

# Chapter X

## Electronic Conduits to Electoral Inclusion in an Atypical Constituency: The Australian Case<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

*Due to compulsory voting, Australia's turnout rate is among the highest and most socially-even in the industrialised world. Nevertheless, some voters are still left behind on election day. In this chapter we examine the potential for E-technologies to address the problem of political exclusion among some currently excluded groups of voters. We canvas known and suspected patterns of such exclusion and, in some cases, suggest possible reasons for it. We review the capacity for electronic forms of voting and registration to address: Low voting and registration levels among indigenous Australians; declining registration levels among the young; restricted access to the secret ballot caused by disability; informal voting among minority language speakers and people with low literacy and numeracy competence; low voting participation among people who experience difficulty in attending a polling place on election day and low voting participation among the Australian diaspora. We begin by providing some technical background, after which we report briefly on the E-voting state of play in Australia today.*

## **AN ATYPICAL CONSTITUENCY**

Australia is one of those rare settings where voting is compulsory. The introduction of compulsory voting 'elevated the status of the franchise from a privilege to a duty' and thereby encouraged 'electoral commissions to treat every vote as sacred' (Orr *et al*, 2002 p. 389). The advent of compulsory registration and voting triggered the development of many democratic innovations to achieve maximum voting participation (Sawer, 2001 pp. 24-5) and Australia's State and Federal electoral offices take enormous care to ensure that the vast majority of Australian voters, regardless of contingent status, and obstacles experienced, is included in the voting process (Hill, 2002). In fact Australia's voting system is one of the most accessible and 'user friendly' in the world (Mackerras and McAllister, 1999 p. 223) with minimal opportunity and transaction costs to voters. The net effect is that, despite the persistent disenfranchisement of some potential voters, few systems are able to boast such consistently high and socially-even voter turnout rates (usually around 95% Voting Age Population –VAP).

Australia's exemplary record on voting inclusion should not, however, be cause for complacency; rather, when almost everyone votes, the exclusion of the non-participating few is greatly magnified and exacerbated. This is especially so where the non-participants in question have a distinct ethnic or socio-demographic profile because their exclusion cannot be discounted as random or anomalous. Neither should it be assumed that such voters will spontaneously begin to vote at some point in the future because, if voting is to become a habit, it should commence as soon as a citizen is enfranchised (Fotos *et al*. 2002). Further, propensity to vote seems to be partly norm-driven (Hasen, 1996; Hill, 2002) and if non-voting is the norm in any subculture, members may never break the habit. It is therefore important to be pro-active in identifying any technical, practical, or cultural barriers to the establishment of the voting habit

among members of social groups where abstention is routine.<sup>2</sup> In a rare constituency like Australia's where voting is a mainstream activity we canvass potential means for embracing those few who remain outside this mainstream.

Specifically, we explore how E-technologies might help to engage some currently excluded groups of voters. It should be stressed that, at this stage, the use of E-voting (and related technologies) is regarded purely as a potential supplement to paper ballots and not as a replacement; this is partly because Australia is an atypical constituency where getting the majority of citizens out to vote is not a major issue. But it is also because the authors are mindful of the fact that widespread use of E-technologies has the potential to drain Australian elections of their prized festive and solidary character: As a shared experience for almost all Australian adults, universal voting gives rise, temporarily at least, to a powerful, non-particularistic, moral and political community. In the lead up to, and on election day itself, politics in Australia is, literally, everybody's business.

Before continuing, let us clarify what is meant by electronic voting for the purposes of this chapter.

## **ELECTRONIC VOTING**

By definition, electronic voting is any electronic means by which votes are cast or data transferred for counting, collation and reporting (Orr, 2004 28). Misunderstandings persist about computer assisted E-voting because many associate it exclusively with computers connected to each other through the Internet. However, not all E-voting technologies are Internet-connected; rather E-voting is defined here as computer-assisted (but not punchcard) voting, vote counting, data transfer and reporting of results. The two main forms of E-voting dealt with here are Internet-enabled voting - which encompasses Full Internet Voting (FIV) and Partial Internet Voting (PIV) - and

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