Country: Australia

Theme: Voter Education for Informed and Ethical Voting

Title of The Best Practice / Case Study: Implementation of and education about new Senate voting rules within a three month period

Area of Coverage: Approximately 15 million enrolled Australian voters located both within Australia and overseas

Period of implementation: The changes were implemented within three months (April - June) 2016

Background: On 18 March 2016, the Australian Parliament passed the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment Bill 2016 introducing a new system of voting to elect the Australian federal Senate. These legislative changes introduced partial optional preferential voting on the Senate ballot paper. The AEC faced the challenge of educating voters about the new voting system within a three month period before an early, double dissolution election on July 2 2016. These changes also made the AEC's existing voter preference count software out-of-date and in need of a new solution.

Brief Description of Best Practice: The legislative changes introduced optional preferential voting to elect the Senate which intended to give voters greater control over how their voting preferences are distributed. On the Senate ballot paper in Australia, voters can either vote above the line for a party group of candidates, or below the line for individual candidates across different parties. The changes removed a system where a voter could place only the number '1' in a box above the line and their vote would be distributed in accordance with the party group voting ticket. At previous federal elections, 95 per cent of voters opted to vote above the line, simply marking one next to the party of their choice and allowing the party's group voting ticket to determine the full preference flow for all candidates. Simplicity in voting equalled simplicity in counting. The above the line totals for groups were loaded into the Senate count system with the group voting tickets and combined with below the line vote data, individually entered at the central senate scrutiny. Under the new rules, voters were asked to nominate a minimum of six preferences above the line or 12 preferences below the line. The effect was a considerably more complex count with an increase in data entry of preferences from less than half a million (3 per cent) to over 14 million (100 per cent) Senate ballot papers. Comparatively, the counting task became colossal. There was an additional layer of complexity in implementing these changes due to an earlier than expected -double dissolution's federal election. In Australia, a double dissolution election occurs when the House of Representatives and the Senate cannot agree on a Bill. The Prime Minister can approach the Governor-General to seek the dissolution of parliament and cause an election to be held earlier than expected. A double dissolution was sought by the Prime Minister in May 2016, and the writs for a 2 July 2016

federal election were issued on 16 May 2016. As a result, not only was election day earlier than expected, but the AEC was left with only 25 business days between election day and the 8 August 2016 when results must be returned by. This was a significantly shorter period of time than under a normal half -Senate's election due to constitutional considerations. PUBLIC EDUCATION CAMPAIGN The AEC had responsibility for informing Australian voters about these changes to the Senate voting system. The AEC developed a public education campaign which included campaign advertising and a public relations strategy. The campaign advertising materials (including television, print, radio and online advertisements) underwent extensive market testing. Materials were all prepared to target a range of audiences including different cultural and linguistic groups. A pre-election phase of the public education campaign ran before the announcement of the federal election to explain the changes to the Senate voting system. It included television advertising which ran from the 26 April to 10 May. The phase ran again after the election was announced from the 29 May to 11 June. This television ad campaign was developed within a short period time and made use of paper constructed animations. The AEC contracted a creative agency to assist with preparation of the campaign advertising materials which were market tested by a contracted market research company. As part of the public relations strategy, fact sheets, frequently asked questions and other educative material was available on the AEC website. For example, this information sheet available on the AEC website explains how voting was different at the election: http://www.aec.gov.au/Voting/How_to_vote/files/senate-how-to-vote-2016.pdf Factsheets were also made available to all polling day staff to assist in answering enquiries. As with previous elections, the AEC ran a federal election campaign in three phases. This included a: - Close of rolls phase from 9 to 23 May. This phase focused on ensuring that all eligible voters were enrolled to vote. - Voters Services phase from 15 June to 1 July. This phase focused on informing voters about the type of services available to enable them to vote, and - Formality phase from 15 June to 2 July. This phase focused on making sure that voters were aware of how to cast a formal vote. Voter Information Officers were deployed to polling places to assist electors in casting a formal vote and to explain the voting changes. The Electoral Commissioner also appeared on popular radio stations and television channels to explain the changes and voting services available. SCRUTINY AND COUNTING SOLUTION In 12 weeks the AEC developed, tested, certified and operationalised a new end-to-end senate count voting solution. The semi-automated process, using scanning and optical character recognition technology to capture preferences, was developed in partnership with Fuji Xerox. In addition to the count, the solution required plans for ballot paper transport, security and scrutiny. After election day, Senate ballot papers were progressively despatched to a central Senate scrutiny site in the capital city of each state and territory for scrutiny. At these sites, batches of Senate ballot papers were scanned using Kodak i5650 scanning hardware and entered into the TIS e-Flow imaging software. Optical character recognition technology captured voter preferences The preferences of every ballot paper were verified by a human operator and compared with the scanned image. Once verified, a record of the preferences on the ballot paper, with a cryptographic digital signature, was generated, before being imported to the AEC's system for the count and distribution of preferences. The solution featured a continual, trackable chain of custody for ballot papers; human validation of every ballot paper; full access for scrutineers; and best practice IT industry standards of architecture and security.

Challenges : The AEC had less than 3 months to implement a working scrutiny and count solution. The AEC had only 25 working days to data enter 100% of all ballot papers in order to provide a result by the specified 8 August due date. Communicating the differences between the old and the new voting system (at the federal level). Each Australian state and territory has their own system of voting which had the potential to add to the confusion in understanding the voting system e.g. some states have full preferential voting, partial optional preferential voting or optional preferential voting. Diversity of the Australian population raises further challenges for the AEC in communicating this message

Outcome: The Australian Electoral Commission's new end-to-end semi-automated solution was developed, tested and made operational in 12 weeks. Senate results for each state and territory were returned before they were due on 8 August. Australian voters were informed about the changes and nationally, approximately 93 per cent of voters cast a formal ballot in accordance with the instructions on the ballot paper. This is despite the risk that voters would number the boxes according to habit or misinterpretation of the instructions.