

# ***Victorian Electoral Commission***

**Tabled 24 February 2016**

The Auditor-General provides assurance to Parliament on the accountability and performance of the Victorian Public Sector. The Auditor-General conducts financial audits and performance audits, and reports on the results of these audits to Parliament.

On 24 February 2016, the Acting Auditor-General tabled his performance audit report, *Victorian Electoral Commission*.

## Overview

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- The Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) is an independent statutory authority responsible for conducting the state's elections.
- An opportunity to provide assurance that VEC's systems are robust.
- The audit found that:
  - VEC plan well
  - election performance remained high
  - there was dissatisfaction with queues and a rise in complaints
- VEC has positive accessibility initiatives but lack evaluation.

The Victorian Electoral Commission (or VEC) is an independent statutory authority responsible for conducting the state's elections.

The audit of VEC was an opportunity to provide assurance that the election systems and services to voters are robust.

The main audit findings are that:

- VEC plan well, election performance remained high, but there was some dissatisfaction with queues ; and
- VEC has a range of positive accessibility and engagement initiatives but these have not been thoroughly evaluated.

In conclusion, VEC need to better evaluate outcomes from their accessibility and engagement initiatives to improve participation in underrepresented communities for the 2018 state election.

## Focus of this audit

### Key areas examined

- The election planning framework
- Performance against objectives
- Effectiveness of its participation and accessibility initiatives

### Audit scope

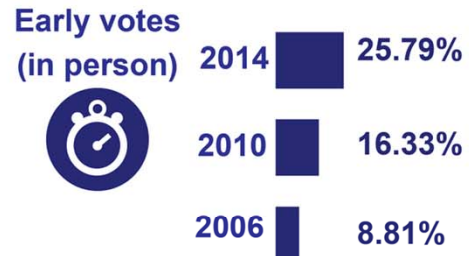
- VEC
- The planning and conduct of the 2014 state election
- Not in scope—the future of early voting or electronic voting

The audit examined three main areas:

- the election planning framework;
- VEC's performance against objectives published in the service plan; and
- the effectiveness of participation and accessibility initiatives.

## Election planning and performance

- Voting centres set up efficiently
- VEC underestimated increase in early voting



➔ Led to rise in dissatisfaction with queueing



Photo courtesy of VEC.

The key findings on election planning and performance are:

- That VEC staff can access training and tools that allow them to set up voting centres efficiently and estimate the staff and other resources required.
- While VEC predicted a rise in early voting and put additional voting centres in popular tourist areas and the CBD, there was an almost 70 per cent rise in early voting compared with 2010.
- Since VEC only allowed for a 30 per cent rise on 2010 turnout, this led to queues at some early voting centres. While those surveyed reported queueing for less than 10 minutes, there was a jump in dissatisfaction from 1 per cent in 2010 to 20 per cent in 2014.

## Election planning and performance



- Rise in early votes:



only **62%** of votes counted on election night



- Additional support was available for new election managers in 2014 worked well
- Need continued focus on reconciling paperwork

**VEC's planning tools are efficient but the rise in early voting impacted on voter satisfaction with queuing**

- The rise in early voting also meant that only 62 per cent of the total votes were counted on election night. However, this did not delay the government forming. The Electoral Commissioner has recommended changes to early vote processing.
- Additional support was available for new election managers in 2014 and this worked well. However, continued focus on improving paperwork is needed.
- Consequently, we found that VEC's planning tools are efficient but the rise in early voting impacted on voter satisfaction with queuing.

## Election performance

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7–16



VEC achieved its targets for planning and resourcing voting centres, and for voter turnout and counting.



It did not meet targets for wheelchair accessible venues, the response time for complaints, and informality rose.

When we examined the performance against published objectives we observed that:

- VEC achieved the targets set for venue planning and resourcing.
- Voter turn-out was on target at 93 per cent of the voting population. The target for overall satisfaction based on surveyed voters was 93 per cent and VEC achieved 92.6 per cent.
- Informal voting increased in 2014. Informality was observed in electorates with large ballot papers due to higher numbers of contesting parties and candidates. English proficiency is also correlated with informality in some electorates.
- The target for wheelchair accessibility was not met, but this is a challenging target as many government and privately owned buildings do not meet accessibility standards.

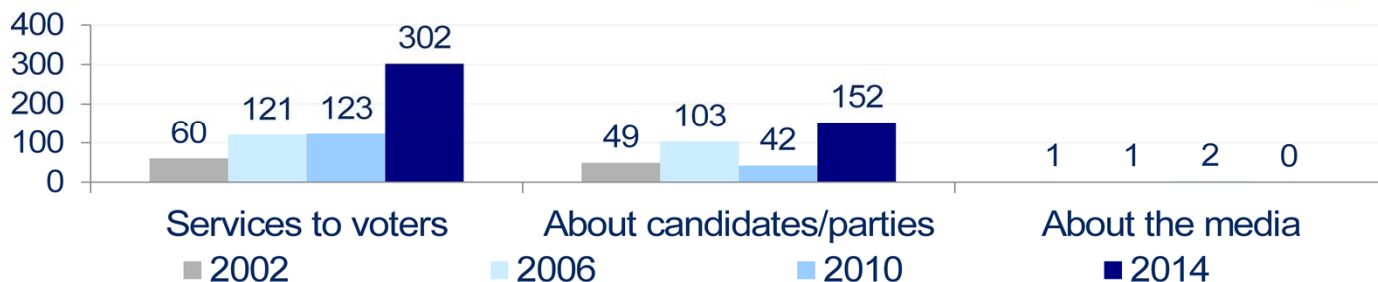
## Election performance

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- Complaints handling needs a clearer process.

### Complaints



- VEC do a lot of outreach amongst underrepresented communities.
- Need targets for engaging underrepresented communities.

**Review performance objectives to improve accountability.**

- Complaints rose significantly—there were 454 compared with 167 in 2010—which could be linked to a new email address making it easier to lodge complaint. 302 complaints were about services to voters and 152 related to the conduct of candidates or parties. This is illustrated by the graph on the slide. Complaints resolution could be improved by implementing a clearer escalation process.
- VEC do a lot of outreach with underrepresented communities such as the homeless and culturally and linguistically diverse groups. However, publishing targets for these activities will improve its accountability to these communities.
- VEC should review their performance objectives prior to 2018 and to improve its accountability to those who find it difficult to vote, or are traditionally underrepresented in electoral systems.

## Promoting participation



Wheelchair accessibility affected by government buildings



Six accessibility super centres were resourced with AUSLAN and bilingual interpreters, and additional supports for people with disabilities

- Accessibility of super centres and vVote not evaluated



VEC's electronic voting system (vVote) developed for use by people with communication difficulties or disabilities, but utilisation in Victoria was low.

### More accessible buildings and evaluation of programs.

In relation to voter participation:

- VEC has election specific and ongoing programs to rate venues for wheelchair accessibility and provides additional tools in voting centres for people with disabilities.
- Venue accessibility for wheelchair users is constrained by available government and private buildings. Continued advocacy is needed to improve the proportion of fully wheelchair accessible venues.
- Six accessibility super centres were resourced with electronic voting, AUSLAN and bilingual interpreters, and additional supports for people with disabilities. Their impact or utilisation is not well understood as this initiative has not been evaluated.
- VEC's electronic voting system (vVote) was developed to be used by people with communication difficulties or disabilities, such as those who have low or no vision.
- Utilisation of vVote was poor in Victoria with less than 200 votes cast.



## Promoting participation

- Advisory committees valuable, Indigenous group to restart
- Positive programs to engage under-represented, but results are variable



*Photo courtesy of VEC.*

## More accessible buildings and evaluation of programs.

- VEC has a number of advisory groups who provide advice. After a period of inactivity in the Indigenous advisory group, the group will soon be restarted following the recent appointment of an Indigenous engagement officer, filling a role vacant since May 2014.
- VEC have programs to engage those traditionally underrepresented in the electoral system, but the results are variable, and data is currently being collected to better determine the impact of outreach and engagement.
- VEC needs to continue to advocate for improved accessibility in government and privately owned buildings, and to evaluate its engagement and outreach activities so that more people have a say in who governs the state.

## Recommendations

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		Accept
That the Victorian Electoral Commission:		
1.	further develops and publishes election performance indicators for improving participation amongst those traditionally under-represented	✓
2.	implements a complaints policy that includes a clear, documented escalation process	✓
3.	evaluates its election accessibility and participation outcomes as a basis for developing an evidence-based strategy for the 2018 state election.	✓

The Acting Auditor-General made three recommendations.

- that VEC further develops and publishes election performance indicators for improving participation amongst those traditionally under-represented;
- that it implements a complaints policy that includes a clear, documented escalation process; and
- that it evaluates its election accessibility and participation outcomes as a basis for developing an evidence-based strategy for the 2018 state election.

VEC accepted all recommendations and has provided a detailed outline of how it intends to address each recommendation and by when it intends to achieve these actions. This is contained in Appendix A of the report.

VAGO will monitor this progress over time.

## Key messages

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**VEC's planning tools are efficient but the rise in early voting impacted on voter satisfaction with queuing.**

**Review performance objectives to improve accountability.**

**More accessible buildings and evaluation of programs.**

The key messages from the audit are that:

- VEC has efficient planning tools but an unprecedented rise in early voting had an impact on voter satisfaction;
- VEC needs to review and publish performance indicators to improve accountability to more voters; and
- VEC needs to continue advocating for more accessible buildings and evaluate its engagement programs for those in traditionally under represented communities.

## Overall message

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**The state election achieved major targets but VEC must do more to improve participation in underrepresented communities.**

In summary, the 2014 state election achieved the major targets set, but VEC needs to do more to improve participation in under-represented communities starting with fully evaluating its engagement and accessibility programs.

## Contact details

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