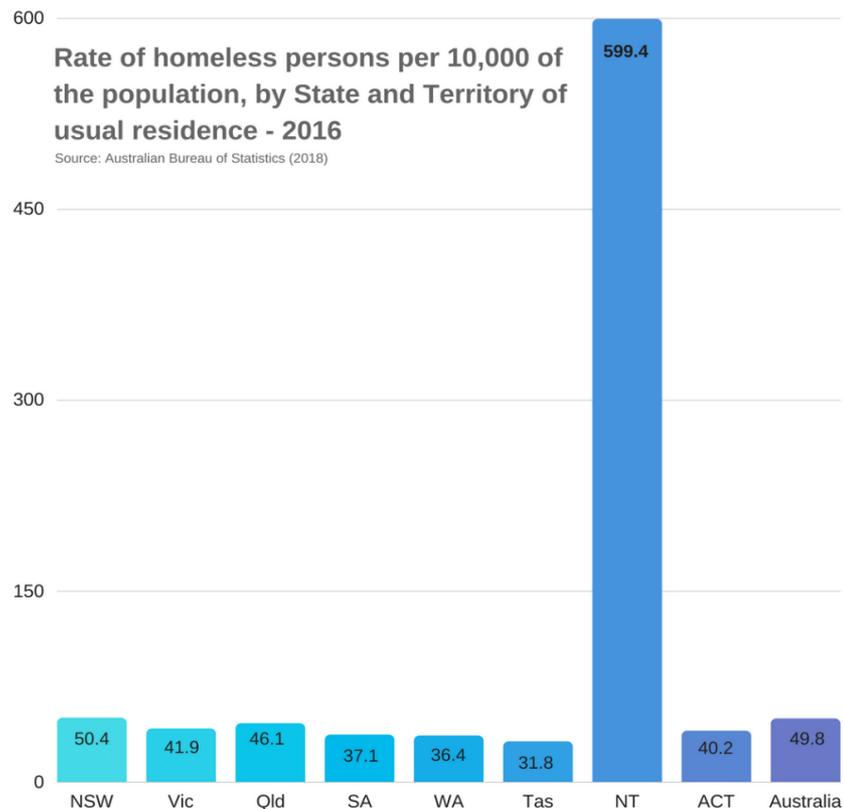
JL **Research questions**

1. Among people experiencing homelessness, what is the level of enrolment and turnout?
2. For those who vote, what is their experience of voting?
3. For those who do not always vote, what are the obstacles to enrolling and voting?
4. What would make voting easier/more attractive to this group?

JL

Homelessness in Australia

- 2016 census: 116,000 experiencing homelessness (0.5% of the population).
- ABS definition includes rough sleeping, insecure and transitory housing, overcrowding, couch surfing, emergency accommodation.
- Intersections with a range of other social issues and groups experiencing marginalisation.



LH Voting and homelessness

Substantive and inclusive enfranchisement requires not just the formal right to vote but *actually voting*.

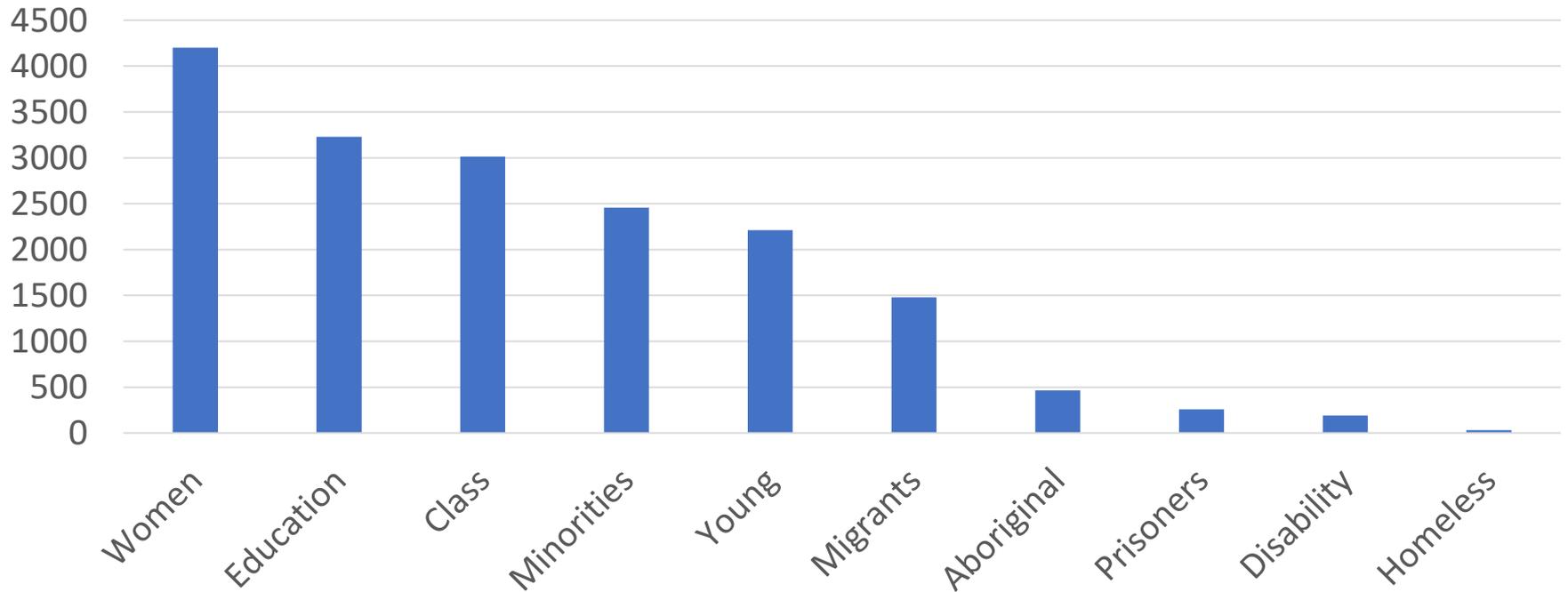
Little is known about the electoral behaviour and attitudes of people experiencing homelessness.



This is an under-researched area. **As far as we can determine, this is the largest scale study to date worldwide even though just a pilot.**

An under-researched area...

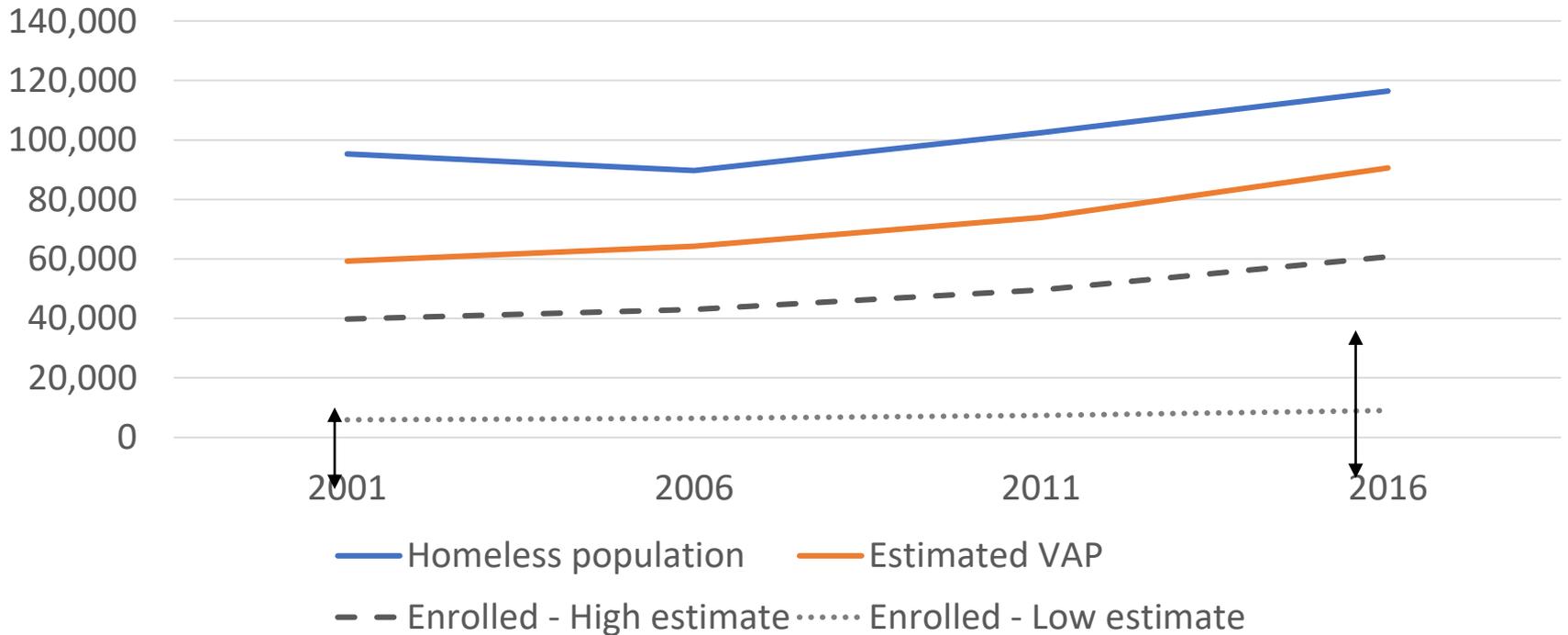
Research outputs on voting and elections by search terms
(Scopus: title, abstract and keywords)



JL

A speculative estimate...

Homelessness, voting age population, and enrolled voters



LH **Why vote?**

An obvious objection: people experiencing homelessness have more important things to worry about.

A false dichotomy: voting and securing appropriate housing are both important.

Marginalised and disadvantaged groups have greater need for their interests to be protected.

LH **Voting and inclusion**

Non-voting, especially in a compulsory voting regime, reflects social dislocation more broadly.

Voting is a source of social and political meaning and belonging.

Increasing electoral participation by socially excluded groups can reduce democratic deficits and enhance the quality of political representation.

It puts the interests of marginalised groups on the political radar.

LH **Voting and inclusion**

Voting has symbolic value.

It may also give individuals a sense of empowerment and political efficacy and creates social meaning.

Disenfranchisement is both *symptom* of and *contributor* to social exclusion.

LH Voting and inclusion

Voting is a fundamental civil liberty, **the right on which all other rights depend.**

Democratic **legitimacy** depends on **political equality** and inclusivity.

Voting is the means by which citizens hold governments to account.

LH Benefits of voting

Voters' preferences and interests count more.

When the disadvantaged vote, welfare policies tend to be more generous and the state more redistributionist.

People experiencing homelessness have **unique experiences and perspectives** that should be recognised in the political process.

Research Design

Rapid multi-method ethnographic design.

Advantages:

- Multiple and mixed methods enhance validity.
- Quantitative and qualitative data are complementary.
- Iterative and collaborative.
- Targeted when/where data are at their richest.

Four phases of data collection:

- Voting information workshops (pre-election).
- Main survey (pre-election).
- Exit survey (during pre-polling in early May).
- Interviews (following Federal Election in late May).

vc **Sampling and recruitment**

Study population: clients of specialist homelessness services. Most were currently experiencing homelessness; some were in short to medium-term accommodation.

164 unique participants:

- 59 for the voting information workshops.
- 66 for the main survey.
- 53 for the exit survey.
- 18 for the interviews.

32 participants were involved in two phases of data collection.

vc **Voting information workshops**

Presentation by AEC
and researchers.

Semi-facilitated discussion.

Qualitative data collection.



vc **Main survey**

Conducted by research team at three locations: Hutt St Centre, Baptist Care, parklands via outreach to rough sleepers.

56% were enrolled to vote

51% of those had failed to vote in a Federal election

43% missed the last Federal election

68% intended to vote in the 2019 Federal Election

vc

Main survey

64% had some or a good deal of interest in what was going on with an election

59% paid some or a good deal of attention to reports about elections

60% had some or a good deal of interest in elections overall

83% said voting had some or a good deal of importance

vc **Comparison with AES**

Homelessness cohort: 44% had a good deal of interest in what was going on with an election

AES 2016: 30% had a good deal of interest in the 2016 election

Homelessness cohort: **36%** had a good deal of interest in elections overall

AES 2016: **34%** had a good deal of interest in politics

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Exit survey

Conducted by research team at three locations: Hutt St Centre, Baptist Care, Neami National Street to Home.

47% said voting generated a greater feeling of acceptance

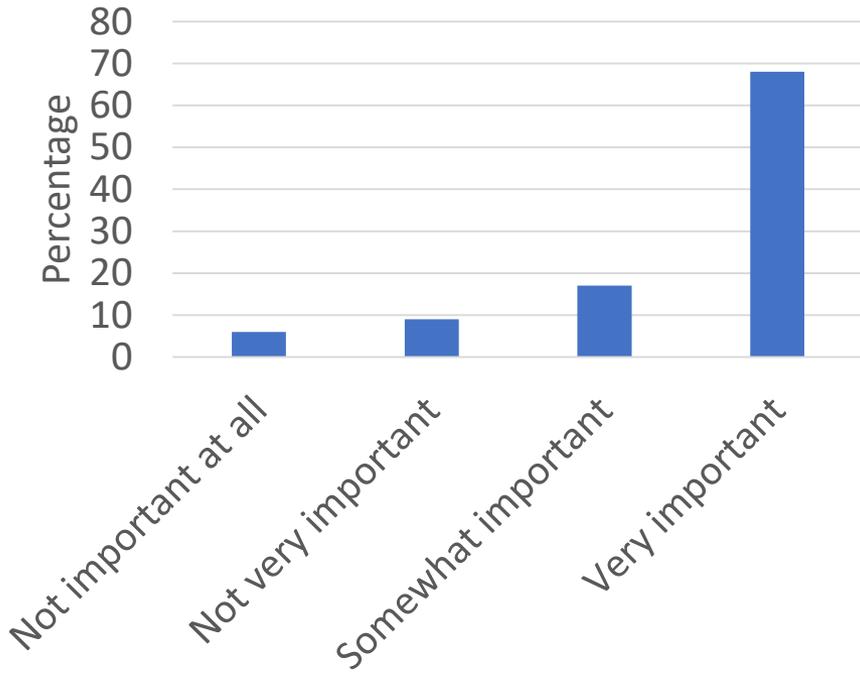
54% said voting generated a greater feeling of equality

51% said voting made a difference to their lives

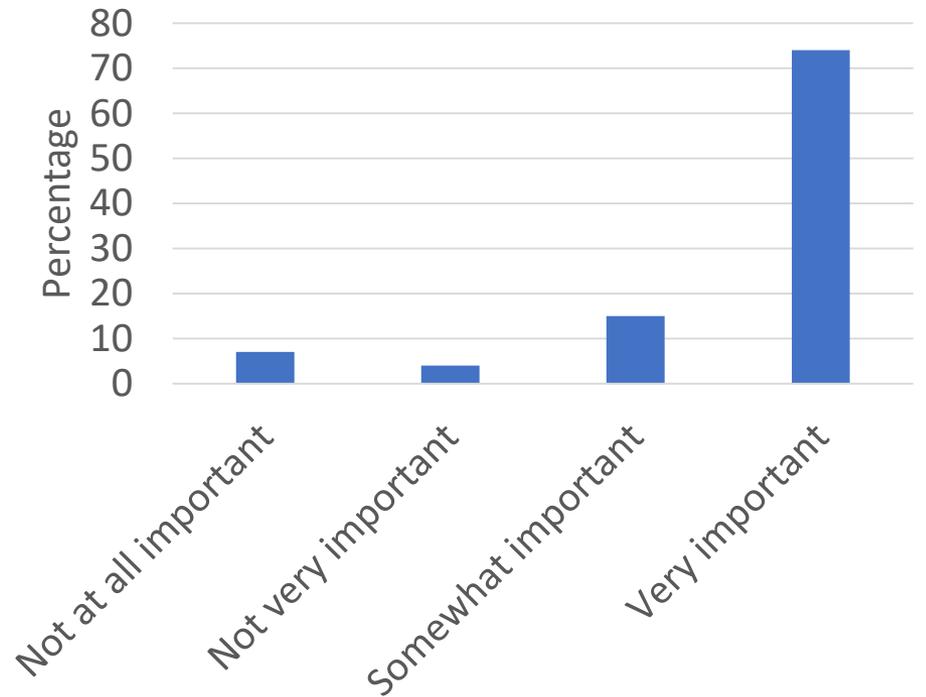
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Exit survey

Importance of voting as part of being a citizen



Importance of everybody voting



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Interviews

Of 18 participants:

- 8 had never been enrolled to vote.
- 10 were enrolled.
- 5 of them voted only sporadically.
- 7 had voted in the 2019 election.
- 2 had voted at mobile booths and were positive.
- 5 had voted on election day and 4 were positive.

vc Interviews – benefits of voting

Of recent voters, 4 reported modest positive psychological benefits and 4 reported negative psychological effects.

I felt like my vote mattered, so at the end of the day I voted, whether it will be counted or not, but you know, I felt satisfactory...I had my say on the voting system. (Participant 85, male, age 30s)

I felt sad...I looked at those pieces of paper and I folded them up and I put them in the box and I walked away in disgust (Participant 84, male, age 50s)

vc Interviews – benefits of voting

13 of the 18 interviewees identified some benefits of voting

9 said voting was important in principle, even if they didn't vote themselves

We really need to have our say, like for the Aboriginal people, you know? Cause they nicked our land and everything. (Participant 160, male, age 40s)

That was one of the main things for me, being homeless, you know, the politicians knowing that okay, we are constituents, you know, members of society, the homeless are actually coming out to vote, that my vote matters as much as those people who are working. (Participant 85, male, age 30s)

vc Interviews – obstacles to voting

13 of the 18 interviewees reported logistical obstacles to enrolling/voting

*The fact is I'm homeless, I don't know where I'm going to be next month, which makes it very difficult. If I was going to be in a place for any period of time, then I would because I'd have a lot to do with the politics in that area, you know?
(Participant 34, male, age 50s)*

I looked at it over there [the mobile polling booth] but I wasn't really sure what to do about...I look at it and go whaaat?... I find it hard. I just like don't know where to begin with stuff...I wouldn't mind getting a little bit of feedback or something in the future and that. (Participant 55, male, age 50s)

vc Interviews – obstacles to voting

14 of the 18 interviewees expressed distrust and disillusionment with politics affecting whether or not they enrolled/voted.

I just don't think they're listening, to be honest. (Participant 162, male, age 50s)

I don't think politicians and politics pay much attention to the homeless. (Participant 161, male, age 40s)

I reckon, you know, that's the thing, they don't know what we go through, like when we're on the streets. Specially like now, with the cold and all that, you know. (Participant 160, male, age 40s)

vc Interviews – obstacles to voting

5 interviewees said that for them, voting was pointless.

I sort of feel that they do what they like anyway...you can see that the people don't really matter too much...how can we entrust our lives and jobs in the hands of those people? We can't. So there's no point. (Participant 22, male, age 20s)

For a lot of years I felt like I didn't deserve to vote...I spent a lot of time institutionalised, boys' homes, jail, whatever...and now it's at the stage where nobody's interested in my vote. (Participant 34, male, age 50s)

vc Reassessing turnout

56% of people accessing specialist homelessness services in the Adelaide CBD are enrolled to vote.

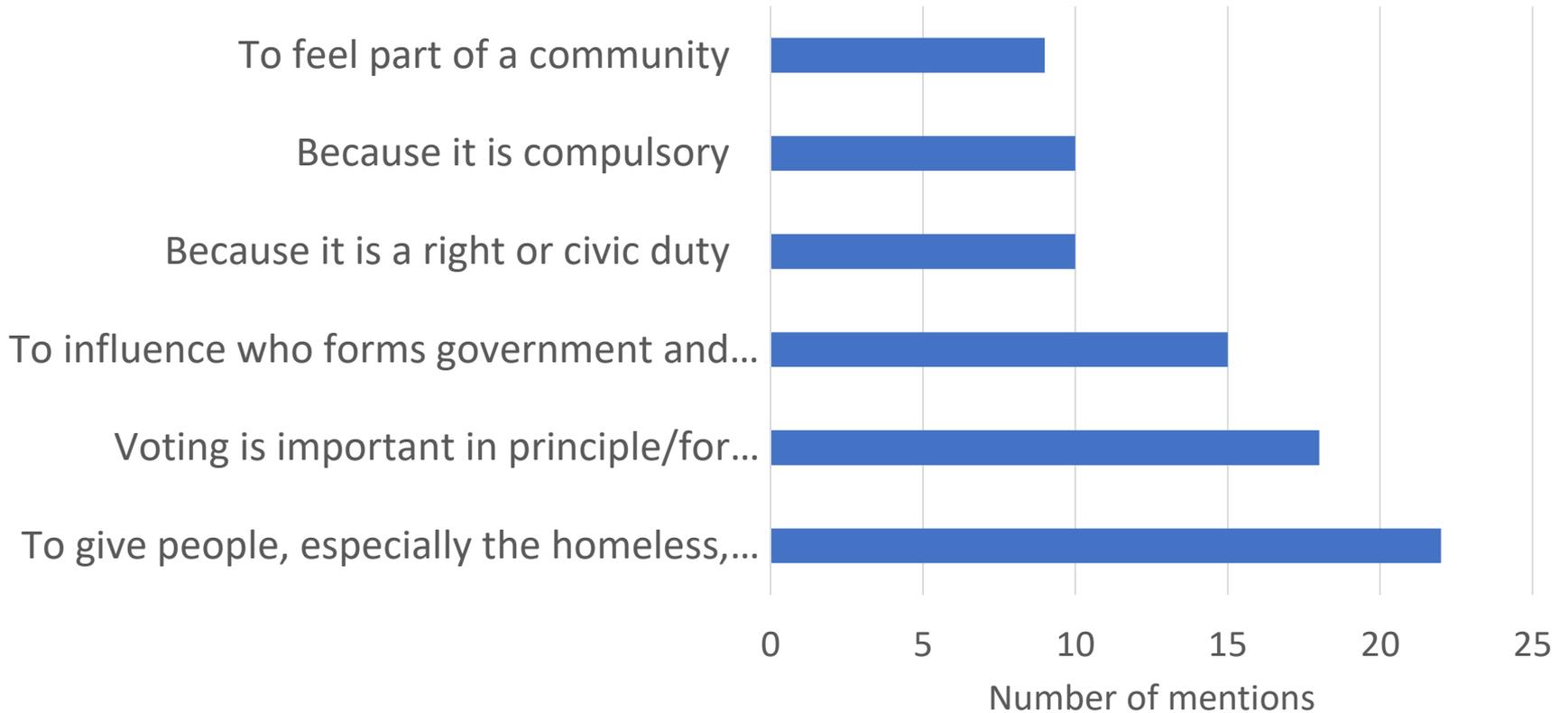
Half of that group *actually* vote.

Therefore turnout rate for this population can be estimated at around 28%.

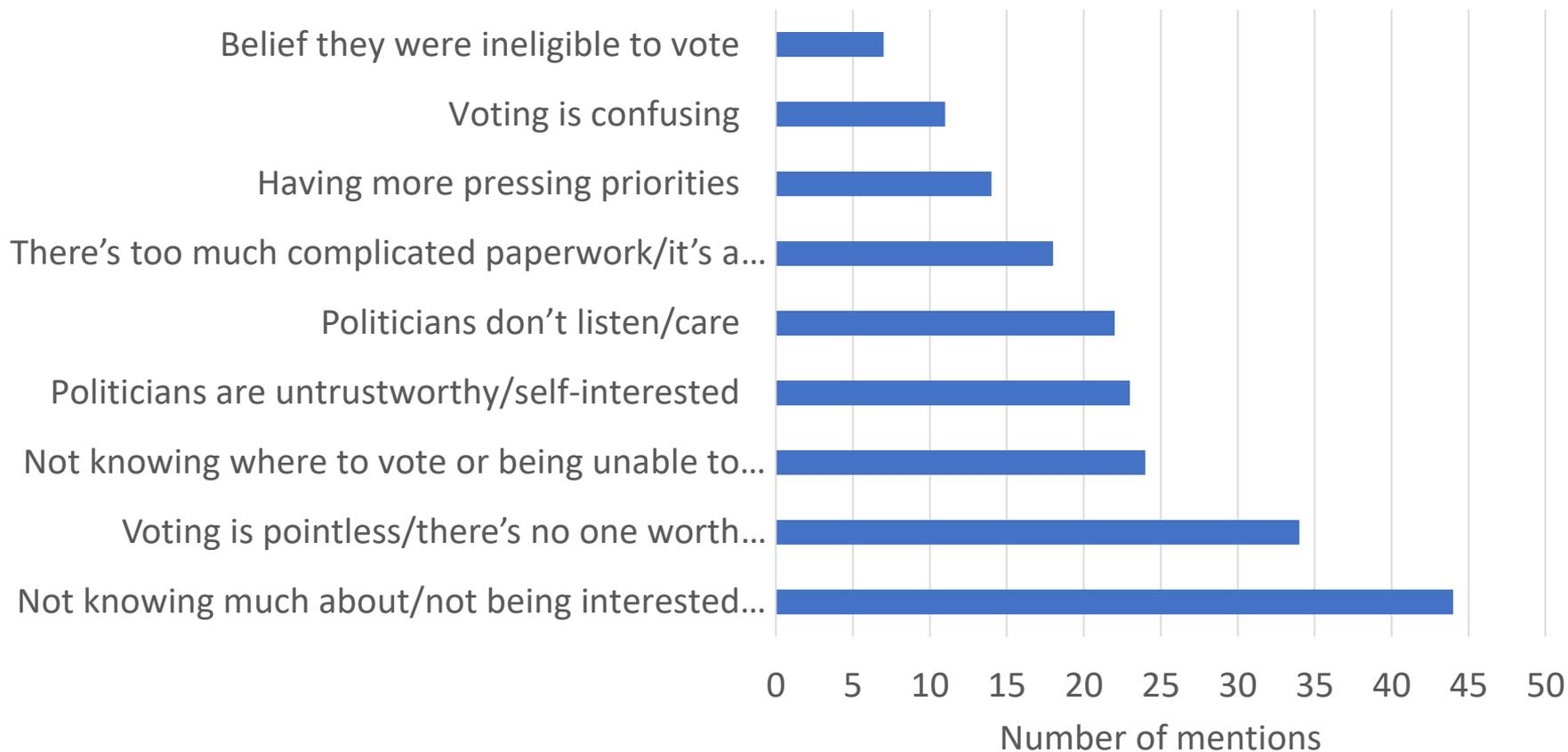
This compares with an enrolment rate of nearly 97% for the voting age population Australia-wide and turnout rates in the low 90s.

vc

Main benefits of voting



JL Main obstacles to voting



JL Political engagement

Despite low enrolment and turnout rates, reasonably high levels of political sophistication and engagement.

Participants did not think voting lacked meaning, but that it lacked meaning *for them* due to their circumstances.

Voting seen as an important and positive activity *ideally*, but not so much in practice, especially for people experiencing homelessness.

While many participants felt frustrated, impotent and ignored, and being able to vote was not enough to restore their sense of empowerment or social inclusion. **The exit survey revealed a significant number who *voted* found meaning, acceptance and a sense of equality from voting.**

JL Recommendations - communication

Focus on providing information on:

- Option to enrol as a silent voter or voter of no fixed address (and avoid a fine for not voting).
- Possibility of enrolling without documentation (e.g. identity verified by a services staff member).
- Presence of mobile pre-polling at services premises.
- Availability of information and support at mobile pre-polling booths.

JL Recommendations - partnerships

- Allow people experiencing homelessness to use the address of specialist services for allocation to an electoral district.
- Continue to develop sustained partnerships between commissions and specialist services to engage, educate and empower people experiencing homelessness.
- Enhancements to mobile pre-polling sessions (including staff training, higher levels of support, improved communication and information).
- Further research to develop the evidence base around homelessness and voting.