CALLING IN TO VOTE: MAXIMIZING INCLUSION AND ACCESSIBILITY IN AUSTRALIA'S ELECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

In conducting elections at various levels of government, Australia has established a robust democratic practice that ensures that every voter, regardless of their personal circumstances or location at the time of the polls, can readily and securely exercise their voting rights.

To that end, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) is responsible for conducting federal elections and referendums in the country. It has consistently ensured high levels of inclusiveness and participation by maximizing voting accessibility in the electoral processes it oversees. In fact, as an election approaches, Australian electors are offered a wide range of voting methods beyond traditional in-person voting at polling places, enabling them to cast their ballots either during the pre-poll period or on election day.

One of these voting methods is telephone voting.[1] Employed for over a decade by the AEC, this voting method seeks to enhance access to voting for select groups of voters facing specific barriers in exercising their suffrage. As telephone voting is rarely used worldwide, there is limited knowledge about this voting method, including the rigorous processes and procedural steps involved in its implementation. In addition, there is a lack of information concerning the key security measures that are used to protect the integrity, secrecy and confidentiality of votes cast by telephone.

This Technical Paper addresses this lack of information by providing an in-depth description of telephone voting as employed in Australia. While people in

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[1] Telephone voting is also referred to as 'electronically assisted voting'.

some jurisdictions may be curious to learn more about how this voting method works, others may find it useful to consider how telephone voting could help maximize inclusion and accessibility in their own elections.

AEC telephone voting operators at work. Courtesy of the Australian Electoral Commission

1. **VOTING AS AN INCLUSIVE AND ACCESSIBLE PROCESS**

As Australia successfully maintains a compulsory[2] voting system, the AEC has consistently sought to ensure that the exercise of this civic duty is as accessible as possible for the electorate. At the time of an election, those electors who are unable or unwilling to vote in person at a polling place on election day can avail themselves of a wide array of alternative voting methods that can accommodate their diverse enfranchisement and mobility needs and personal circumstances, whether they are in-country or overseas.

Electors voting in Australia can cast their ballots either in person or through an alternative voting method, as follows:

- *Pre-poll voting*. This in-person voting service is offered to electors who for certain reasons are unable to vote on election day. Pre-poll voting enables electors to attend any one of the hundreds of pre-poll voting centres established in accessible locations across Australia in the weeks leading up to the election and cast their ballot there.

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[2]   Compulsory voting was first introduced in Australia for federal elections in 1924. The law was enacted after the voter turnout in the 1922 federal election was only 59.38 per cent. The Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 was amended to include compulsory voting, and the first federal election under this new law was held in 1925.

- *Mobile polling*. This in-person voting service involves polling teams going to a wide array of locations—from mental health facilities to aged-care facilities, homelessness service providers, prisons, Indigenous communities, remote areas and other locations—to ensure the broadest-possible inclusion, participation and representation in Australia's electoral processes. The mobile polling service is delivered over two weeks prior to voting day, and the schedules are developed in consultation with the locations the AEC is attending. Remote mobile polling occurs across vast, extremely remote, inaccessible and often sparsely populated regions in Australia. All mobile polling plays a crucial role in upholding the democratic right to vote for all Australian electors, regardless of their whereabouts, mobility impairments or other barriers to attending a polling place.

- *Postal voting*. This voting system provides Australian electors with the possibility to receive, upon application, their ballot papers by mail if they are travelling, physically incapacitated or otherwise unable to visit a polling place on election day or during the early voting period. To be eligible for a postal ballot, however, electors must meet at least one of the following qualifications: (a) they must be away from their electorate[3] on election day; (b) they must reside more than 8 kilometres from the closest polling place; (c) they must be unable to leave their workplace to vote; (d) they must be seriously ill, infirm or approaching childbirth; (e) they must be in hospital and unable to attend a polling place; (f) they must have religious beliefs that prevent them from attending a polling place; (g) they must be a silent elector;[4] or (h) they must be in prison or otherwise detained.

  To avail themselves of this voting method, electors apply by completing a Postal Vote Application (PVA), which can be submitted online, through the AEC website, or in paper form. Once electors receive their Postal Voting Pack, they mark their choices on their ballot papers and return them by mail to the AEC. Postal voters must sign a declaration and have it witnessed by an already enrolled voter in order to ensure the integrity of the process. The AEC must receive returned postal votes by the 13th day after election day to be included in the count. Since the introduction of postal voting, demand for this accessible and safe voting method has increased at each federal election, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

- *Out-of-electorate voting*. This in-person voting method enables those electors who are away from the electorate where they are enrolled to vote at any polling place within their state or territory on election day. Those who are outside their state or territory on election day can cast a vote at a designated interstate voting centre.

- *Provisional voting*. This in-person voting method enables any elector whose name cannot be found on the electoral roll at a polling place to cast a so-

Alternative voting methods include pre-poll voting, mobile polling and postal voting.

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[3]   In the context of Australia's elections, an electorate (also known as an electoral division, district or seat) is a geographically defined area represented by a member of the House of Representatives. Each electorate elects one member to the House of Representatives through a preferential voting system.

[4]   In Australia's electoral system, a silent elector is a registered voter whose address is not shown on the electoral roll.

called provisional vote. The completed ballot papers must be sealed in an envelope on which the voter signs a declaration that they are entitled to vote and have not voted already.

After the election, postal, out-of-electorate and provisional votes are returned to the electoral division where the voter is enrolled. Before the vote is admitted to the count, the AEC verifies that the voter is on the electoral roll and that their declaration was correctly completed.

Electors located overseas at the time of the polls can avail themselves of one of the following two polling services:

- *Overseas postal voting*. Overseas electors can apply for a postal vote by completing a PVA. Overseas electors receive a Postal Voting Pack in the foreign jurisdiction in which they are located. The Postal Voting Pack contains the postal ballots, a return envelope and voting instructions. Electors must return the envelope to the AEC by mail or courier so that it arrives at the AEC within 13 days after election day. As it may be difficult for overseas voters to find a witness on the Australian electoral roll, alternative provisions are in place if required.

- *In-person voting at overseas voting centres*. Australian embassies, high commissions and consulates often serve as voting centres during federal elections and facilitate the process of in-person voting for those overseas electors wishing to cast their ballot in this manner. On designated voting days, electors visit the overseas voting centre closest to them and follow the same steps and procedures as if they were voting in Australia.

Telephone voting is another method in addition to those described.

Telephone voting is another method in addition to those described above. It is primarily used to facilitate access to voting for two specific segments of the electorate—those within the country who face enfranchisement barriers because they are blind or have low vision, and electors working in Antarctica or on a ship in transit to or from Antarctica.

2. AN UNCONVENTIONAL BUT EFFECTIVE VOTING SERVICE

The numerous voting services offered to the Australian electorate to enable them to fulfil their duty to vote demonstrate the extraordinary effort undertaken by the AEC to maximize opportunities for the electorate to vote while also meticulously preserving and protecting the integrity, transparency, secrecy and security of voting processes.

Comparative research on the employment of telephone voting in national elections shows how, across the world, this voting method is extremely

uncommon and, hence, remains largely unknown, as New Zealand is the only other country to permit telephone voting.[5]

First introduced in Australia in 2013, telephone voting is prescribed by legislation. The Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 and subsequent amendments reserve the ability to vote by telephone to two limited categories of electors—those who are blind or have low vision and electors working in Antarctica or on a ship in transit to or from Antarctica.

Since a versatile and effective telephone voting service already existed prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, it was leveraged during the 2022 federal election in the extraordinary circumstances imposed by the pandemic. Having to be delivered under severe health restrictions, the 2022 election required the introduction of the Electoral Legislation Amendment (COVID Enfranchisement) Act 2022.

This legislation enabled the AEC to introduce the unprecedented measure of expanding telephone voting (rebranded for the occasion as 'secure telephone voting' [STV]), to enfranchise thousands of electors who, at the time of the 2022 federal election, either had tested positive for Covid-19 or were in isolation, which was a compulsory requirement at that time for those who had tested positive. For such a vulnerable segment of the electorate, who would have been otherwise disenfranchised, STV was the only option enabling them to fulfil their voting duty without risking public health.

While eligibility for telephone voting has reverted to the previous criteria, the successful expansion of telephone voting for Covid-affected voters demonstrated that this is a viable voting method for other disenfranchised groups, such as defence force personnel serving overseas. Future expansion would require additional legislative amendments.

Removing the need for the voter's physical attendance at a polling place on election day, telephone voting enables certain segments of the electorate to overcome suffrage barriers and cast their ballots securely and confidentially.

The very limited use of this method before and since the Covid-19 pandemic is attested to by statistics concerning the use of telephone voting compiled by the AEC over the last four federal electoral events.

Table 1 highlights two significant accomplishments achieved in the 2022 federal election—one is the extent to which telephone voting was expanded to meet the extraordinary enfranchisement challenges imposed by the pandemic; and the other, the consistently high turnout figures in the use of telephone voting across the four electoral events from 2016 through 2023.

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[5]   New Zealand maintains a 'telephone dictation voting' service that was introduced in 2014 to enhance accessibility for voters who are blind or partially sighted or have a disability that makes it difficult to mark a ballot paper independently and in secret.

Table 1. **Enrolment and telephone voting data**

Election	Total registered voters	Voters registered for telephone voting	Votes cast by telephone voting	Telephone voting turnout (per cent)
2016 federal election	15,676,659	2,175	1,998	91.86
2019 federal election	16,424,248	2,214	2,044	92.30
2022 federal election	17,228,900	80,393	78,178	97.24
2023 referendum	17,676,347	2,372	2,306	97.22

Source: Australian Electoral Commission.

3. STEPS IN THE TELEPHONE VOTING PROCESS

Since the introduction of telephone voting more than a decade ago, the AEC has worked incrementally and persistently, from one election to the next, to strengthen the various procedural steps governing the process to register and vote by telephone as well as the backbone system employed to rigorously protect and preserve the secrecy and integrity of the votes cast by telephone.

Box 1 provides a sample of the preparatory information typically provided by the AEC to the electorate for telephone voting.

Box 1. **What happens when you call**

To prepare for telephone voting:

- Have your PIN and registration number handy.
- Call the designated number to cast your vote.
- To protect your privacy, you will be asked for your 8-digit registration number and 6-digit PIN rather than your personal details to mark you off the electoral roll. This means your vote remains secret because the AEC voting assistant will not know your name or address.
- An AEC voting assistant will record your vote onto hard copy ballot papers. The voting assistant will then place the ballot papers into an envelope and the envelope will be placed into a secure ballot box and then included in the count.
- The voting assistant records the vote as 'complete' in the system so that the voter's name is marked off the electoral roll (as having voted).

Voting hours are from 08:30 to 17:30 on weekdays during the early voting period and from 08:00 to 18:00 on polling day.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, 'COVID-19 secure telephone voting', updated 21 May 2022, <https://www.aec.gov.au/election/covid19-affected.htm>, accessed 13 September 2024.

Ahead of an election, when the two-week pre-poll period opens, electors have until 12:00 noon Australian Eastern Standard Time (AEST) to Australian Eastern Daylight Time (AEDT) on election day to register and until 18:00 (AEST/AEDT) to vote.

- First, they must qualify. If they do so, they can register to vote by telephone. To do that, an elector must call a designated telephone number.

- Second, to vote by telephone, electors whose eligibility was verified and who were successfully registered must place a second call to the same designated telephone number.

Box 2 provides a detailed description of these steps.

Box 2. Registration for telephone voting

No.	Step
1	The operator asks the elector to provide their full name, suburb and postcode.
2	Upon receiving the information, the operator locates the elector on the electoral roll and verifies their entry: • If the elector's name appears on the electoral roll, the operator asks the voter which category they are registering as—either as a blind or low vision elector or as an elector working in Antarctica or on a ship to or from Antarctica. • The operator then asks the elector to make a verbal declaration. The operator reads out the appropriate declaration statement and asks the elector to repeat it back to them if the elector confirms that the statement is correct. • If the elector's name does not appear on the electoral roll, they first must enrol in order to be eligible to vote. In this case, the call is ended since the caller is ineligible to vote.
3	For statistical purposes and post-election analysis, the operator records the category that applies to the elector in the telephone voting system.
4	Once the elector's eligibility is confirmed, the operator asks them to create a six-digit PIN, which is then entered into the system. The operator explains to the elector that, to be able to vote by telephone during the pre-poll period, the elector must use their PIN and an additional eight-digit registration number that will be automatically generated by the system and sent to them shortly after their telephone voting registration is completed.
5	Upon recording the PIN provided by the elector in the system, the operator asks the elector how they want to receive their eight-digit registration number, specifying that it can be either sent to them by SMS[1] or email or provided by telephone.
6	The operator confirms that the elector's registration has been completed and explains when the elector can expect to receive their registration number. The operator advises the elector that when they receive their registration number they can call back to vote, reminds them not to disclose their name when they call back and suggests they may want to take some time to consider their voting preferences. The call is then ended.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission in email conversation with the author.

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[1]   As SMS is not available in Antarctica, the registration number is typically sent to electors stationed there by email or, if email is not available, by telephone.

Within one hour after registration, the elector receives their registration number if it was requested through an SMS or email. Alternatively, if they opted to receive their registration number by return phone call, the registration number will be provided the next day.

When the elector calls back to vote, they need to quote their registration number and PIN. Both numbers must match for the elector to vote through the telephone voting system. The elector does not provide their name. This measure protects the anonymity of the elector so that no vote can be traced back to the person who cast it. Box 3 and 4 describes the telephone voting process.

Box 3. **Voting by telephone**

No.	Step
1	Once connected[1] to a voting assistant, the voter must not reveal their identity or any other personal information in order to maintain their anonymity and confidentiality throughout the voting process and ensure the secrecy of their vote. Hence, the voter provides the voting assistant with only their chosen PIN and their registration number, both of which must match the information in the system.
2	To ensure that the vote is recorded as per the elector's instructions, a second voting assistant, or witness,[2] is present for the vote-taking call. The voting assistant informs the voter that a witness is present to monitor the call. The witness introduces themselves and confirms their presence to the voter as well as their role to ensure that the vote is recorded correctly and as per the voter's intent.
3	Using the PIN and the registration number provided by the voter, the voting assistant verifies their registration in the telephone voting system. The system does not provide any personal details that can identify the voter; it displays only their electoral division and state or territory so that the voting assistant can select the relevant ballot paper/s.
4	The voting assistant reads aloud the ballot papers to the voter, listing the candidates and parties in the order they appear. The voter indicates their choices verbally, while the voting assistant records these choices on the ballot paper/s, and the witness monitors the call.
5	Once voting is completed, the voting assistant or, if the voter prefers, the witness confirms the voter's choices by reading aloud the completed vote to ensure they have been recorded correctly and as per the voter's will. At this point, the voter is also informed that they can make any necessary changes or corrections before their vote is finalized.
6	Once the voter has confirmed that the choices are correct, the voting assistant informs the voter that they are folding up their voted ballot paper/s and inserting them into an envelope, on which the following information is recorded: the voter's division, the call centre's location and the relevant state or territory.
7	The voting assistant seals the envelope, and the voting assistant and witness affix their respective signatures to the sealed envelope.
8	The voting assistant informs the voter that they are depositing, on the voter's behalf, the sealed envelope into the ballot box.
9	Once the envelope has been deposited into the ballot box, the voting assistant records the vote as 'complete' in the system so that the voter's name is marked off the electoral roll (as having voted), and the call is terminated.

[1]   If the call drops at any time, it is regarded as a spoiled ballot.
[2]   The presence of a second voting assistant, or witness, to monitor the call is a critical additional election integrity safeguard introduced by the AEC in 2024.

Box 3. **Voting by telephone (cont.)**

No.	Comments
1	Processing a vote cast through the telephone voting system takes 10–20 minutes on average.
2	The telephone voting system cannot detect in real time instances of multiple voting. Rare cases in which a voter also voted through another voting service can be detected only after the election, when the certified lists of the various voting services are reconciled so that instances of both multiple voting and non-voting can be identified and, in case of breaches, sanctioned. Instances of multiple voting in Australian elections are extremely rare.

Box 4. **Counting votes cast by telephone**

No.	Step
1	At the close of the telephone voting period, at 18:00 (AEST/AEDT) on election day, the ballot boxes containing the votes cast by telephone are unsealed and opened so that the envelopes, still sealed, can be reconciled. The reconciliation involves verifying that the number of sealed envelopes matches the number of voters who cast their ballots through telephone voting.
2	The sealed envelopes are sorted first by state or territory and then by division.
3	Once sorted and packaged, sealed envelopes are sent to the various counting centres in the division they pertain to so that they can be unsealed and counted with all the other votes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Highlighting Australia's efforts to maximize electoral inclusiveness and voting accessibility, this paper can inspire other jurisdictions around the world to achieve the same aims. By diversifying its offer of voting services and tailoring them to the different enfranchisement needs and personal circumstances of its electorate within the bounds of electoral legislation, the AEC ensures that no elector is left behind. Strengthening the legitimacy of election outcomes, this commitment to maximum electoral participation ultimately reinforces the fundamental democratic principle that, in Australia's elections, every vote counts.

This Technical Paper provides much-needed exposure to an unconventional and largely unknown special voting arrangement. Australia's decade-long use of telephone voting has consistently maximized electoral participation while simultaneously also rigorously meeting numerous requirements for security, integrity, privacy, public trust and accountability. Although telephone voting may not be viable in highly polarized political contexts with a high degree of controversy and distrust in elections and their management, it offers an important consideration. While electoral management bodies often look at costly, overly complex, and sometimes unsuitable and unsustainable technological solutions to maximize the inclusivity and accessibility of their voting processes, Australia's telephone voting experience demonstrates that

Australia's use of telephone voting has consistently maximized electoral participation while simultaneously also rigorously meeting requirements for security, integrity, privacy, public trust and accountability.

simpler, more practical and cost-effective solutions can also address the numerous electoral accessibility challenges that the pace of time regularly brings to the fore.

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