Reconnecting Australia’s Politically Excluded: Electronic Pathways to Electoral Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the potential for e-technologies to address the problem of political exclusion among some currently excluded groups of voters in Australia today. It canvasses known and suspected patterns of such exclusion and, in some cases, suggests likely reasons for it. We review the capacity for electronic forms of voting and registration to address the following issues: 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 electronic voting (e-voting) state of play in Australia today.

Keywords: civic networks; computerization of society; digital divides; electronic democracy; equality of access; IT innovation; teledemocracy

INTRODUCTION

It has been stated that “one of the most fundamental—and sacred—challenges that election officials must overcome in the discharge of their professional duties is making the electoral process open and accessible to all” (Soudriette, 1997, p. 3, cited in Electoral Management). Partly because voting is compulsory here, Australia’s state and federal electoral offices go to considerable lengths to ensure that the majority of Australian voters, regardless of contingent status and obstacles experienced, are included.
in the voting process (Hill, 2002). As a result, and despite the persistent disenfranchisement of some potential voters, few systems are able to boast such consistently high voter turnout rates: usually around 95% voting age population (VAP). This exemplary record should not, however, be cause for complacency; rather, when almost everyone votes, the exclusion of the nonparticipating few is greatly magnified and exacerbated. This is especially so where the nonparticipants in question have a distinct ethnic or sociodemographic 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 & Franklin, 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. 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 electronic voting (e-voting), and related technologies will be 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 have the potential to drain Australian elections of their prized festive and solidary character. Before continuing, let us clarify what is meant by electronic voting for the purposes of this article.

**ELECTRONIC VOTING**

By definition, e-voting is any electronic means by which votes are cast or data transferred for counting, collation, and reporting (Orr, 2004, p. 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 in this article are Internet-enabled voting, which encompasses full Internet voting (FIV) and partial Internet voting (PIV), and non-Internet electronic voting (NIEV). Full Internet voting can take place from any computer anywhere; voter identification, vote casting, and counting and transmission of results all take place on the Internet. Partial
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