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# An Exploration of Homelessness and Electoral Participation

**A report prepared for the Australian Electoral Commission by**  
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*"That was one of the main things for me, being homeless, you know, the politicians knowing that okay, we are constituents, you know, members of society, the homeless are actually coming out to vote, that my vote matters as much as those people who are working."*

- 30 year old, Male participant  
on the importance of voting

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## Pictures on front cover

Photo supplied by the AEC. The image depicts a voter information session run with participants at Hutt St Centre.

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# Executive Summary

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This pilot project set out to examine the under-researched link between homelessness and electoral participation. Democratic legitimacy depends on high levels of inclusivity, and this is even more important in countries with compulsory voting such as Australia. The formal right to vote is not enough; obstacles to the exercise of that right should be minimised and the right should actually be exercised, not only to ensure democratic legitimacy but because voting is also a proxy for inclusion more broadly and because it generates social and political meaning.

One of the key findings of this study is that, while the political interest of people experiencing homelessness may actually be *higher* than that of the general population, their turnout rate is much lower. This is a telling reflection of how marginalisation and social exclusion manifests itself politically. It is safe to say that the electoral participation of people experiencing homelessness is a bellwether for the health of Australian democracy more generally.

Increasing electoral participation among socially marginalised groups has the potential to reduce democratic deficits, enhance the quality of political representation for these people and increase their influence over public policymaking. This report identifies a range of reasons why turnout among people experiencing homelessness is so low and makes a series of recommendations to address the issue. It delivers a number of key recommendations for the AEC to consider (see page 59) in their preparation for future elections and to fulfil their mission to deliver an inclusive franchise for all Australian citizens.

## Key findings

1. The overall turnout rate for participants in the study is alarmingly low. It is estimated that around 56% of the study population (people over 18 accessing specialist homelessness services in the Adelaide CBD) are enrolled to vote and around 40% of these voters vote regularly. This means the turnout rate for the study sample can be estimated at around 22%, compared with enrolment rates of around 97% of registered voters in Australia generally and turnout rates in the low to mid 90s for this group. This low figure is within the range of estimates made in previous small studies. Note, however, that the cohort composition and size of the present study mean this figure should be regarded as indicative only.
2. Despite their low enrolment and turnout rates, the participants in the study exhibited high levels of political sophistication and interest, **on par or even higher** than the Australian electorate average. Moreover, irrespective of the value they placed upon their *own* vote, the overall importance of voting scored very highly among this cohort.
3. In the survey conducted before the 2019 Federal Election that targeted individuals experiencing homelessness:
  - 4.1. 64% of participants had some or a good deal of interest in what is going on with an election, 59% paid some or a good deal of attention to reports about elections, and 60% had some or a good deal of interest

in elections overall.

- 4.2. 71% of the main survey participants thought voting had a good deal of importance and 74% thought it was very important that everyone voted.
5. Among participants who were surveyed immediately after voting at a mobile polling station hosted by a specialist homelessness service:
  - 5.1. 85% thought voting was a somewhat or very important part of being a citizen.
  - 5.2. 54% thought voting generated a somewhat or good deal greater feeling of equality.
  - 5.3. 51% said voting made a difference to their life.
  - 5.4. 47% thought voting generated a somewhat or good deal greater feeling of acceptance.
6. The provision of mobile polling at specialist homelessness services' premises was generally viewed very favourably by participants and was of particular value to the significant numbers with disability.
7. Indigenous participants who experienced homelessness were significantly under-represented among those who turned out to vote. In the pre-election survey nearly a third of participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. This figure was halved at the exit survey.
8. The most significant obstacles to participants' voting **irrespective of enrolment status** were (in order of magnitude):
  - 8.1. Not having much knowledge of or interest in elections/politics.
  - 8.2. Believing voting was pointless or that there was no one worth voting for.
  - 8.3. Seeing politicians as untrustworthy and self-interested.
  - 8.4. Not knowing where to vote or being unable to access a polling place.
  - 8.5. Believing that politicians don't listen or care.
  - 8.6. Not wanting their name on the electoral roll.
  - 8.7. Finding voting too complicated or burdensome.
9. For participants **who were enrolled to vote**, the most significant obstacles to turning out were:
  - 9.1. Not knowing where to vote or being unable to access a polling place.
  - 9.2. Not having much knowledge of or interest in elections/politics.
  - 9.3. Being unaware an election was taking place.
  - 9.4. Forgetting to vote.
  - 9.5. Isolation/feeling disconnected from society.
10. While participants were not less interested or more disengaged than the rest of the electorate, they did express high levels of disillusionment with politics and 'the system', and this was closely related to their lived experience of homelessness.



# Introduction

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Homelessness impacts an increasing number of citizens. At the time of the 2016 census more than 116,000 Australians were identified as experiencing some form of homelessness. Homelessness is not an experience defined only by rough sleeping; it is a spectrum that includes insecure and transitory housing, couch surfing, overcrowding, through to shelters and emergency accommodation (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). The composition of cohorts experiencing homelessness differs depending where on this spectrum researchers, specialist homelessness services and, indeed, electoral commissions, engage.

Homelessness intersects with pronounced and well-studied social issues, including domestic and family violence, disability, mental health, and poverty. Experience of homelessness also intersects with particular characteristics common among vulnerable and socially excluded communities e.g. the young, women, migrants, veterans, Indigenous people.

Because of these multiple points of intersection, we contend that directly examining the link between homelessness and electoral participation is a telling representation of how disengagement and social exclusion manifests publicly. This study offers unique insights into how non-voting reflects broad dislocation amongst Australian society's most marginalised and vulnerable communities. Indeed, the outsider status and invisibility of homeless citizens provides a bellwether to broader concerns around citizenship and what it means to belong. This could not be more pronounced than within a compulsory voting regime (in which nearly everybody else votes) where acute points of non-voting align with the social dislocation experienced in vulnerable communities.

Voting, then, has value as a proxy for inclusivity that extends beyond the formal act of casting a ballot. A core impetus behind this research centres on identifying the social and political meaning that comes from voting; it explores whether voting promotes a sense of belonging that has positive ripple effects within society-at-large. At the very least, it seeks to understand how people experiencing homelessness might be better connected to the electoral process; an interest we share with the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). Working through the barriers to voting through the lens of homelessness speaks directly to the mission of the AEC to maximise the inclusivity of the franchise.

Within this frame and against the backdrop of the May 2019 Federal Election, a pilot research project was undertaken to establish an initial baseline as to the level of electoral participation by those experiencing homelessness, the obstacles to participation they faced, and how these could best be addressed. The project sought answers to the following research questions:

1. Among people experiencing homelessness, what is the level of enrolment and turnout?
2. For those who vote, what is their experience of voting?
3. For those who do not always vote, what are the obstacles to enrolling and voting?
4. What would make voting easier/more attractive to this group?

The project was funded by the AEC and involved the cooperation and in-kind support of three specialist homelessness services. The close involvement of frontline service providers familiar

with the needs of people experiencing homelessness was crucial to ensuring participants were appropriately supported and informed throughout their participation in the research. The specialist homelessness services also co-designed the project methodology and the research instruments.

The project provides a rapid ethnographic snapshot of the voting behaviours and attitudes of people experiencing homelessness both generally and specifically in relation to the May 2019 Federal Election. To identify 'fundamental dynamic processes' within a compressed timeframe (Van Holt et al. 2013, p. 367) the researchers employed multiple and mixed methods approaches (Taplin et al. 2002) involving information sessions, surveys and semi-structured interviews. This approach ensured that a broad range of data – both qualitative and quantitative – were collected to provide as full a picture as possible of current electoral participation patterns by people experiencing homelessness, and the likely effectiveness of various strategies to improve turnout rates within this group.

As a pilot project, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the research. The participant population was drawn from people accessing homelessness service centres in the Adelaide CBD. While this recruitment method was necessary for reasons of time and to contain the study, it means the data captured reflects distinctly urban, transitory or rough sleeper views. People experiencing homelessness in other areas, particularly regional and remote locations, may have a different experience of electoral participation and encounter a different set of obstacles. Particular groups within the homeless population, such as women, Indigenous people and young people, are also likely to have distinctive elements to their experience of voting and are (unintentionally) under-represented in the participant sample.

The pilot project has produced findings that will inform preliminary strategies to reduce obstacles to voting by those experiencing homelessness. Increasing electoral participation by socially excluded groups has the potential to reduce democratic deficits and enhance the quality of political representation for these groups, as well as their influence over policymaking. As a bellwether population – insofar as low turnout and voter decline in established democracies is always led by and higher and steepest among the most disadvantaged citizens – these are important considerations when examining the future health of Australian democracy. The report makes a number of recommendations for the AEC to consider.

# Background

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Substantive and inclusive enfranchisement – not just the formal right to vote but *actually voting* – is essential for democratic functioning and legitimacy, especially in a country such as Australia where voting is compulsory in Federal and state elections. High and inclusive levels of electoral participation is not just good for the democratic system it also has benefits for individuals, particularly those who are marginalised and have few other ways of accessing mainstream political and social life. Additionally, the interests of voters are more likely to be represented than those of people who do not vote. But what is often overlooked is that voting is an important form of social inclusion: it can create social meaning and may also be a source of psychological benefits relating to feeling empowered and connected.

Australia offers an excellent case study for exploring the nature and implications of low electoral participation by people experiencing homelessness. It is relatively rare among advanced industrial democracies in that it uses compulsory voting at the national and state levels, producing high elector turnout rates which run at well above 90% (Registered Voters - RV) (Louth & Hill 2004). Accordingly, Australia has very high levels of democratic inclusiveness and electoral administrators engage in ongoing efforts to ensure that everyone has a chance to vote regardless of social location, hence this study. Further, its electoral laws are flexible in relation to people who are experiencing homelessness or have no fixed address. Finally, Australian elections are considered very well managed, with high perceived levels of probity, integrity and legitimacy (Hill 2010). This enhances both turnout and the legitimacy of the electoral process.

Despite these advantages, people experiencing homelessness in Australia have turnout rates much lower than other groups. Little is known about the electoral behaviour and attitudes of people experiencing homelessness because only limited research has been conducted. This report is a significant preliminary step towards bridging this gap in knowledge.

## Voting and homelessness in Australia

Experiencing homelessness does not formally disqualify a person from voting in Australia. However informal exclusion – failure to exercise the right to vote for one reason or another – is likely to be much higher among this group than among the average population. Notwithstanding Australia's compulsory voting system, people experiencing homelessness who are not already enrolled are not required to enrol, may enrol as voters of no fixed address under s.96 of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (Cwth) (Orr, Mercurio & Williams 2002, p. 389) and are not fined if they are enrolled under s.96 and fail to vote in federal elections. Section 96 permits people to enrol either as having 'no fixed address' or as being 'homeless' (Australian Electoral Commission 2018). This allows a distinction between people who are transient for work purposes or are on long-term holidays (such as the so-called 'grey nomads') and those who are experiencing homelessness. The Act defines homelessness as living in crisis or transitional accommodation or having inadequate access to safe and secure housing.

The enrolment form for people with no fixed address does require the identification of a residential address so that the elector can be assigned to an electoral division. This may be the address at which the elector was last eligible to enrol, the address of next of kin, or the first address the elector lived at after they were born.<sup>1</sup> The elector's identity also needs to be verified (e.g. by another enrolled elector who knows them) and the signed form submitted in hard copy. Elements of this process may act as potential barriers to enrolment by people experiencing homelessness.

Some of the concerns people experiencing homelessness may have about voting could potentially be alleviated by providing them with more information or engaging in 'myth-busting'. For example, enrolling as a voter of no fixed address does not require the voter to be living at the address which determines their electoral division. People enrolled as voters of no fixed address will not be issued with a fine by the AEC if they fail to vote in a federal election. It is also possible to be a silent voter, with no enrolment address appearing in the electoral roll and no details available to other government agencies. Voters who find it difficult to access a regular polling booth on election day can lodge a postal vote or utilise a pre-poll mobile polling booth. Finally, Australia's electoral system operates with a high degree of integrity and includes a secret ballot system that ensures confidentiality.

One barrier to voting that some marginalised groups encounter in the United States is the requirement in many states for voters to present photo identification at the polling booth to confirm their identities. This generates debate about balancing access to voting with avoiding electoral fraud (see, for example, Devlin 2009; Hall & Wang 2008). Australia does not have this issue, although there was a recent push by some Federal Government MPs to adopt the photo identification requirement. The Federal opposition resisted this proposal on the grounds that it would compromise access to voting by certain social groups including the homeless (Osborne 2018). Furthermore, there is no evidence of widespread electoral fraud in the Australian context (Hill 2011). However, it is possible that some people in Australia are under the misapprehension that they need to present photo identification at the polling booth.

The AEC in South Australia estimates that with very few electors classified as homeless under the voters of no fixed address provisions, many people experiencing homelessness across the state are not on the electoral roll (Martyn Hagan, AEC, personal communication, 5 November 2018). Data from the May 2019 Federal Election showed that just 42 people were registered as being of no fixed address across South Australia (Susan Geraghty, AEC, personal communication, 16 August 2019). It is also possible that people experiencing homelessness are on the roll as ordinary electors under a previous address, rather than voters of no fixed address. This issue has not been investigated systematically, so there are no authoritative figures on the electoral exclusion of people experiencing homelessness, either in Adelaide, South Australia or Australia more generally.

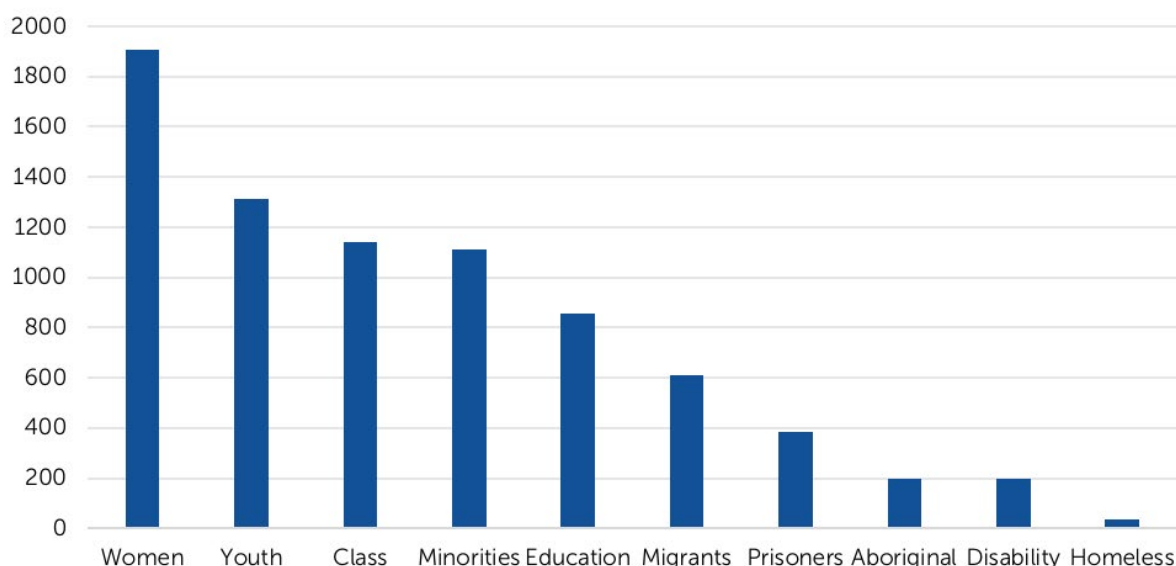
## **An under-researched issue**

Little research has been undertaken in Australia or overseas on the voting behaviour of people experiencing homelessness. There are a number of likely reasons for this. First, homelessness is a complex issue, comprising multiple 'types' and 'experiences', as well as being difficult to define and challenging to accurately and reliably quantify. Second, there may be a perception that voting is a trivial issue compared to other problems affecting people experiencing (or at risk of) homelessness. It may also be that people experiencing homelessness are so marginalised by the systems around them that they have escaped the attention of social scientists.

<sup>1</sup> People born outside Australia may enrol in the division to which they feel most closely connected.

## The work so far

A systematic search for prior research on the electoral participation of people experiencing homelessness was extremely revealing. A Google Scholar search for literature relating to voting by various groups found homelessness barely registered as a research concern (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> A search of the Scopus citation and abstracts database replicated the Google Scholar search terms but extended the search parameters to abstracts and keywords as well as titles, finding just 33 citations relating to homelessness (Figure 2).<sup>3</sup> When the search terms were tightened further to the specific topics of electoral participation and voter turnout, only a single result was returned for homelessness (Figure 3).<sup>4</sup> Where homelessness is considered to be the key variable, rather than associated with another factor (e.g. incarceration), there is a clear absence of research and knowledge.

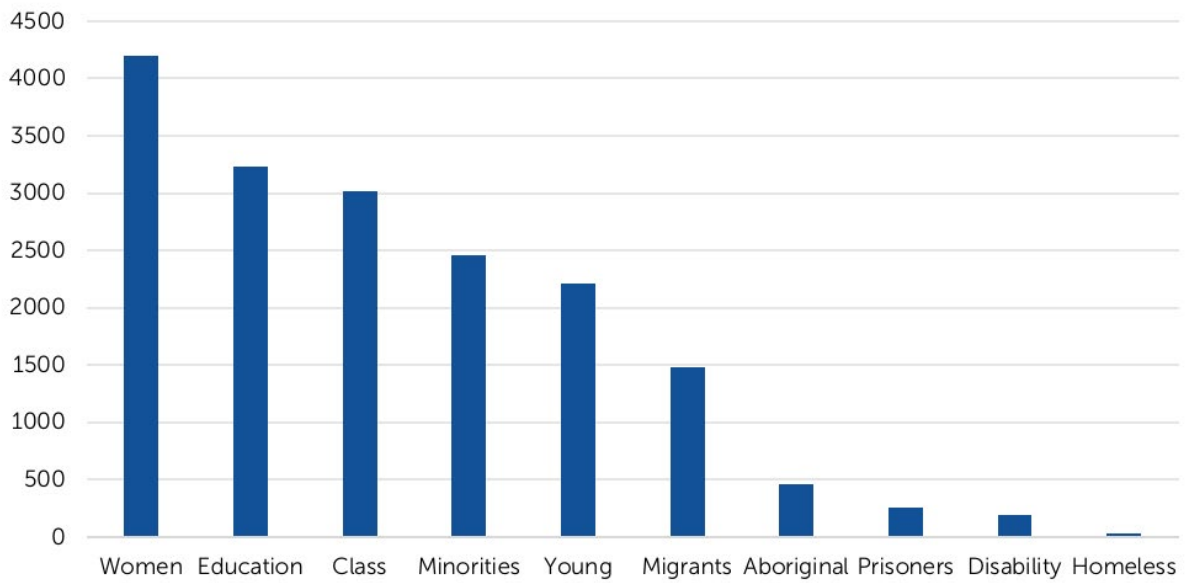


**Figure 1:** Research outputs on voting and elections by search terms  
(Google Scholar: title only)

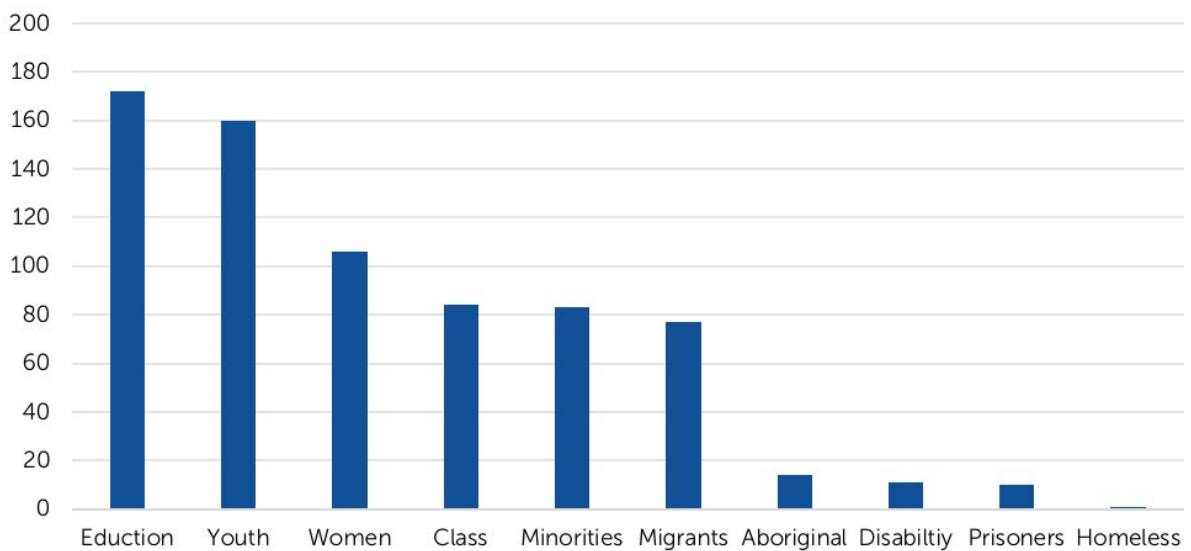
<sup>2</sup> Search terms were: women OR female; youth OR young; class; education; immigrant(s) OR migrant(s) OR refugee(s); prisoner(s) OR felon(s); Aboriginal OR Indigenous; disabled OR disability OR disabilities; homeless OR homelessness with the search terms (separately and then collated): vote, voter, voting, elections and electoral. This method produced some duplication due to the limited capabilities of Google Scholar Advanced.

<sup>3</sup> Scopus has more powerful search capabilities than Google Scholar. Search terms were: women OR female; youth OR young; class; education; immigrant OR migrant OR refugee; prisoner OR felon; Aboriginal OR Indigenous; disabled OR disability; homeless OR homelessness with the search terms: AND vote OR voter OR voting OR elections OR electoral. The results were then limited to the subject areas of social sciences, art and humanities, and psychology.

<sup>4</sup> The search parameters were restricted to titles, abstract and keywords because while there are many articles that mention homelessness and electoral participation, there are few where this is the primary focus. Search terms were: women OR female; youth OR young; class; education; immigrant OR migrant OR refugee; prisoner OR felon; Aboriginal OR Indigenous; disabled OR disability; homeless OR homelessness with the search terms: AND 'voter turnout' OR 'electoral participation'. Experimentation with the broader search term 'political participation' delivered significant increases in results across all categories except homelessness.



**Figure 2:** Research outputs on voting and elections by search terms (Scopus: title, abstract and keywords)

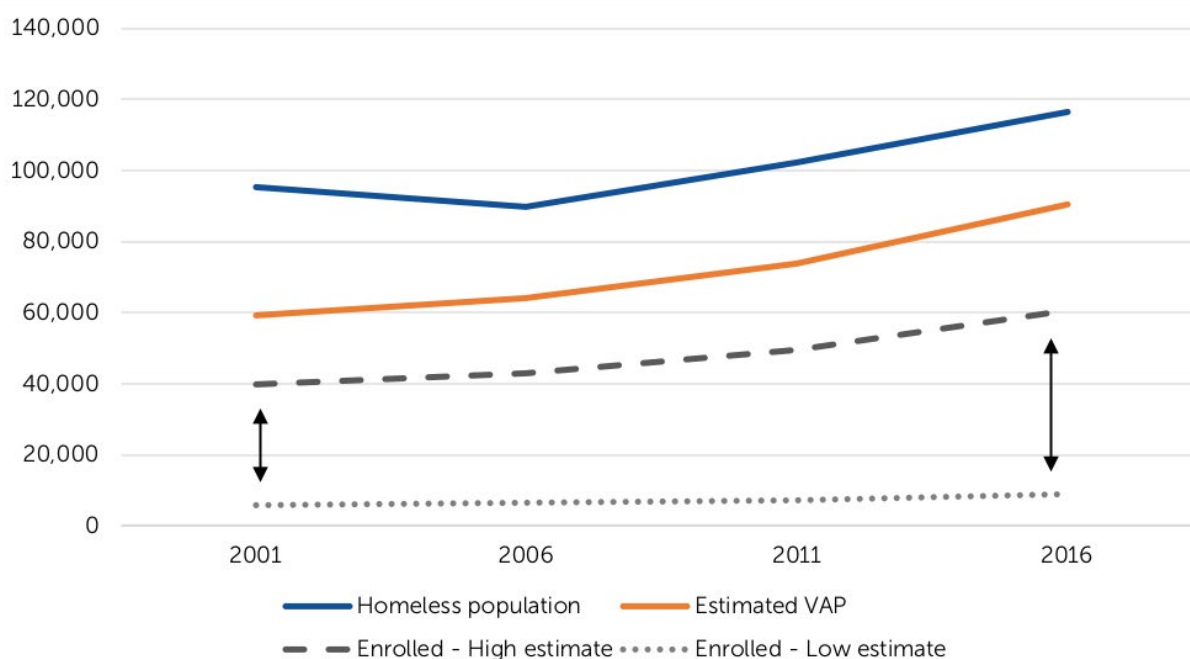


**Figure 3:** Research outputs for search terms 'voter turnout' or 'electoral participation' (Scopus)

## Defining and measuring homelessness

'Homelessness' refers to a continuum of experiences that are aligned with a cultural understanding of 'home' (Chamberlain 2014; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). The Australian Bureau of Statistics has usefully developed a statistical definition of homelessness in 2012 which is relatively broad and includes most people who live in inadequate dwellings, have limited or no tenure and/or have a lack of access to or control over 'space for social relations' (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). This definition is reflected to some extent in the definition of homelessness in s.96 of the *Commonwealth Electoral Act*.

With a better understanding and definition of homelessness in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act*, it becomes possible to more definitively assess the extent of non-voting among people experiencing homelessness. Yet the limited available data strongly point to how little is known, not only about voting, but about the level of enrolment for people experiencing homelessness. Estimates of the homeless population, those of voting age within this group, and some speculative enrolment estimates are presented in Figure 4.<sup>5</sup> The significant gap between the high and low enrolment estimates (and based on studies with small samples) produces a result of 'indeterminate'. If the engagement and knowledge of homeless electors is taken as a proxy indicator of the health of Australian democracy, then this should be an area of concern.



**Figure 4:** Homelessness, voting age population (VAP) and enrolled voters

(Source: See footnote 5)

<sup>5</sup> The data on which Figure 4 is based are drawn from Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018, Mundell 2003, Lynch 2004, Australian Electoral Commission 2005 and Chamberlain & Mackenzie 2003. These data are subject to several limitations. The voting age (homeless) population has been estimated by subtracting the two youth cohorts that are calculated by the ABS (under 12 and 12-18) from the total estimated homeless population. Unfortunately, this excludes 18-year olds from the calculation. There are no available data to work out eligible homeless voter population (i.e. there is no ability to exclude non-citizens). The 2001 data for homeless population and estimated VAP come from two separate datasets where there are discrepancies. Finally, the enrolled figures are estimates based on a limited number of dated small-n studies.

## The complexity of the problem

Many people experiencing homelessness have complex social needs, suggesting their exclusion from electoral participation is deeply structural. As noted, homelessness intersects with a range of other indicators (e.g. Indigeneity, youth, disability or incarceration), meaning a lack of political engagement by those experiencing homelessness exacerbates the marginalisation of some of the most vulnerable people in Australian society. Indigenous Australians deserve special attention in this context, a point borne out in the NT, and shown in the data presented in Figure 5, where rates of homelessness in this sector are much higher than in other states and territories. This is related specifically to the larger Indigenous population in the NT. Indigenous people in general are significantly over-represented among the homeless and are more likely to experience overcrowding (a key contributor to homelessness overall) and rough sleeping. Indigenous Australians make up less than 3% of the total population but up to 20% of people experiencing homelessness in Australia (and 88% in the Northern Territory) (Louth & Burns 2018).

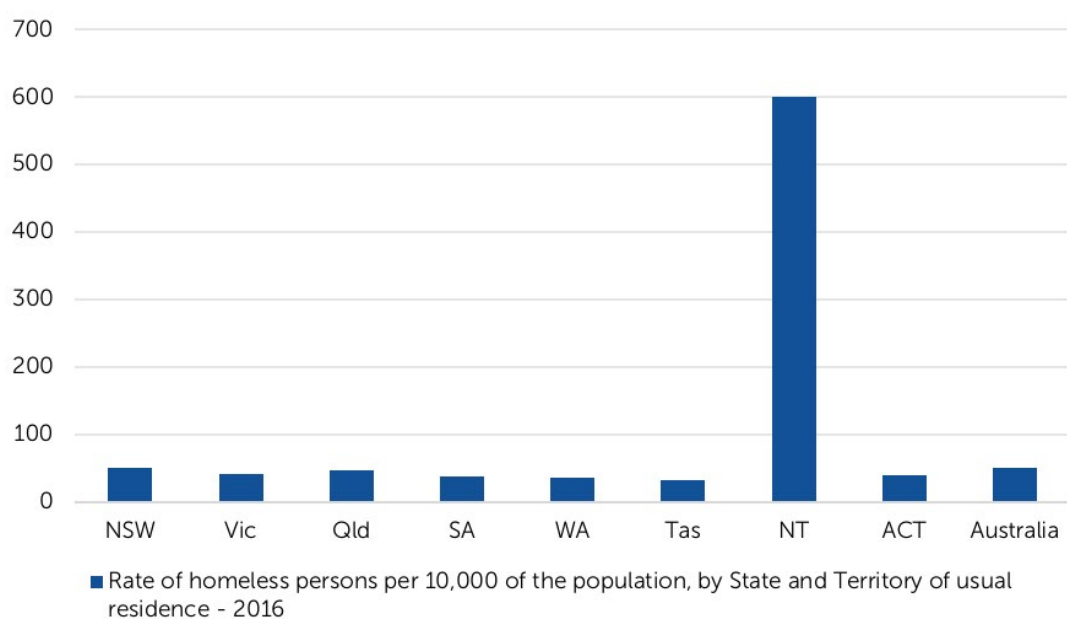


Figure 5: Rate of homelessness by state and territory<sup>6</sup>

In considering complexities around homelessness and social participation, there is also an important intersection between youth disenfranchisement and homelessness that is often poorly recognised. The voter enrolment process is closely linked with the idea of having a home, which can add to a sense of frustration and futility for young people experiencing homelessness, so much so that they may see it as easier just to civically disengage (Edwards 2006).

<sup>6</sup> Source: Louth & Burns 2018, p.51, based on data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018.



Recent research has also identified that Australian veterans are a rapidly emerging group affected by homelessness at rates higher than the general population. The homelessness rate for veterans who had recently left the Australia Defence Force was found to be 5.3%, compared with 1.9% of the population as a whole (Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade References Committee 2016, ch. 6; Hilferty et al. 2019). This raises concern that there may be a trend towards a reduction in electoral participation by veterans should rates of homelessness and social exclusion remain significant.

## **Homelessness and obstacles to voting**

The limited research on homelessness and obstacles to voting, supplemented by our own discussions with key stakeholders about homelessness and voting in South Australia, identified a number of obstacles to voting for this group. The first such obstacle to voting is that many are simply not enrolled to vote. It is likely that a significant number are not even aware they are eligible to enrol as voters of no fixed address. Some people in this group may be wary of enrolling because they do not want their information shared with other government agencies or made public via the electoral roll. They may also have cognitive or literacy issues that make it hard for them to complete voter enrolment forms (or ballot papers) and to produce the necessary identity documentation or verification. Compulsory voting could be a source of further anxiety as there may be (misplaced) concerns that once on the roll, failure to vote will result in a fine that they can ill-afford to pay. Some people who have been enrolled under a previous address will not have up-to-date details and are at risk of having their names removed from the roll.

A University of Queensland study on people experiencing homelessness in Brisbane found lack of information was a key barrier to their political participation (Guerra & Lester 2004). People in this situation 'are often outside the mainstream media loop' and may be unaware an election has been called (Lynch & Tsorbaris 2005, p. 20). Other practical concerns such as lack of transport to a polling booth and being unaware that third parties are permitted to assist with voting have also been cited as reasons for not voting (Thompson 2004).

A workshop<sup>7</sup> with frontline community services organisations and electoral commissions<sup>8</sup> was held in Adelaide in November 2018 as part of the conceptualisation process for this research. Discussions at this workshop identified a number of further barriers and considerations:

- Not knowing how to engage with the system.
- Belief that homeless people are not eligible to vote.
- The requirement to complete enrolment forms and associated residential and identification requirements.
- Perceived stigma of identifying as homeless in order to enrol as a voter of no fixed address.
- Distrust of government and concern about electoral roll details being shared with other government agencies.
- Literacy and numeracy challenges.
- Fear of having their location publicised.
- Social isolation and lack of awareness that an election is on.
- Difficulty accessing polling booths (especially for people in remote communities).
- Health issues.
- Low levels of political efficacy.
- Concern that voting is not confidential and that there may be repercussions.

The obstacles outlined above informed the development of the research instruments deployed for this project.

<sup>7</sup> Hosted by the South Australian chapter of the Electoral Regulation Research Network, in collaboration with the Australian Centre for Community Services Research and the Don Dunstan Foundation.

<sup>8</sup> Attendees at the workshop included representatives from Centacare Catholic Family Services, Housing Choices South Australia, Hutt St Centre, Neami National, ShelterSA, South Australian Housing Authority, Welfare Rights Centre (SA), Australian Electoral Commission, Electoral Commission of South Australia, Victorian Electoral Commission and the ACT Electoral Commission.

## Why should people experiencing homelessness vote?

An obvious objection to calling for greater electoral participation by people experiencing homelessness is that they have more important things to worry about than voting. This is true, but it is also a false dichotomy: voting is a valuable activity and so is securing appropriate housing. The research team contends that it is even more important for marginalised and disadvantaged groups to vote than other groups because the former have a greater need for their social and economic interests to be represented and protected.

People experiencing homelessness numbered nearly 116,500, or just under 0.5% of the population, at the time of the 2016 Census (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2018). Even if all of these people voted, it would be difficult for them to form a critical mass able to influence elections or policy. However, in some marginal seats, and particularly in the Senate, a very small number of voters can make (and have made) a crucial difference to the outcome of electoral contests. Voters experiencing homelessness could also have influence by joining with other citizens to form voting blocs. But regardless of their numbers, the persistent electoral exclusion of our most vulnerable citizens undermines the legitimacy of Australian democracy which historically prides itself on its inclusivity.

In any case, homelessness itself can be a political issue and there is generally broad public support for policies that benefit people experiencing homelessness. Research on public perceptions of homelessness has found that 67% of respondents would strongly support a political party that took action on homelessness (Hanover Welfare Services 2006, p. 15). In more recent research, only 14% of respondents agreed governments were doing enough to address homelessness (Launch Housing 2016, p. 10).

The benefits of electoral inclusion, for citizens experiencing homelessness themselves and for democratic legitimacy in Australia, do not depend on this group having a decisive impact on election outcomes. Voting has important symbolic value. It gives marginalised groups a voice and puts their interests and preferences on the political radar. It may also give individuals a greater sense of empowerment and political efficacy, possibly motivating some to embrace other forms of political participation, including running for election themselves. 'Voicing' homelessness is important for representing and understanding the complete fabric of Australian society and working to address inequity.

### Democratic inclusion and legitimacy

Electoral participation serves a range of purposes for a polity. Being fairly elected is vital to legitimising the authority of a government. On a democratic proceduralist account such as Robert Dahl's (1991), not only must elections be free and fair, but five other key conditions must be met: political equality, effective participation, enlightened understanding, final control of the agenda by the demos (the people) and inclusiveness. Political equality is the basis for the principle of 'one vote, one value'; because the claims of all members of the demos are equally valid, every individual's vote counts equally. Inclusiveness requires that all individuals have the chance to have their vote counted.

Elections function as key 'integrative institutions' that bolster citizens' commitment to democracy (Lipset 1981, pp. 30-31) and strengthen the norm of political equality by acting as 'the single mode of participation for which the maximum input is equalized across actors' (Verba et al. 1995, p. 24). Voting has powerful symbolic and psychological value.<sup>9</sup> The inclusion of people who are marginalised in electoral practice is especially symbolic in terms of democratic inclusion and political equality.

As well as conferring legitimacy in democratic states, voting in elections is the primary mechanism by which the people hold governments to account. As individuals, when we vote we are effectively signing our names to the social contract and entering into political society, not only with government, but with each other as equal partners in the democratic project, levelling out power asymmetries between citizens on both a political and sociological level and symbolically communicating that each voter is an equal power wielder. It therefore creates meaning both horizontally (between citizens and representatives) and vertically (between citizens). The right to vote is therefore a fundamental civil liberty in democratic systems of government. However, the formal right to vote is insufficient; voting must also be an easily exercisable right and one that is *actually exercised* by citizens. If too many citizens are excluded from the franchise (either formally or informally because they don't turn out to vote), the democratic legitimacy of the government is called into question. Further, the right to vote is the right that protects all other rights (including economic rights), therefore everyone should vote, particularly those whose rights are often insecure (Hill 2017).

## Voting and disadvantage

It is especially important that the poor and marginalised vote. Turnout levels provide an indirect indicator of political equality, and turnout is strongly correlated with socioeconomic status (Lijphart 1999, p. 284). People experiencing homelessness are among the poorest and most marginalised, but beyond the suspicion that their turnout levels are low compared with the population average, little is known about their electoral participation.

The social isolation that tends to go hand-in-hand with homelessness is partly to blame for low turnout among this group because 'having social interaction with others and being a settled member of a community' is an important precondition for the inclination to vote (McAllister & Mughan 1986, p. 143; Eagles & Erfle 1989). If the most vulnerable members of society do not vote, they experience a double dose of marginalisation and democratic legitimacy is called into question (formal exclusion is also a contravention of basic human rights – see, for example, Ruth et al. 2017). For the AEC, this is a vital consideration as it speaks to their mission 'to deliver the franchise' (Australian Electoral Commission 2019a), including providing 'targeted education and public awareness programs' (Australian Electoral Commission 2018a), based on principles that affirm the rights of citizens and the legitimacy of the democracy.

<sup>9</sup> This is often referred to as 'psychic value' in the research literature.

## Voting as protection for material interests

It is a truism of electoral politics that ‘if you don’t vote, you don’t count’ (Burnham 1987, p. 99). Governments generally pay more attention to the demands of groups who habitually vote, such as older and better off citizens, at the expense of those who abstain. There is evidence that electoral participation rates affect the design and implementation of public policies in key areas like health, housing, education and public amenities (see, for example, Verba et al. 1993; Verba 2003; Gallego 2010). In short, voters’ preferences count more (for further evidence, see Bullock 1981; Hill & Leighley 1992; Martin 2003). As Martin Wattenberg has noted: ‘Politicians are not fools; they know who their customers are’ (1998, p. 6). Nor are the people fools: they are well aware when politicians are not listening to them, as is evidenced in the interview data presented later in this report.

In non-compulsory and low turnout electoral settings, voting rates are higher among more prosperous members of society, thereby enhancing the advantage of ‘those who are already better off’ (Verba & Nie 1972, p. 388). This has been demonstrated in a wide range of studies (see Hill in Brennan & Hill 2014). Other studies have shown that when voting rates among the disadvantaged are higher, welfare policies tend to be more generous and the state more redistributionist (Bennett & Resnick 1990; Hicks & Swank 1992; Hill, Leighley & Hinton-Anderson 1995; Mueller & Stratmann 2003). In Australia, for example, when compulsory voting was introduced, bringing with it much higher voting rates, there was a ‘dramatic increase in pension spending’ (Fowler 2013). People experiencing homelessness are some of the poorest in Australian society and therefore have more to gain from voting than most people. In terms of marginal utility, even small gains and losses can make a substantial difference to their capacity for human flourishing.

## Voting as representation

Ensuring that as many citizens as possible, including the most marginalised, turn out on election day improves the quality of democratic representation. The deliberative process that produces representation is enriched when it includes as many relevant perspectives as possible. As Iris Marion Young has noted: ‘In socially differentiated societies, individuals have particular knowledge that arises from experience in their social positions, and those social positionings also influence the interests and assumptions they bring to inquiry’ (Young 2000, p. 114).

Representation has a relational character that is guaranteed by voting: the represented and their representatives together construct the issues that are on the agenda (Urbinati 2006). The connection between the represented and their representatives depends on the demos – including all eligible voters – being electorally engaged. Empirical studies show that high turnout is associated with high levels of political awareness, engagement and sophistication among citizens. This effect occurs across all social cleavages therefore high turnout bridges gaps in political engagement between the advantaged and the disadvantaged.

Excluding people from the franchise either formally or informally means a segment of the population with unique experiences and perspectives misses out on the opportunity for political influence (Demleitner 2000, p. 772). Indeed, the political process itself suffers when diverse and unique perspectives are missing (Estlund 2007, p. 215; see also Misak 2008). There is evidence that the political preferences of the homeless are, in fact, distinctive in some ways. A series of interviews

carried out among people experiencing homelessness across the United States found that while they had strong political opinions, their policy views were not influenced by ideology in the same way as those of the general public. The lived experience of life without secure accommodation had a significant influence on policy attitudes (Colin, Morrison & Belt 2014). The data gathered through the interviews described later in this report also reflected this.

## Voting as social inclusion

Political inclusion is an important element of social inclusion. Disenfranchisement is both *symptom* of and *contributor* to social exclusion. Voting is just one aspect of social inclusion but it is foundational for other forms of inclusion and participation. For people who are unable to access other ways of contributing to public life, the basic right to vote is especially critical: '[t]he significance of the vote as a mark of civic inclusion is greatest for those whose inclusion might otherwise be in doubt' (Fishkin 2011, p. 1353). In countries like Australia with compulsory voting and a highly inclusive electoral system, failure to participate in elections is a truly marginalising experience.

Voting has the potential to partly reconnect people experiencing homelessness to mainstream civic life. There is also evidence that voting may produce psychological benefits such as a feeling of empowerment. We know, for example, that habitual voters tend to be more satisfied with the state of their democracy than abstainers (Hill 2011). A recent study in the United States found that disenfranchised felons whose voting rights were restored after their release from prison experienced increased levels of trust in government and were more willing to cooperate with authorities, including law enforcement (Shineman 2018). The data gathered in the fieldwork described in this report found mixed feelings among the four participants who reported having spent time in prison. They felt like they were unworthy of voting while in prison and shortly afterwards, but two had since come to believe that they too deserved the right to have their voices heard.

The results suggested that re-enfranchising the electorally excluded produces an increase in their pro-democratic attitudes and behaviours. Related studies show that restoring voting rights reduces recidivism rates (see Manza & Uggen 2008), while strict state disenfranchisement laws are correlated with higher rates of recidivism (Hamilton-Smith & Vogel 2012). It appears that voters do, in fact, see voting as a symbolic signing up to the social contract, making them subject to the rights *and* responsibilities it brings with it.

Victoria Shineman observes that being 'disconnected from the democratic process' creates 'both a psychological stigma and a rational belief that the system is non-inclusive and non-responsive' (2018, p. 6). Voting, on the other hand, tends to increase trust and willingness to obey laws in the general population (see Hill in Brennan & Hill 2014), so it is not surprising that a similar effect is observed in the case of prisoners and ex-felons. Re-enfranchisement helps people imagine and construct themselves as democratic citizens who matter and whose votes are of equal value to those of all other citizens. Under the right conditions, voting assures political equality. Voting can move people from 'a stigmatized status as outsiders to a full democratic participation as stakeholders' (Uggen, Manza & Thompson 2006, p. 283).

The act of voting itself may have on-the-spot benefits of making people who are marginalised feel empowered, as well as flow-on effects in terms of their feelings of autonomy, competence

and self-determination. In a recent British study, participants experiencing homelessness placed a high value on activities offering an immediate sense of agency and participation (Iveson & Cornish 2014). They focused more on the present than longer-term goals such as securing housing and employment, which perhaps seemed less achievable.

Unlike many convicted felons, people experiencing homelessness are not formally disenfranchised. However, they often encounter obstacles to voting that are not within their immediate control, some of which are structural and related to a societal failure to provide them with the support they need to flourish. Governments bear a responsibility to minimise these barriers, particularly in an electoral system that aspires to be highly inclusive.

## Voting to create social meaning

A little-discussed aspect of life as a person experiencing homelessness is the lack of meaningful activity in their lives. People without secure accommodation are often unemployed, isolated from social networks and with limited access to organised leisure activities. They are also excluded from the meaning created by a sense of 'home' – a stable foundation for life and living – and the activities that can be undertaken in the domestic sphere, such as preparing food, caring for self and others, gardening, hobbies, even simply sitting down to watch television with a cup of tea.

Fieldwork undertaken with people sleeping rough in Brisbane found that they missed not only the control over their daily lives than secure housing could provide, but also the idea of home as symbol of normality and inclusion (Parsell 2012). During its 2018 connection week with rough sleepers in the Adelaide inner city area (CBD and North Adelaide), the Adelaide Zero Project – an initiative to end rough sleeping – found more than half of people sleeping rough they connected with reported experiencing *no* meaningful daily activity.<sup>10</sup> These data are a proxy measure for social connectedness/social inclusion and testament to the need for greater focus on participation opportunities for vulnerable people who are socially excluded. Similarly, an Australian study of youth who were 'at risk' and experiencing homelessness found they experienced lower levels of personal meaning than a control group, with this being a strong predictor of low scores on subjective quality of life measures (Bearsley & Cummins 1999).

A lack of meaning in people's lives is no small matter. It can exacerbate psychological and physical health problems. For those experiencing homelessness, meaning is tied to their 'esteem needs', a fundamental sense of self-worth and recognition by others (Flatau et al. 2018, p. 91). Not surprisingly, people experiencing homelessness have lower subjective quality of life scores than the general population (Hublely et al. 2014). Health issues contribute less than might be expected to overall perceptions of wellbeing; instead, feeling safe and having positive social connections and opportunities to participate in 'normal' life appear to be key factors (Thomas, Gray & McGinty 2012).

Voting is an important source of meaning for people who have little meaningful activity in their lives. It is a distinctive political activity within the broader democratic framework that is not interchangeable with other forms of political or social participation. As a mass participation activity, voting is a source of solidarity with others. In the 'popular imagination' of democratic citizens, 'voting is singled out as the object of a duty' owed to others and society (Chapman 2019, pp. 2-3).

<sup>10</sup> 70 out of 137 people responded to this question. Source: Adelaide Zero Project By-Name List data 2018.

Many people believe that not only should we enjoy ample opportunities to vote, but that we should actually avail ourselves of those opportunities (Blais 2000, p. 95).

For less privileged social groups, voting is doubly important as a source of meaning. Treating people who are marginalised as fit to vote and of equal status to all others in this respect counters their isolation from mainstream society and the perception that they are social and political 'outcasts' (Mansbridge 1999, pp. 648-52). It restores their citizenship. In one survey of people experiencing homelessness in Australia, the reported sense of marginalisation was acute: in fact, only half said they thought of themselves as Australian citizens (although 96% had in fact been born in Australia); 38% felt excluded from participating in social life and 58% said they didn't enjoy the same rights as everyone else (Walsh & Klease 2004). A significant contributor to these feelings of exclusion was a perceived lack of political citizenship rights. Of the respondents in this survey who were eligible to vote, 50% said they had never voted and 65% never discussed political issues with anyone else. Despite the formal right to vote, 'the operation or practical effect of the law may result in homeless persons' belief that they do not enjoy certain citizenship rights to the same extent as other members of the community' (Walsh & Klease 2004).

## **Contribution and limitations of this research**

The present study aimed to address the relative dearth of research on the electoral participation of people experiencing homelessness. As discussed above, there is a strong case for maximising the franchise on the grounds of democratic legitimacy, effective representation and political equality. It is particularly important to enable marginalised groups such as the homeless to exercise their right to vote, to ensure their perspectives and interests are democratically represented. Voting also enhances the social inclusion of people experiencing homelessness, generates social meaning for this group and produces psychological benefits such as feelings of empowerment.

The present study set out to investigate the voting behaviour of people accessing homeless support services in the Adelaide CBD. It aimed to gain an understanding of how the benefits of voting are experienced by those who are electorally engaged and to explore the obstacles to voting by those who are not. Whether barriers to voting are structural, individual or a combination of the two, governments have a duty to minimise them to enable voting by the broadest possible range of citizens.

This project faced several limitations due to the tight timelines associated with the May 2019 Federal Election. The participant population was limited to people accessing homelessness service centres in the Adelaide CBD. People experiencing homelessness in other areas, particularly regional and remote locations, are likely to have a different experience of electoral participation and encounter a different set of obstacles.

Particular groups within the homeless population, such as women, Indigenous people and young people, are also likely to have distinctive elements to their experience of voting and were under-represented in the participant sample. Women experiencing homelessness are especially difficult to access as they can be reluctant to engage with generalist homelessness services and less frequently present as rough sleeping. They may also be escaping domestic violence and therefore keen to keep their whereabouts secret. Future research could engage with providers of services specifically for women in order to more fully understand challenges and opportunities for participation and inclusion for this group.



This project employed a rapid ethnographic-informed method that works well within an applied research setting requiring rigorous research on short timeframes (Green et al. 2015; Taplin et al. 2002). The research design aligned with emerging practices around relevance and direct applicability to complex social policy that may require 'multiple aspects of implementation and delivery' (Pink & Morgan 2013, p. 16). It is also worth noting that this method requires a developed understanding of the political and legal framework within which the research takes place, in addition to well-developed relationships with key stakeholders (Madden 2017). With this in mind the project team comprised researchers with academic expertise as well as personnel with expertise in electoral management (AEC staff) and knowledge of the lived experience of homelessness (staff from specialist homelessness services). All contributed to the overall project design and approach.

The research approach can be simply summed up as short-term multi-method ethnography (Charlesworth & Baines 2015) where multiple and mixed methods reduce the risk of producing misunderstandings or eroding the validity of the observations (Taplin et al. 2002). As a multi methods approach its emphasis is on applying a 'telephoto lens' as opposed to the more traditional 'wide-angle lens' (Charlesworth & Baines 2015, p. 10). This study, building on the work of Green et al. (2015), was built around:

- Semi structured interviews
- Intervention/voter information sessions
- Longer pre-poll surveys
- Targeted rapid assessment surveys (exit surveys)
- Direct observation

The data collection was iterative and collaborative (Charlesworth & Baines 2015) and focused on deliberate and targeted responses at key moments when data was at its richest, as opposed to broad and numerous interactions with random participants or informants over a longer time period (Loosemoore et al. 2015, p. 1275).

## Ethical considerations

### Impact on participants

The participant population for this project includes some of society's most marginalised and vulnerable people. Their needs and overall wellbeing were of paramount importance during the conduct of the project. The project team took steps to avoid making participants feel stigmatised, anxious or uncomfortable at any stage. Input from service centre staff with an understanding of their clients and lived experience of homelessness was vital in both the research design and implementation. The data collection settings were carefully managed in consultation with service centre staff to ensure the comfort and security of both participants and researchers.

The data collection was considered low risk in terms of the likely impact on participants, which was

limited to inconvenience and potentially minor anxiety. However, the participants were members of a vulnerable group, so a full ethical review of the research proposal was conducted. The project was granted ethics approval by the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee in February 2019. Several revisions to the methodology were subsequently submitted and approved by the Committee Chair.

## **Data confidentiality**

The survey phases of data collection were conducted in relatively public settings, although usually out of direct earshot of others. This was to ensure the safety of participants and researchers and for logistical reasons; it was not practical to take participants to private rooms when several surveys were being conducted simultaneously. Researchers monitored participants' apparent comfort levels during surveying, and on a couple of occasions suggested moving to a quieter location where it seemed that this might be beneficial.

Steps were taken to protect participants' privacy by ensuring the data collected were kept confidential. Data were deidentified on the same day they were collected and stored in re-identifiable format (to allow for cross-matching of different data sets from the same participants). Two members of the research team had access to a participant database enabling re-identification of data during the data collection phase. This database included participants' names and a unique identifier for each participant, which could then be matched with survey and interview data sets. Names are to be removed from the database at the conclusion of the project, rendering the data non-identifiable.

Electronic data were stored on password-protected personal computers and backed up on the University of Adelaide server and a securely held portable storage device. Hard copy data were stored securely in researchers' offices. After collection, primary and identifiable data were available only to two designated members of the research team.

Participants were offered information about how their data would be stored and used. Very few expressed concerns about data confidentiality, perhaps surprisingly given that members of this group are more likely than the broader population to be wary of bureaucracy, being part of 'the system', and perceived persecution by police and government agencies such as Centrelink.

## **Benefits for participants**

It is anticipated that over the longer-term, this study and possible follow-up research will contribute to a better understanding of the voting patterns of people experiencing homelessness and enable interventions to minimise obstacles to voting by this group. This, in turn, will enhance the electoral presence and influence of people experiencing homelessness, and the chance of representation and policymaking that takes their views and interests into account.

For some participants there was an immediate sense of empowerment simply from feeling their political views were important enough to be the subject of a research study. This echoed the experience of researchers in an American study, which reported that participants experiencing homelessness queued up to take part, eager to be asked about their political views rather than the usual physical and mental health-related issues (Colin, Morrison & Belt 2014, p. 4).

In the present study, queues of potential participants also formed to take part in the information sessions, surveys and interviews, and a few had to be turned away. While some participants did not have a great deal to say, they nearly all appeared happy to engage with researchers for as long as was helpful. The main exceptions were some of the exit survey participants, who had sometimes already experienced delays in the voting process, and one interviewee who found the process of reflecting on her attitudes towards voting increasingly frustrating and decided to leave of her own accord rather than waiting until the researcher advised that the interview was complete.

## Sampling

The research was conducted in collaboration with specialist homelessness services – the Hutt St Centre, Baptist Care SA and Neami National Street to Home. Participants were recruited via the service centres run by these organisations in the Adelaide CBD. Participants were recruited in the following ways:

1. Voting information workshops. These were promoted via posters displayed at the service centre (Hutt St Centre) and active recruitment efforts by service centre staff.
2. For the main survey, participants were recruited via posters displayed at the service centres and via active recruitment efforts by service centre staff and researchers on location.
3. For the exit survey, participants were recruited by researchers as they left mobile polling booths located at the three service centres.
4. For the interviews, some participants were recruited directly after they expressed interest in participating in the interview phase. Others were recruited on location by researchers.

It was initially anticipated that the project participant population would comprise rough sleepers in the Adelaide CBD. However, in the course of data collection it became evident that this would be unworkable for several reasons:

- Not all rough sleepers present to service centres and they can therefore be difficult to connect with.
- Many of the service centre clients are not currently rough sleeping and it is not always easy or practical to ascertain which of them are.
- It is not always clear cut who is a rough sleeper and who is not. Many service centre clients are not currently sleeping rough every night, but have been in the recent past, and may be again in the near future.

Due to these factors, the participant population was revised to include all clients of the partner specialist homelessness services. The majority of the participants were clients who presented to the service centres of their own accord. Five main survey participants were contacted via outreach in the field, conducted in conjunction with Neami National Street to Home (an assertive outreach service in Adelaide). Some of the participants were currently rough sleeping; others fell into the broader 'insecurely housed' category in that they had secured temporary (crisis, transitional or other non-permanent) accommodation. A few participants currently had more secure housing arrangements but had relatively recent lived experience of being insecurely housed.

There were 164 unique participants in the data collection for the project. Fifty-nine participated in

the voting information workshops, 66 participated in the main survey, 53 participated in the exit survey and 18 participated in the interviews. The *overlap* was as follows:

- 5 participants in the voting information workshops also participated in the main survey.
- 5 participants in the voting information workshops also participated in the interviews.
- 10 participants in the voting information workshops also participated in the exit survey.
- 8 participants in the main survey also participated in the exit survey.
- 4 participants in the main survey also participated in the interviews.

The scale of the study makes it one of the most significant studies that has looked directly at the relationship between homelessness and electoral participation.

## Data collection

### Voting information workshops

The two voting information workshops at the Hutt St Centre were presented by members of the research team. The manager of the Hutt St Centre day centre also attended and introduced the sessions. The workshops were run a week apart in the first half of April 2019, shortly before the closing of the electoral roll ahead of the 18 May Federal Election. The AEC usually runs an enrolment drive at the service centres hosting mobile polling booths at this time. This year the enrolment drive was combined with the voting information workshops and participants were offered assistance with completing voter enrolment forms. This included advice on which address could be used to identify voters' electoral divisions, and having identities verified by staff at the Hutt St Centre. Six participants took the opportunity to enrol to vote as voters of 'no fixed address' after attending an information session and several others enrolled as silent or ordinary electors.

Participants sat at tables in groups of three to five at the sessions and were served morning tea. The sessions were lively and most tables engaged in some constructive discussion around voting benefits and obstacles. Each table was provided with large colour 'worksheets' as an aid to discussion and researchers circulated to provide low-level facilitation. Some participants were highly engaged and took a leadership role at their tables; others were more subdued. Participants were asked to mark the worksheets with pre-set benefits and obstacles, but many went outside the brief and added their own benefits/obstacles, as well as written comments.

Participants were briefed on the nature of the research project at the start of each session and completed individual consent forms at their tables. Participant information sheets were also available on the tables. The researchers present were of the view that all the participants were capable of providing informed consent.<sup>11</sup>

### Main survey

The main survey was administered by the researchers with assistance from three research assistants

<sup>11</sup> The researchers were all trained surveyors and interviewers, experienced conducting research with a range of participants, and able to make an informed judgement about consent.

and staff from Baptist Care SA. Most of the data collection took place at the Hutt St Centre and Baptist Care SA, with 5 surveys completed via outreach (with one researcher accompanying a Neami National staff member on Street to Home outreach in the Adelaide CBD in the evening). The main survey phase took place on five separate occasions in the second half of April 2019. Surveys were not self-administered; researchers read out questions and possible responses where applicable and wrote down participants' responses by hand. The data was then de-identified and entered into a spreadsheet for analysis. The main survey instrument is provided as Appendix 2.

The interaction between researchers and participants was one-on-one in an open setting – the main day centre room at the Hutt St Centre and the courtyard area next to the dining room at Baptist Care SA. Participants were briefed on the nature of the research project and completed individual consent forms before the survey was administered. Participant information sheets (see sample at Appendix 1) were also offered. As with the voter information workshops, the researchers were of the view that all the participants were capable of providing informed consent.

## Exit survey

The exit survey was administered by two researchers with assistance from three research assistants. The data collection took place across six two-hour mobile polling sessions, two each at the Hutt St Centre, Baptist Care SA and Neami National. These sessions were scheduled by the AEC as part of their mobile pre-poll program in the two weeks preceding the 18 May Federal Election. The researchers played no part in the operation of the mobile polling booth, which was run by AEC staff. The researchers only approached potential participants after they had completed the voting process and were exiting the mobile polling area. The exit survey instrument is provided as Appendix 3.

The researchers aimed to approach every person who voted at the mobile polling booths except those who were staff members at the host centre. The polling booths were located in the heart of the service centres, with no sign of their presence from the street. This meant the only people voting at the booths were those who happened to see them while visiting or working at the centre, or attended purposely after seeing a notice about the scheduled polling times at the centre. Hence voters at the mobile booths were effectively restricted to staff and clients of the service centres.

Polling on the second visit to Neami National was an exception to this. After a very quiet mobile polling session on the first visit at the Street to Home shopfront, Neami staff actively promoted the presence of the booth at the time it was in place. They did this by sending an SMS to all the residents of the short- to medium-term accommodation facility adjacent to the centre on Light Square. This proved very effective at bringing voters to the booth.

A total of 125 votes were lodged at the mobile booth across the six pre-polling sessions at Hutt St Centre, Baptist Care SA and Neami National Street to Home. Fifty-four of these were ordinary votes lodged in the federal division of Adelaide, while 64 were absent votes (from electors voting in other electoral divisions) and 7 were provisional votes (from electors who are silent, of no fixed address or not identifiable on the certified list) (private correspondence from the AEC, 14/8/19 and 17/10/19). Of the 125 voters, 53 completed the exit survey. Only 13 of these identified as currently experiencing homelessness; the remainder were in short to medium-term accommodation but

retained a connection with the specialist homelessness service that was hosting the mobile booth where they voted.

Of the 72 voters who did not complete the exit survey, it is estimated that around half were staff at the specialist homelessness services who were intentionally excluded from the sample. It is estimated that the other half were 'missed' or unintentionally excluded. This was due to two main factors: voters refusing to provide consent and/or participate in the survey, and voters who the researchers were not able to approach in time. After completing the voting process, some voters were very keen to move on, especially when lunch was being served nearby, and made a quick exit from the polling booth area. It is unknown how many of the voters who completed the exit survey had lodged an absent or provisional vote; it would be useful to collect this data in any future exercise.

It is worth noting that the voting experience at the mobile polling booths was quite different to the experience at regular polling places on election day. The mobile booths were relatively low-key and staffed by just two or three AEC staff. Signage was minimal and there were no posters or materials from candidates. Nor were there any how-to-vote cards.

The process of checking voters off the roll and issuing their ballot papers could be quite time-consuming. This was largely because the mobile polling booths receive a greater proportion of out-of-division voters than regular polling places. The out-of-division process requires voters to complete a declaration envelope and provide additional information. To facilitate access to different rolls, AEC staff at the mobile booths used an online version of the roll (an 'electronic certified list') for South Australia, but with only one laptop available this could slow the process down.

However, for many voters, any extra hassle associated with the voting process at a mobile booth and/or out-of-division was outweighed by the convenience of having the booth 'come to them', rather than having to make their own way to a regular polling place on election day. The high number of people (66% of the sample) with disability taking advantage of the mobile polling was testament to the benefits of facilitating access to voting in this way.

It is also worth noting that there are limitations to facilitating out-of-division voting. Like all mobile pre-poll booths, the booths at the specialist homelessness services' premises were equipped to allow voting by people enrolled in all of South Australia's federal divisions, but not those located in other states. The electronic certified list eliminates the issue of needing access to hard copy rolls for the entire country, but it would be logistically very difficult for the mobile booths to have hard copy ballot papers for every division in Australia on hand.

For this reason, voters enrolled in a division outside South Australia need to be redirected to an early voting centre equipped to issue interstate ballot papers (such as the one located on North Terrace in the Adelaide CBD). It might have been expected that some voters accessing booths at homeless service centres would be transient and have enrolments in other states, but in practice, the researchers observed only one prospective voter being redirected to the North Terrace centre.

Participants in the exit survey were briefed on the nature of the research project and completed individual consent forms before the survey was administered. Participant information sheets were

also offered. The researchers were of the view that all the participants were capable of providing informed consent.

## Interviews

The interviews were conducted by a researcher across three sessions, one at the Hutt St Centre and two at Baptist Care SA. Participants in previous phases of data collection who had expressed interest in the interviews were contacted advising them when and where interviews would take place if they wished to attend. Four participants attended at one of the appointed times; the other 14 interviewees were recruited on the spot by the researcher and service centre staff from clients visiting the service centres. The interview question guide is provided at Appendix 4.

The interviews were conducted in private rooms at the Hutt St Centre and Baptist Care SA to allow for confidentiality and audio recording without background noise. Security measures were in place during the interviews and service centre staff were close by at all times. Participants were briefed on the nature of the research project and completed individual consent forms before the interviews were conducted, including consent to audio recording. Participant information sheets were also offered. The researcher was of the view that all the participants were capable of providing informed consent.

## Gift vouchers

Participants received a \$30 gift voucher for attending a voting information workshop or an interview, and a \$10 gift voucher for completing the main survey. No gift vouchers were offered for completing the exit survey to avoid any perception that participants were being paid or rewarded for voting.

The gift vouchers were provided primarily to compensate participants for their time and inconvenience. There is no doubt that the gift vouchers were also a significant incentive to participate, but nearly all participants engaged sufficiently to produce meaningful, considered responses to questions. It is worth noting that the provision of some form of compensation to interview subjects for their time is routine practice in ethically sound research, and regardless of the socioeconomic status of research participants. The absence of gift voucher incentives may have limited the exit survey data collection as a higher rate of refusal to participate was noted. The exit survey phase was also affected by the fact that participants were recruited after they had already completed the voting process, which sometimes took as long as 20 minutes, and some were not keen on any further delays or paperwork.

## Voting information workshops

At the two voting information workshops held at the Hutt St Centre, the 59 participants discussed benefits to voting (or reasons for voting) and obstacles to voting with others at their tables. The voting information workshops were originally envisaged as 'treatments' with a view to measuring whether participants who had attended a session were more likely to go on to vote at a mobile booth (and be picked up in the exit survey phase). The two workshops were both conducted at the Hutt St Centre, with Baptist Care SA seen as a 'control' location. A voting information workshop was also held at the Neami National Street to Home shopfront but only one participant attended. This was due to the fact that Neami National's Light Square centre does not operate as a drop-in day centre providing meals and other services in the same way as Hutt St Centre and Baptist Care SA. Staff at Neami National were unable to promote the information session in an effective way to their clients, the vast majority of whom sleep rough and have often done so for a prolonged period.

It was not possible to measure any statistically significant link between attendance at a voting information workshop and voting in the 18 May election because only ten participants who attended a session were subsequently picked up in the exit survey phase. These participants were picked up voting at Baptist Care SA as well as Hutt St Centre. This is because there are a number of clients who frequent both centres.

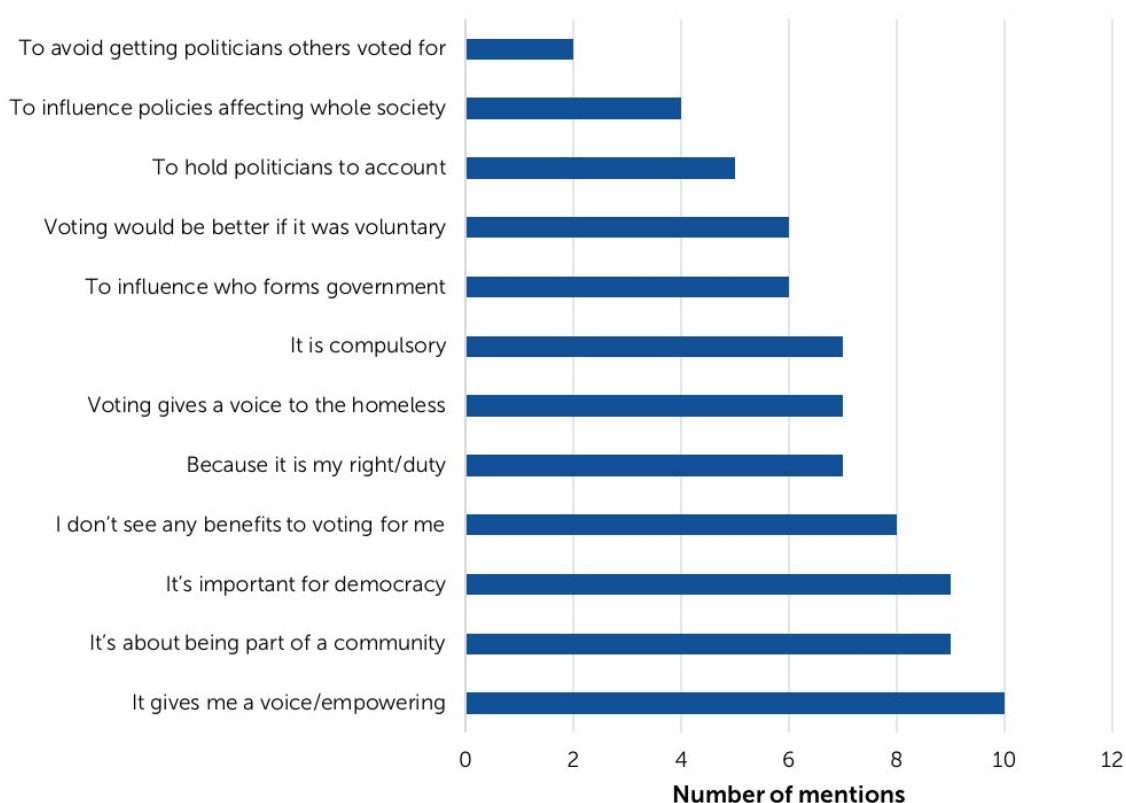


Figure 6: Workshop – benefits of voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



However, as standalone sessions the workshops were a success inasmuch that they were exceptionally well-attended and were characterised by robust discussion between participants and between the participants and the researchers; they presented a unique opportunity to observe discussion and collect additional data. The sessions also provided participants with a chance to address concerns related to their individual situations. In at least one case this resulted in a person who initially expressed his desire not to register to vote changing his mind by the end of the session as the information presented caused him to report appreciating the value of his vote.

Participants in the information sessions completed worksheets listing pre-set benefits and obstacles, as well as adding their own. The benefits or reasons for voting that were most commonly mentioned as part of this process are set out in Figure 6 (and tabulated in Appendix 5, Table 8). The obstacles to voting that were most commonly mentioned as part of this process are set out in Figure 7 (and tabulated in Appendix 5, Table 9).

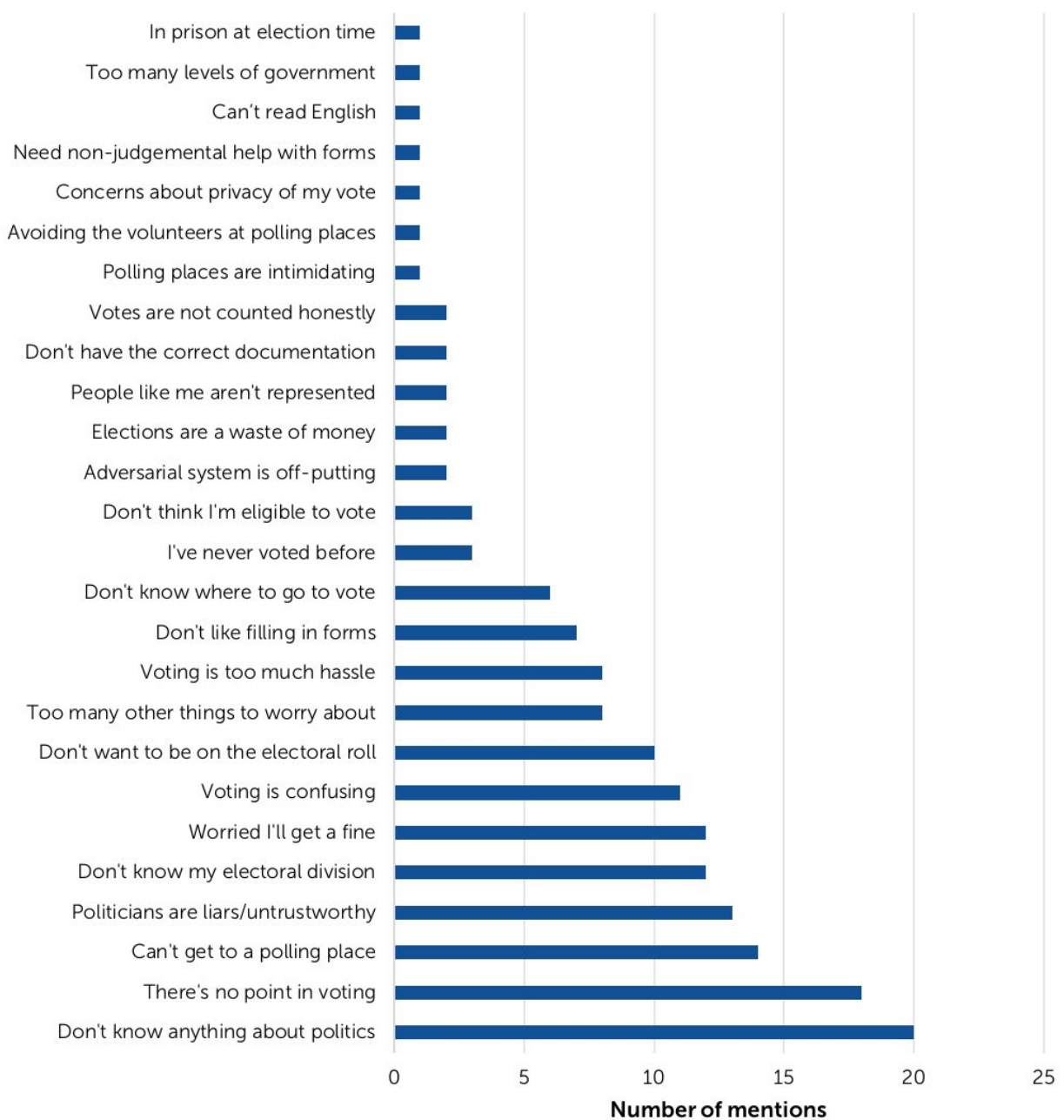


Figure 7: Workshop – obstacles to voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

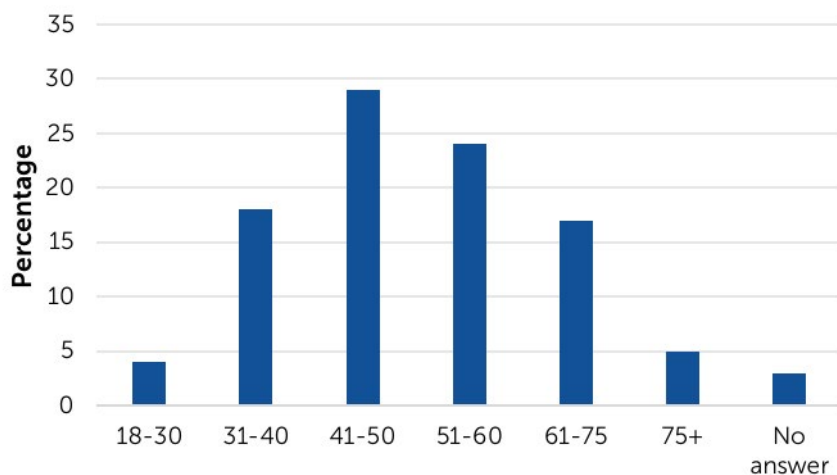
## Main survey

### Participant demographics

Sixty-six participants completed the main survey with their age ranges set out in Figure 8 and other demographic characteristics set out in Table 1 (77% identified as male and 23% identified as female).

	Yes %	No %
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identification	32	68
Born in Australia	80	20
Australian citizen	94	6
First language English	89	11 <sup>12</sup>
Identification as having a physical or psychological disability	53	47

**Table 1:** Characteristics of main survey participants (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 8:** Age of main survey participants (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

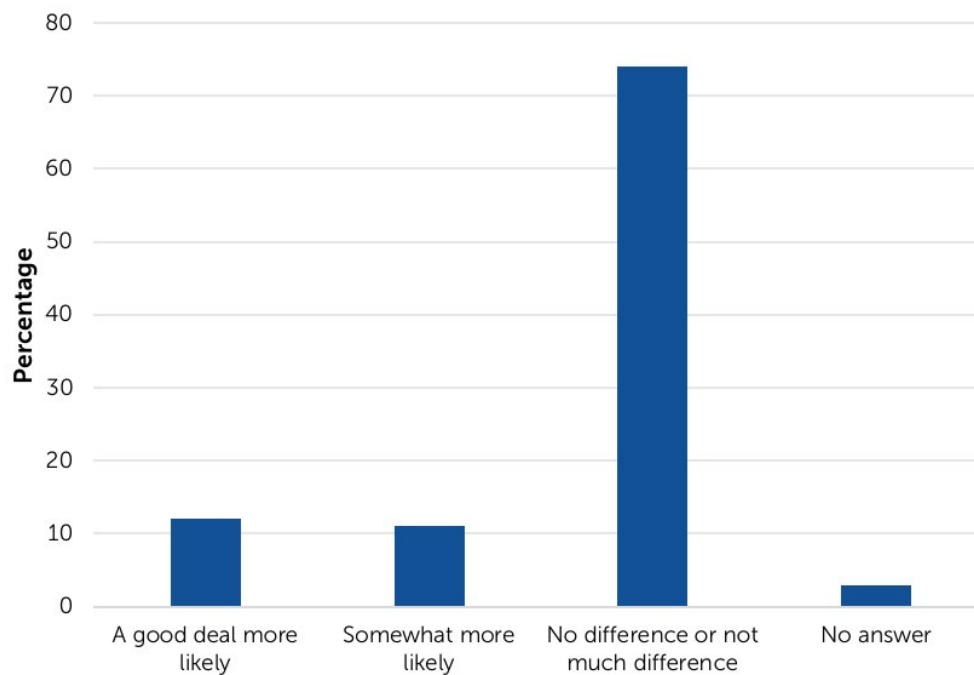
<sup>12</sup> Two said Italian, two Aboriginal languages, one Greek, one German and one Somali.

## Voting behaviour and attitudes

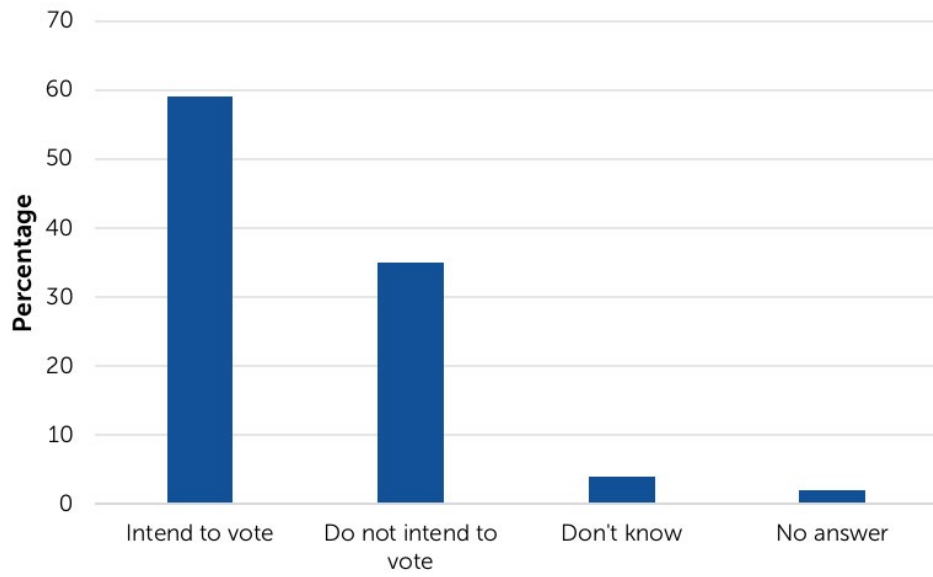
The results of the main survey are set out in Table 2 and Figures 9 to 14.

	Yes %	No %	Don't Know %
Enrolled to vote?	56	36	8
Of those enrolled, failed to vote in a federal election at some stage	65	30	5
Of those enrolled to vote, enrolled as no fixed address	32	65	3
Aware of being able to enrol as no fixed address	30	62	8
Of those enrolled to vote, enrolled as silent elector	11	84	5
Aware of being able to enrol as silent elector	18	80	2
Previously voted in a federal election	68	30	2
Voted in the last federal election	44	54	2

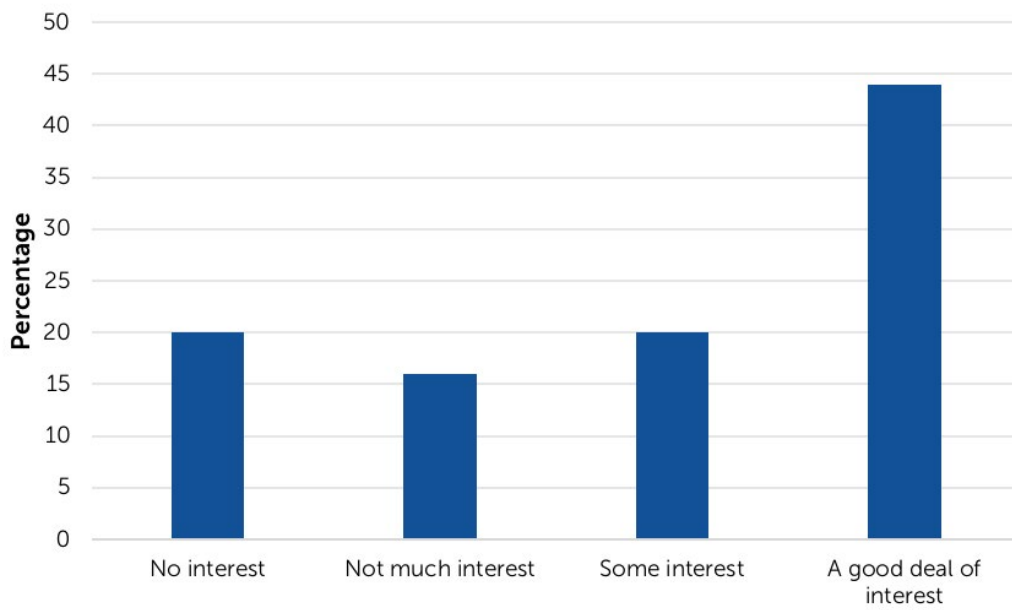
**Table 2:** Results from main survey (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



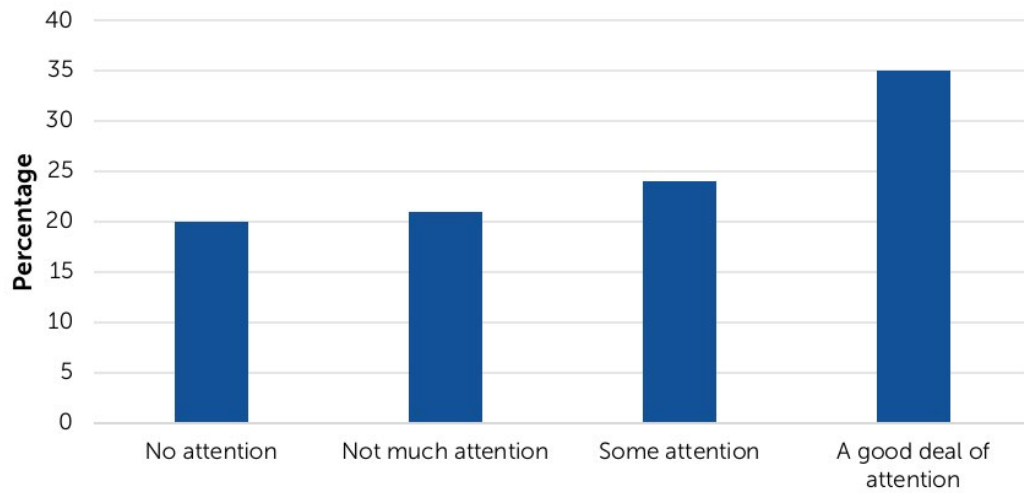
**Figure 9:** Effect of silent elector option on voting likelihood (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



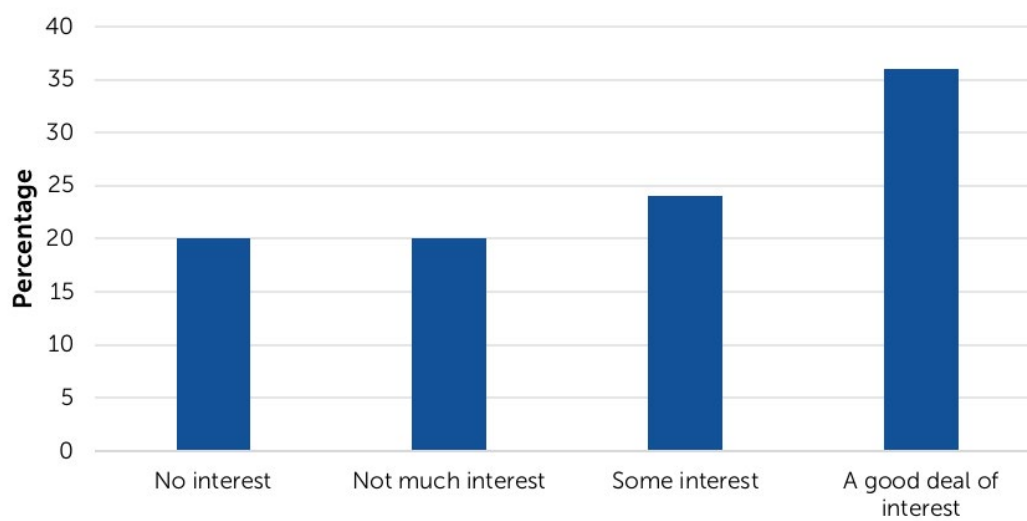
**Figure 10:** Intention to vote in 2019 Federal Election (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



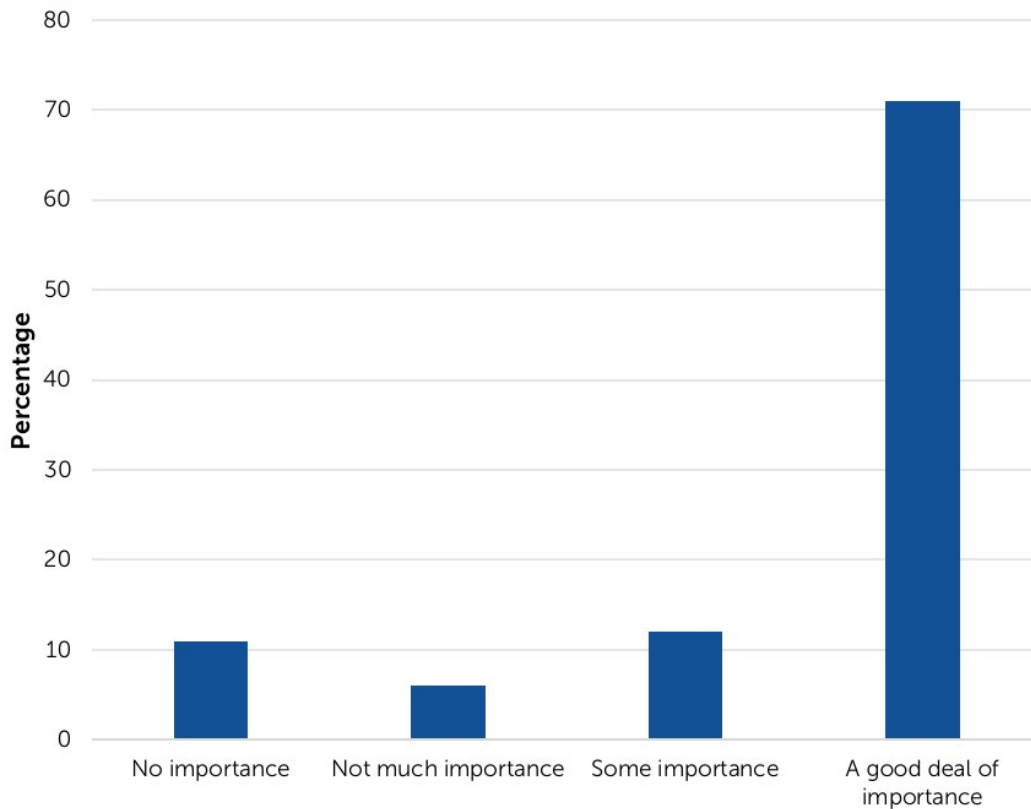
**Figure 11:** Interest in what is going on with an election (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 12:** Attention paid to reports about elections (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 13:** Interest in elections overall (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 14:** Importance of voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

The survey also found that television was the most common source of information about elections, followed closely by the newspaper and radio, with the Internet a distant fourth. Thirty percent of participants had experienced a social contact trying to persuade them to vote, in most cases via face-to-face communication.

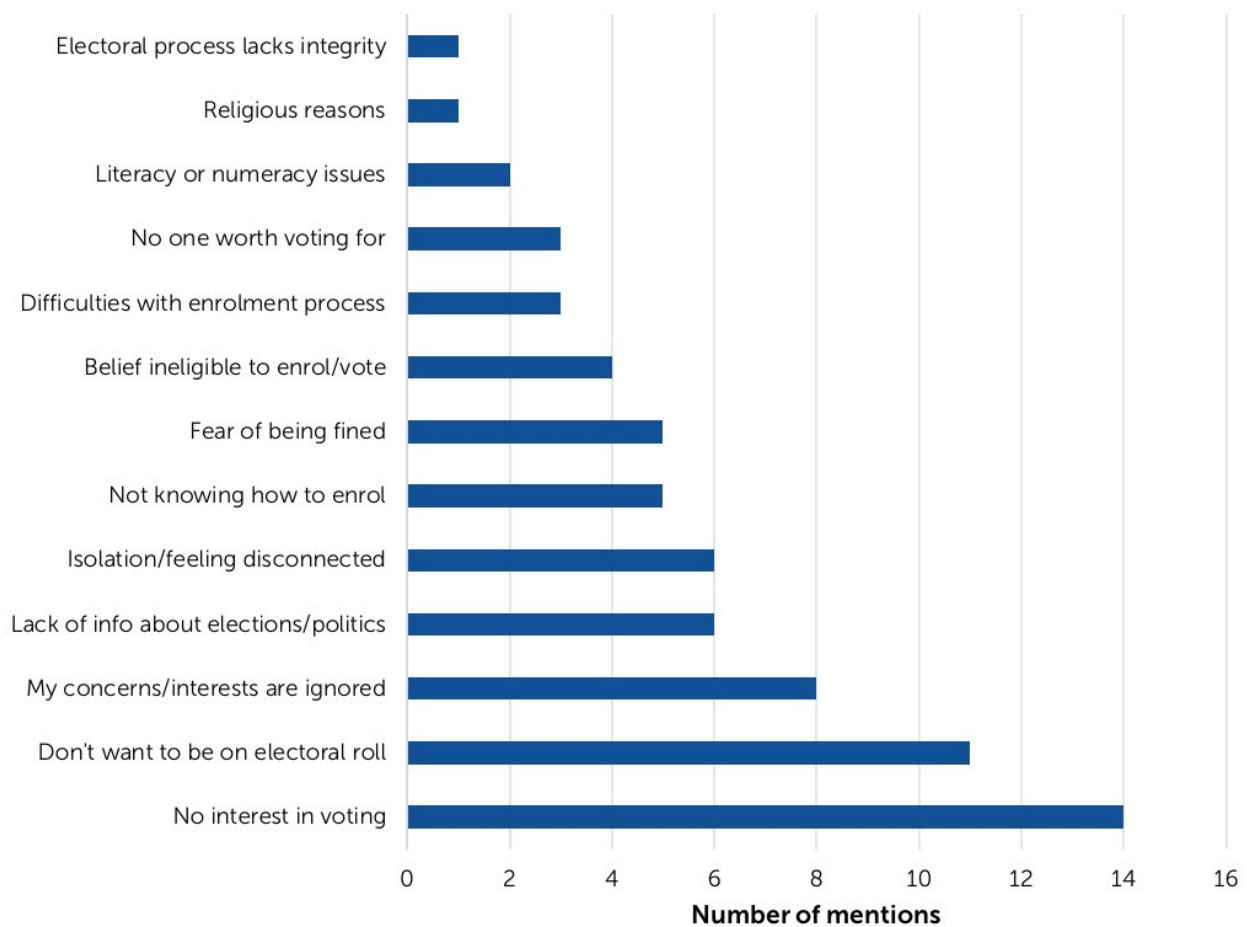
Several of the survey questions aligned with questions asked of Australian voters from the broader population as part of the Australian Election Study (AES). Table 3 compares the responses of the homelessness survey population with similar AES results (see Cameron & McAllister 2019). This comparison suggests that people experiencing homelessness actually have *higher* levels of interest in elections than the broader population.

The results for the homelessness study are based on a much smaller number of participants than the AES and the sample cannot be considered representative of people experiencing homelessness across Australia. However, the results do suggest that people experiencing homelessness, despite their low turnout rates, should not be assumed to be apathetic or uninterested in politics and elections. The lived experience of homelessness may in fact catalyse latent political sensibilities.

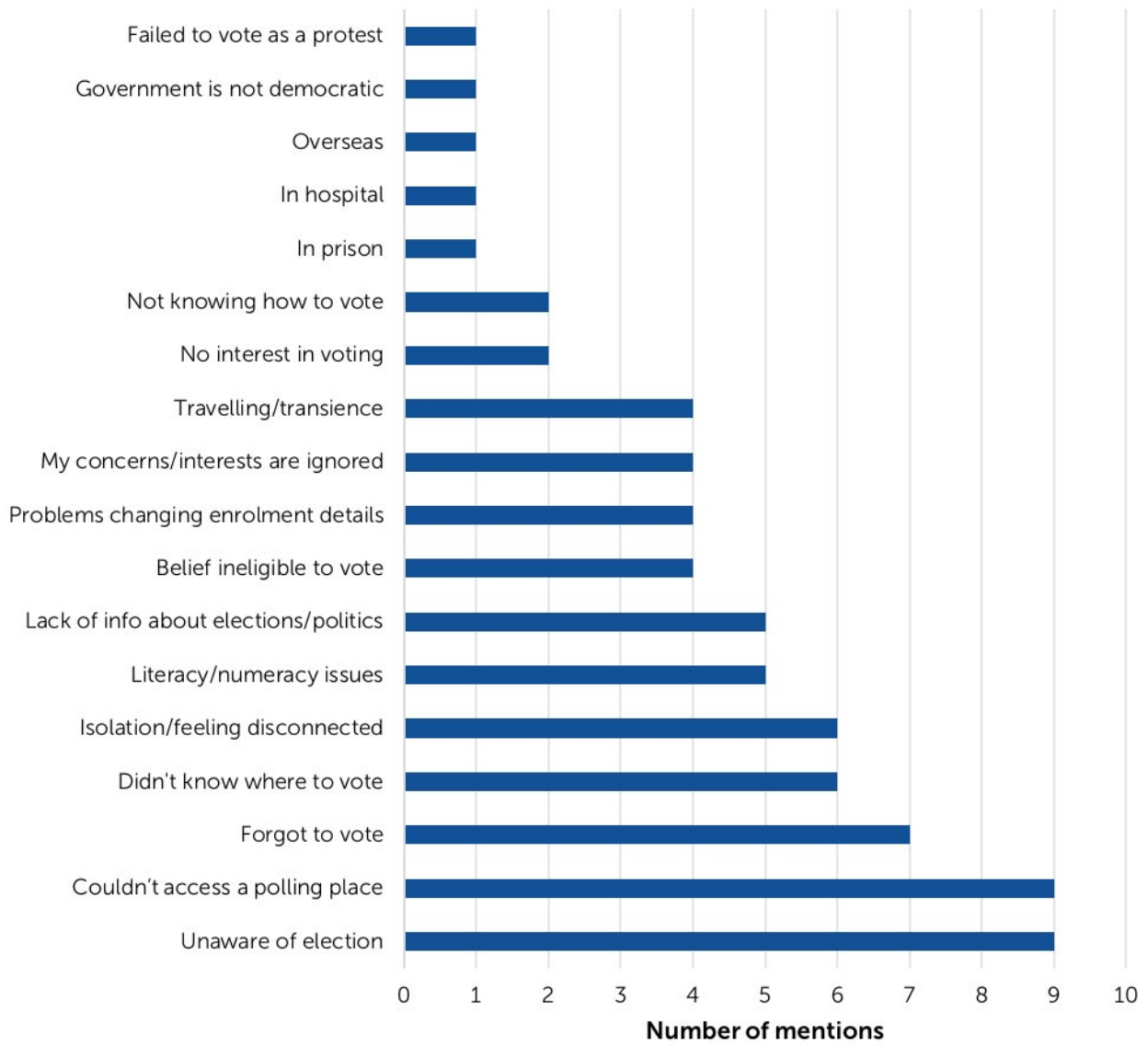
	Homeless Cohort %	AES result (2016) %
A good deal of interest in what is going on with an election	44	n/a
A good deal of interest in the 2016 election	n/a	30
A good deal of interest in elections overall	36	n/a
A good deal of interest in politics	n/a	34
Pay a good deal of attention to election reports on television	33	25

**Table 3:** Comparison with AES results (Source: Fieldwork 2019 , Cameron & McAllister 2019)

Reasons survey respondents gave for not being enrolled to vote are set out in Figure 15 (and tabulated in Appendix 5, Table 10). Reasons given for not voting in a federal election by those who believed they were enrolled or didn't know are set out in Figure 16 (and tabulated in Appendix 5, Table 11).



**Figure 15:** Reasons for not being enrolled to vote (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 16:** Reasons for not voting despite being enrolled (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



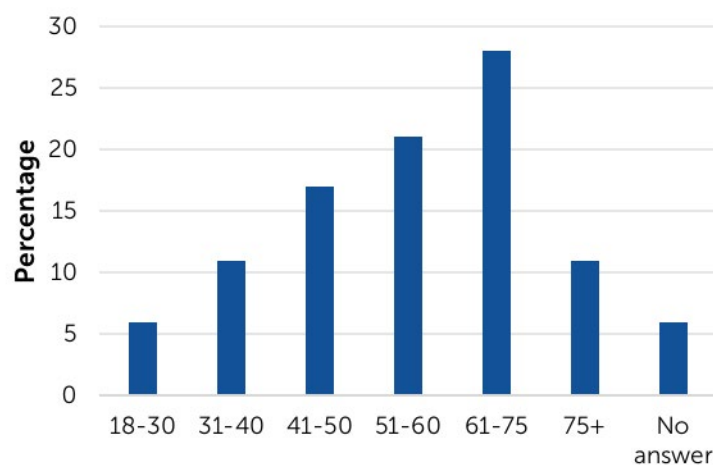
## Exit survey

### Participant demographics

Fifty-three participants completed the exit survey with their age ranges set out in Figure 17 and other demographic characteristics set out in Table 4 (77% identified as male and 23% identified as female).

	Yes %	No %
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identification	15	85
Australian citizen	94	6
First language English	87	13 <sup>13</sup>
Identification as having a physical or psychological disability	66	32
Currently homeless or of no fixed address	24	70

**Table 4:** Characteristics of exit survey participants (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 17:** Age of exit survey participants (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

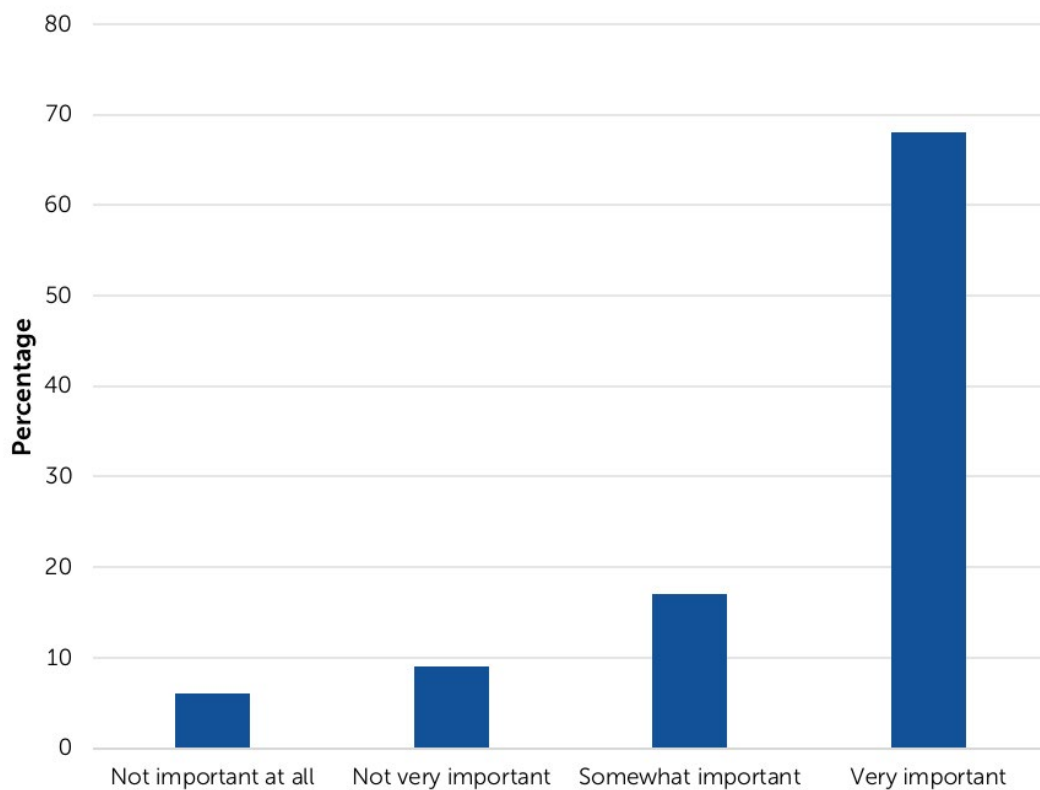
<sup>13</sup> There was one each for Spanish, Italian, Serbian, Croatian, Greek, French and Hungarian.

## Voting behaviour and attitudes

Results from the exit survey are set out in Table 5 and Figures 18 to 22.

	Yes %	No %
Voted previously in a federal election	92	6 <sup>14</sup>
Had completed main survey	15 <sup>15</sup>	85
Had participated in a voting information workshop	17 <sup>16</sup>	83

**Table 5:** Results from exit survey (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

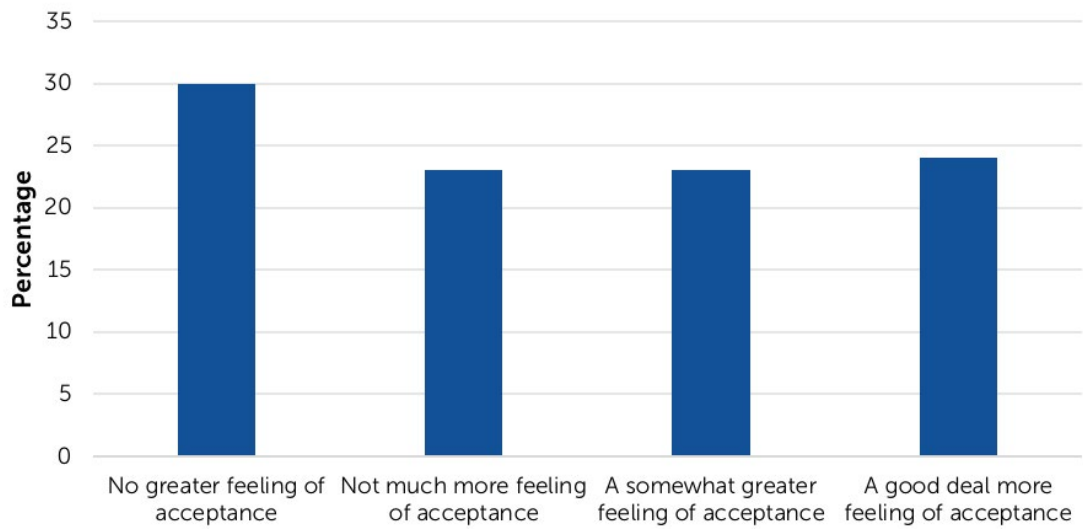


**Figure 18:** Importance of voting as part of being a citizen (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

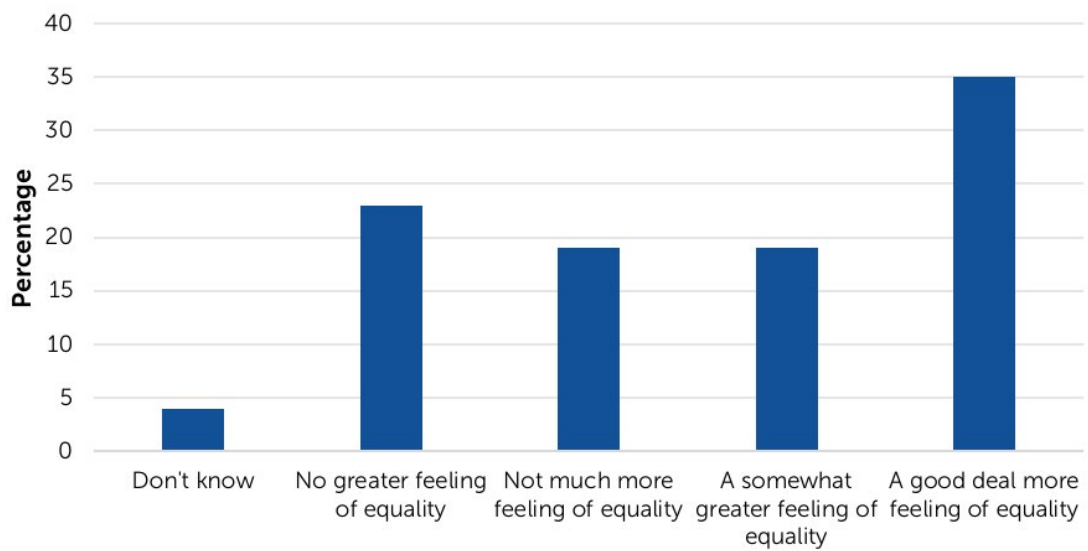
<sup>14</sup> These three participants were in their 30s to 50s rather than first-time voters due to age.

<sup>15</sup> This was verified by the researchers rather than relying on self-report.

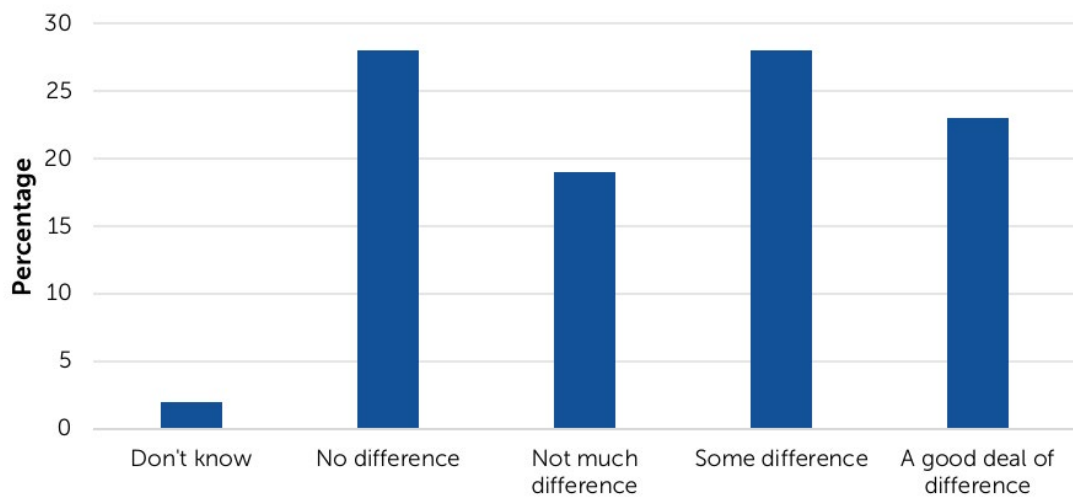
<sup>16</sup> This was verified by the researchers rather than relying on self-report.



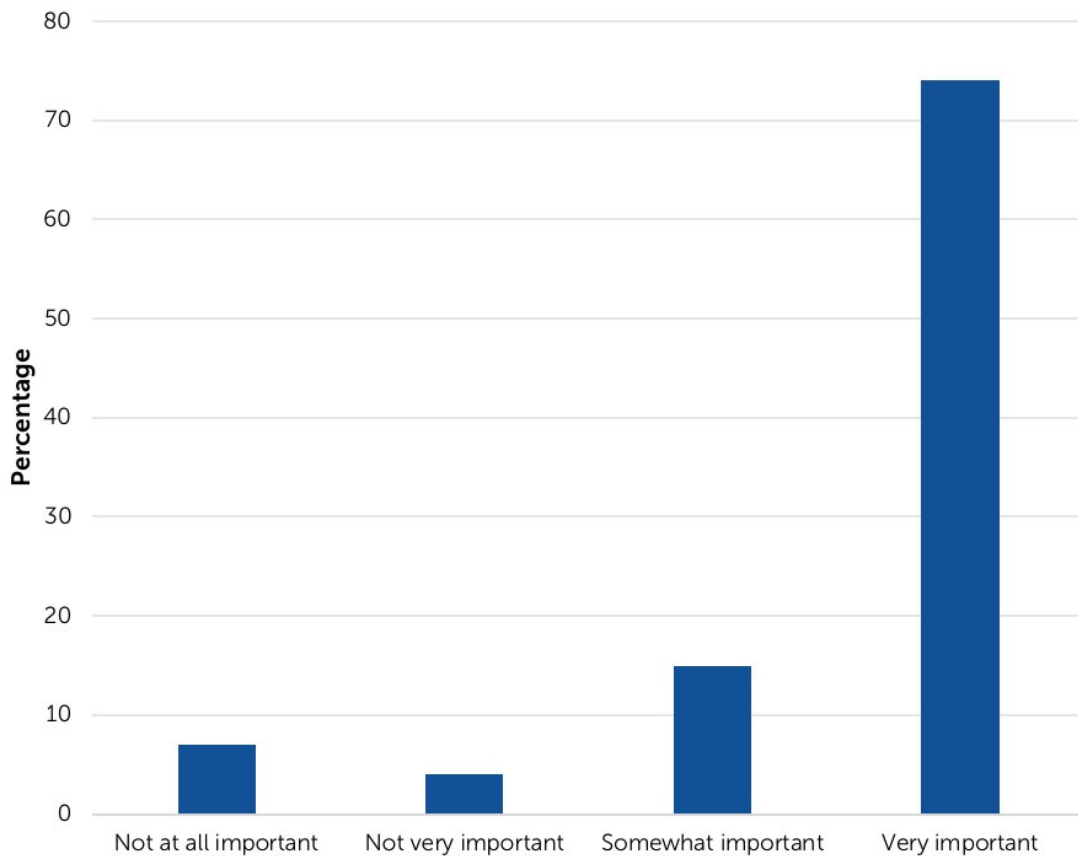
**Figure 19:** Voting as generating a feeling of acceptance (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 20:** Voting as generating a feeling of equality (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 21:** Voting as making a difference to one's life (Source: Fieldwork 2019)



**Figure 22:** Importance of everybody voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

## Interviews

### Participant demographics

Eighteen participants completed the interview with their demographic characteristics set out in Tables 6 and 7.

Gender identification	2 female	16 male
Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identification	5 yes	13 no
Currently homeless or of no fixed address	5 no <sup>17</sup>	13 yes

**Table 6:** Characteristics of interview participants

(Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Under 25	1 participant
25 – 40	2 participants
40 – 60	13 participants
Over 60	2 participants

**Table 7:** Age of interview participants (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

<sup>17</sup> These participants had prior experience of homelessness but were housed in short-term accommodation at the time of the interviews.

## Data analysis

The interview transcript data were analysed thematically using NVivo software. This involved classifying interviewees' comments against seven main themes which were then broken down into sub-categories:

1. Voter status (e.g. enrolled/never enrolled, regular/irregular voter).
2. Social influences (e.g. social networks, media).
3. Obstacles to voting (e.g. logistical, disinterest in politics, distrust/disillusionment).
4. Reasons for and benefits of voting (e.g. fear of fine, interest in politics, civic duty, to have a voice).
5. Experience of the voting process.
6. Psychological impact of voting.
7. Non-electoral participation (e.g. protesting, direct access to politicians).

These themes have been used to frame the discussion of interview results, and to inform the recommendations in this report.

## Voting status and habits

Of the 18 participants, eight had never been enrolled to vote. The other ten were enrolled but five of them voted only sporadically. Seven reported voting in the 2019 Federal Election. Two of the 2019 voters lodged their vote at a mobile polling booth at the Hutt St Centre or Baptist Care; both found the experience convenient and hassle-free. Five voted on election day at a regular polling booth in their local area. Of these, four found the process relatively straightforward; one reported that he would have found it easier if there was more information available about how to lodge his vote.

I think people should vote, you know? I can't see any real hassle why you can't vote, you know? There's been a couple of times in the past 20 years I've been stuck in hospital, I get asthma, for a couple of times, but they get you a vote thing anyway and fix it up. It's no drama. You still vote, you know. (Participant 108, male, age 60s)

Of those participants who had voted relatively recently, four reported modest positive psychological benefits, such as feeling satisfied or empowered by the experience. These people said they felt like they'd had their say and their vote had meaning. Four participants reported negative psychological effects, including feeling sad or disillusioned. Each of these four participants also reported lodging intentional informal votes and/or abstaining from voting because they didn't believe it made any difference.

I felt like my vote mattered, so at the end of the day I voted, whether it will be counted or not, but you know, I felt satisfactory, that I felt much better that I actually voted, I had my say on the voting system, so... Which was good, in a sense, yeah. (Participant 85, male, age 30s)

[After lodging an intentional informal vote] About two hours after when I went back to my girlfriend's place and her grandchildren, that's when I realised, you know, there's these kids here, I could have made a vote for a future for them, you know what I mean? (Participant 81, male, age 50s)

I felt sad. I felt sad...I looked at those pieces of paper and I folded them up and I put them in the box and I walked away in disgust. I wasn't going to bother writing 'I don't believe in your system', I just made an informal vote. I think a lot of people, for a lot of years now, who are completely disenchanted with what options are being presented to us, do as I did. (Participant 84, male, age 50s)

## Reasons to vote and benefits

Thirteen of the 18 interviewees, including both habitual voters and those who were not enrolled or didn't vote, had some positive things to say about voting, though this was often tempered by reservations about the political system. These participants said they felt it was important to vote so they could have a say, be represented, influence policy and make a difference. Several participants thought it was especially important that their voice was heard as an Indigenous person or a person experiencing homelessness. Commenting on the historical experiences of Indigenous peoples, one Aboriginal participant (male, age 40s) noted that "We really need to have our say, like for the Aboriginal people, you know?"

I just didn't think I had to do it and then later on in time I most probably needed to vote...Because I'm Indigenous to Australia, so I'd like to have a bit of say in what, you know, happens. (Participant 159, male, age 30s)

That was one of the main things for me, being homeless, you know, the politicians knowing that okay, we are constituents, you know, members of society, the homeless are actually coming out to vote, that my vote matters as much as those people who are working. (Participant 85, male, age 30s)

Four interviewees said they had an interest in politics and three said they enjoyed voting. Three thought it was a civic duty to vote and nine said voting was important in principle, even if they didn't vote themselves. These participants said that even if each individual vote counted for only a little, voting was a way of contributing to the community and having some influence over government.

I think it's also really good that it's compulsory if you are registered to vote because that way, you know, you have to do it, contribute to the community in terms of the voting part. (Participant 85, male, age 30s)

I think it's important to vote and I think people should have a say who goes into power. I think it's, you know, everyone should be voting. (Participant 160, male, age 40s)

I just think that people who don't vote or just vote anyhow, they're totally irresponsible...I think voting's very important. What I do is, I look up the policies of the candidates and then vote accordingly...I'm only a very small, you know, a minuscule amount of input, but I just think it's my responsibility. And whatever I can do to get good government, I'll do, you know. (Participant 2, female, age 70s)

It's the one little bit of democracy left in this country, the opportunity to vote every three years. (Participant 84, male, age 50s)

Three interviewees said fear of being fined was a key reason they voted, although they also mentioned other benefits. Of those participants who expressed some loss of faith in the political system, several still said they felt a duty to vote.

The whole purpose I was voting was because I didn't want to get a fine. So I can argue and say 'yeah, I voted!' (Participant 85, male, age 30s)

I've always liked voting, you know, for the pollies and that. I've always enjoyed voting... I think everyone should vote and have their say. I mean, even if I decide not to vote, I'm going to get a hefty fine, which I'm not going to let happen anyway, you know...It's just that when your name's on the list you've gotta vote, otherwise you get a hefty fine, you know? Not that I want to miss voting, but that's the way it works, when your name's on the electoral roll. (Participant 108, male, age 60s)

Who knows [why I vote], it's just that hopefully we get a better country one day. (Participant 163, male, age 50s)

## Obstacles to voting

Logistical issues were a key obstacle. One interviewee reported missing elections because he had a chronic illness that required regular hospitalisation; two others reported missing elections because they were in prison (and did not recall being given the opportunity to vote). Other obstacles were literacy issues, difficulty accessing a polling place, lack of transport and transience making it hard to enrol and/or vote. Transience was mentioned, not only as a logistical barrier to voting, but also as an impediment to forming a connection with a particular place and to engaging with the social and political issues relevant to that location. Three participants were put off voting because it seemed like a hassle and too complicated.

I moved to a different suburb, and um, I couldn't find where to go, you know, and I didn't have transport so I didn't want to go all the way down the hill, so I said oh well, I'm not going to worry about it this year, if they want to fine me, they can fine me. (Participant 163, male, age 50s)

The fact is I'm homeless, I don't know where I'm going to be next month, which makes it very difficult. If I was going to be in a place for any period of time, then I would because I'd have a lot to do with the politics in that area, you know? (Participant 34, male, age 50s)

Six interviewees said they had missed out on voting because experiencing homelessness meant they had more pressing priorities. They spoke of worries about where they would sleep and how they would obtain food, and a sense of profound loss that came from no longer having things others took for granted, such as a family, home and car. For those who had previously been engaged with voting, experiencing homelessness was a time when this engagement was at risk of being broken. For those who had never voted, the problems associated with experiencing homelessness made it unlikely they would start at this time in their lives.

When you are homeless, it's really hard...to actually go into a polling booth to vote because, you know, you're worried about where am I going to sleep tonight or where am I going to get food. (Participant 85, male, age 30s)

I lost my wife and I lost my kids and that, and I lost my house, my car, everything, and that's been sort of playing on my mind. (Participant 161, male, age 40s)

I didn't have the opportunity because I was doing other things and at that time, I'd had enough. I was going through a lot of difficult things at the time. And I wasn't sort of in my right mind to think about that because I'd never voted before, see? Been travelling, and it's hard. (Participant 71, female, age 50s)

Seven interviewees, including two who attended an information session, said they would need more information to participate in voting. The biggest concern was lack of information about candidates and policies (i.e. knowing who to vote for), followed by information about the voting process and then information about the enrolment process. Some participants had observed the presence of the mobile polling booth at the homelessness service provider premises but did not really see it as being there for them. They did not know where to start in terms of enrolling or voting and did not know what sort of assistance would be available to them. For several participants, the reason they were reluctant to vote without feeling better-informed was because they didn't want to 'muck their vote up' and wanted to ensure it was meaningful. In some ways this echoed concerns around transience, and not seeing themselves as entitled to vote because they lacked a strong connection to a specific district or an understanding of the issues and candidates in that area.

Voting, I don't know what I'm doing, you know what I mean? (Participant 159, male, age 30s)

It was a little bit hard because not much information was available in terms of who to vote for. (Participant 85, male, age 30s)

No, I don't know about the voting. (Participant 161, male, age 40s)

I looked at it over there [the mobile polling booth] but I wasn't really sure what to do about...I look at it and go whaaat?...I haven't got around to it and stuff, or really know much about it... I find it hard. I just like don't know where to begin with stuff...I really find it hard to like understand most of it, you know? I wouldn't mind getting a little bit of feedback or something in the future and that. (Participant 55, male, age 50s)

And when you guys come here before [for the information sessions] it was quite informative, what information you gave, it was [im]partial, and so on, it was very good. It got me interested in the whole thing...I'd like to know what they're doing and what their intentions are because it is very important. If you're gonna have your say you've got to know what you're talking about. (Participant 34, male, age 50s)

Several participants had concerns about the complexity of voting and the electoral system and there were mixed views about compulsory voting. Only one interview participant was wary of having his name on the electoral roll and he had become a silent voter as a result.

Democracy's extremely important, but the way we practice it is just overwhelmingly complex, unnecessarily complex. (Participant 132, male, age 50s)

I think that any system that claims it's a democratic system and then compels its people to vote or be fined or imprisoned is not a democracy, it's a technocracy. (Participant 12, male, age 50s)

By far the most common factor that discouraged participants from voting was some form of disillusionment with politics, expressed by 16 of the 18 interviewees. Fourteen felt their voices would not really be heard through voting. In some cases this was expressed as applying generally to all citizens. However, for many of the interviewees it was specifically their voices, the views of people experiencing homelessness, that they felt would not be listened to, nor their specific lived experience understood. These participants felt that no one really wanted to hear what they had to say, and some had internalised this view. Several participants reported feeling helpless and that they did not deserve to vote.

I just don't think they're listening, to be honest. (Participant 162, male, age 50s)

I don't think politicians and politics pay much attention to the homeless. (Participant 161, male, age 40s)

I reckon, you know, that's the thing, they don't know what we go through, like when we're on the streets. Specially like now, with the cold and all that, you know. (Participant 160, male, age 40s)

The government don't even listen, I'm sorry to put it like that, but it is true. They don't listen. (Participant 71, female, age 50s)

Just lost confidence in the whole system at that point, I think. Probably got to the point where it's just learned helplessness, there was no point voting, it wasn't going to improve things, or that's how it seemed at the time. (Participant 84, male, age 50s)

For a lot of years I felt like I didn't deserve to vote, because of my transience. I was, I spent a lot of time institutionalised, boys' homes, jail, whatever, and there was a long period of time when I felt like I didn't even deserve to vote. It got to a period where oh, I've become interested in voting, and now it's at the stage where nobody's interested in my vote. (Participant 34, male, age 50s)



Ten interviewees saw politicians as untrustworthy or pursuing their own interests and eight said there was no one worth voting for. Several participants went further, suggesting that 'the system' not only failed to address the conditions they were experiencing, but was largely responsible for producing those conditions. In the eyes of these participants, voting was tantamount to an endorsement of a system that they no longer had any faith in.

I have also abstained for my own reasons. Basically because I don't agree with the way the government is running the country and legislating to suit the top end of town and themselves, with us on the end of the train... Our politicians seem to have no will or interest to be the best they can be, they're just there, they're really just invested in their own interests. (Participant 12, male, age 50s)

The whole of Australia needs to band together, in a nice way, non-violent, and turn against our politicians, because they're not for us. They're for themselves. (Participant 81, male, age 50s)

If you ask me, they don't seem to want to help the homeless. (Participant 158, male, age 50s)

Why should we vote for someone who don't want us? Who don't want to look after us?...All of us felt left out, we felt like we're nothing. And we're human beings. We're not animals to walk on just because we're poor. You made us that way. (Participant 71, female, age 50s)

Well, Jesus, why should I vote for you bastards? It's you that created the system that put me in the circumstances that I'm in. Ah, if I vote for them, someone said if you vote for them it only encourages them. (Participant 84, male, age 50s)

Some participants were quite explicit about the fact that they would be more likely to vote, and they believed others experiencing homelessness would also be more likely to vote, if their views were treated as important and that addressing homelessness was on the political agenda.

If you heard on the radio, oh, this minister's going to do this or that for the homeless, then people would listen and say...then there would be talk around. (Participant 34, male, age 50s)

I'd like to see someone who was going to address homelessness a lot more than they have up until now, you know what I mean? If I could find a candidate prepared to do that, I'd vote 100%, because as you said, every vote counts. (Participant 34, male, age 50s)

## Social and media influences

Seven interviewees said they obtained information about elections and voting through television, three said they accessed information online and one in newspapers (several of these participants referred to multiple sources). One interviewee who was in his 20s reported that school was still the most significant source of information about politics and elections for him. One interviewee was scathing about the media and said he actively avoided any news reporting about elections and voting. Another said he was unable to access media due to his circumstances.

Three interviewees reported talking with friends, family and associates outside the service centre about politics. Six said they talked about voting and elections with other people at the centre (one with staff rather than fellow clients), although half of these participants said they were listening in to others talking rather than actively engaging themselves. Five interviewees said they were unaware of any discussion about voting and elections at the centre. One person said he would like to find out more information about elections and voting by talking to people at the centre.

## Other forms of participation

Several interviewees said they saw value in forms of political participation other than the current voting system. One thought direct democracy would be an improvement so that people's voices could be heard on specific issues. When questioned about alternative forms of participation (to voting), one interviewee said he wanted to see greater representation of Indigenous people in parliament. Two interviewees thought signing petitions could be effective. Four people were very supportive of protests and demonstrations, while two were not impressed with protesting because they thought it was too disruptive and potentially violent and one thought there was no point protesting because it wouldn't change anything. Six interviewees would value the opportunity to speak directly with politicians who came to visit the centre, and several had, in fact, been present during past visits. Several of these interviewees also felt that direct interaction with people experiencing homelessness would help politicians understand the problems that needed addressing.

## Reassessing turnout

The present study did not attempt to precisely measure the rate of enrolment and turnout among people experiencing homelessness in Adelaide, South Australia or Australia. The population in scope for this project is diverse with varying characteristics. The sample for the study was non-representative because it was limited to self-selecting participants drawn from people accessing one of three specialist homelessness services in the Adelaide CBD. Rough sleepers, people from remote areas, women and young people were under-represented. The sample reflected the attitudes of those who were more engaged with specialist homelessness services. The views of a small number of arguably some of the most isolated people experiencing homelessness were recorded, with recruitment via outreach. In many respects this echoes the character of previous small-sample studies but nevertheless adds to the overall picture of turnout among homeless populations.

Figure 4 in the Background section, drawing on data from a number of prior studies, estimated the voting age population experiencing homelessness in Australia in 2016 as approximately 90,000 (out of a total homeless population of approximately 116,000). A low estimate of enrolled voters among this group was 9,000 (10% of the voting age population). A high estimate was 60,000 (67%). The size of this range is indicative of how difficult it is to find information on which reasonable estimates of voter enrolment among the voting age population experiencing homelessness can be based.

The present study sheds some additional light on this issue. Of the 66 participants in the main survey, 56% said they were enrolled to vote (8% didn't know). Of the 18 interview participants, ten (55%) said they were enrolled to vote.<sup>18</sup> The numbers enrolled for the main survey and interviews suggest that around 56% (47 of 84 participants in these two elements of the study) of people accessing specialist homelessness services in the Adelaide CBD are enrolled to vote (which also evidences a consistency with enrolment numbers across the two research instruments).

Of those participants who were enrolled, not all were regular voters. Of the 37 participants in the main survey who said they were enrolled, 65% said they had failed to vote in a federal election at some stage and 19% had missed the last federal election. Fifty-nine percent of all main survey participants, both enrolled and not enrolled, said they intended to vote in the 2019 Federal Election.<sup>19</sup> Of the ten interview participants who were enrolled, half were regular voters and half were sporadic voters; seven had voted in the 2019 Federal Election. The numbers from the main

<sup>18</sup> These participants had prior experience of homelessness but were housed in short-term accommodation at the time of the interviews.

<sup>19</sup> The higher number of people stating an intention to vote in the upcoming election and the low non-voting figure for the previous Federal election may reflect some response bias – the participant wishing to avoid being viewed negatively by the researcher.

survey and interview participants suggest that only around 40% of people accessing services at specialist homelessness services in the Adelaide CBD and who are enrolled to vote actually turn out to vote regularly to semi-regularly.

If 56% of people accessing services at homelessness service centres in the Adelaide CBD are enrolled to vote, and 40% of that group actually vote, the turnout rate for this population can be estimated at around 22%. This compares with an enrolment rate of nearly 97% for the voting age population Australia-wide and turn out rates in the low to mid 90s for this group. The present study therefore tentatively confirms that people experiencing homelessness have enrolment and turn out rates significantly lower than the Australian voting age population average. Further, if we look at the overall turnout for the three mobile polling booths where 54 ordinary votes, 64 absent votes (with a rough estimate that one third of these votes were cast by homelessness service provider staff), and 7 provisional votes were cast (private correspondence from the AEC, 14/8/19), improving turnout to reflect the national average would mean more than a quadrupling of this figure. While considerably more research needs to be undertaken to confirm whether this can be extrapolated to a national level, these early results allow for a limited ballpark projection that, at a minimum, there are potentially more the 60,000 people experiencing homelessness who do not vote. This would make them one of the largest cohorts of invisible citizens.

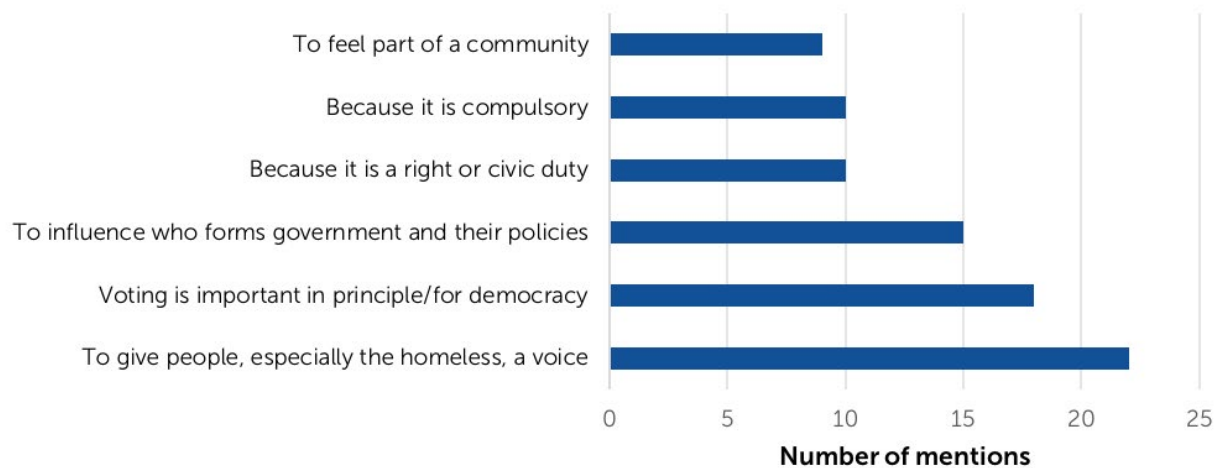
## Political sophistication

Despite having such low enrolment and turnout rates, the participants in this study generally exhibited a reasonably high level of political sophistication and engagement. The majority were articulate and thoughtful about their views. Many of the participants who said they lacked information about elections and politics expressed an interest in finding out more so that they could engage with voting in a meaningful way. Even the participants who said politics meant nothing to them personally often acknowledged that voting was important in principle.

The biggest factor discouraging the participants from enrolling and voting was not that they thought voting lacked meaning, but that it lacked meaning *for them* due to their circumstances. They believed that their interests were not a priority on the political agenda and they didn't feel like voting was going to change that situation. Participants spoke of the future possibility of engaging more meaningfully with voting not just when logistical obstacles were eased, but when it was clearer that their voices would be heard and have some chance of making a difference, if not for them, but for other homeless and marginalised people.

## Reasons for voting

Notwithstanding the undercurrent of disillusionment with politics and 'the system', participants recognised a range of positives about electoral engagement. Combining the responses in the information sessions and the interviews, the most commonly cited reasons for, or benefits of, voting are set out in Figure 23 (and tabulated in Appendix 5, Table 12).



**Figure 23:** Combined responses – benefits of voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

The study results suggested that participants saw voting as an important activity in general, and had a reasonable level of interest personally, belying the fact that only 56% of the sample said they were enrolled and 22% regularly turned out to vote. Sixty-four percent of participants in the main survey had some or a good deal of interest in what was going on with an election, while 60% had some or a good deal of interest in elections overall. Similarly, 83% of participants in the main survey thought voting had some or a good deal of importance.

Results from the exit survey suggested an even more positive view of the importance of voting, not unexpectedly given that this sample was more electorally engaged than the other three (with a 100% turn out rate). In the exit survey, 85% of participants said voting was a somewhat or very important part of being a citizen, while 89% said it was somewhat or very important for everybody to vote.

Participants in the interviews were somewhat more equivocal in their support for voting. Although 13 of the 18 interviewees made some positive comments about voting, in all but two of these cases, negativity was the more dominant orientation. For most participants, it was as though they recognised that voting was *ideally* a positive activity with a range of benefits, but this was not the case in practice for people experiencing homelessness. There was a sense that many participants saw themselves as somehow apart from the rest of the voting age population; voting did not, and could not, have the same meaning for people experiencing homelessness as it did for others. It was yet another activity they felt excluded from, not formally, and not so much because the logistical obstacles were insurmountable, but because their voices and interests were not seen as important.

## Psychological benefits of voting

The results of the study, particularly the exit survey and interviews, suggest that, for some people experiencing homelessness, there may be some psychological benefits to voting. In the exit survey, 47% of participants said voting made them feel somewhat or a good deal more of a sense of acceptance. Fifty-four percent thought voting created at least a somewhat greater feeling of

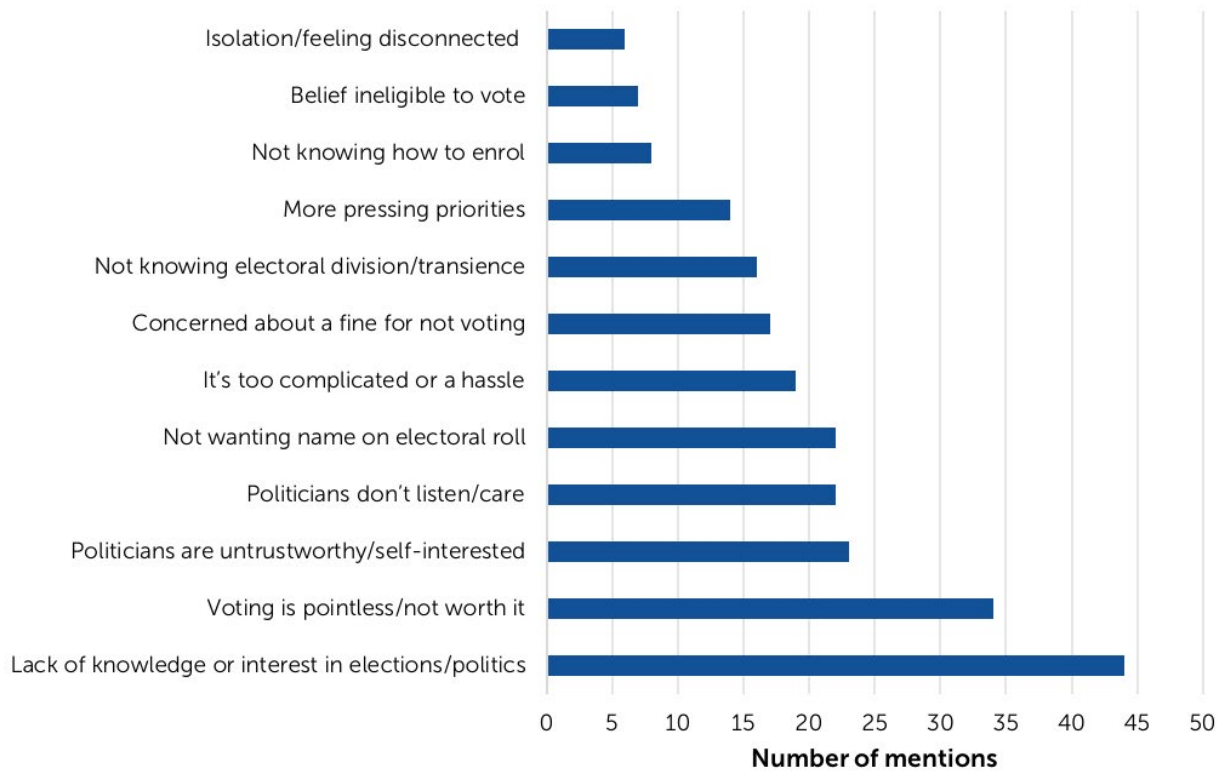
equality and 51% said it made some or a good deal of difference to their lives. However, some participants appeared a little bemused to even be asked such questions about voting and several declined to answer because the questions had no meaning for them. Considering this was by far the most electorally engaged of the four samples, their enthusiasm for the psycho-social effects of voting was somewhat muted.

There were possibly a few cases where people's views were coloured by the fact that they had just gone through the process of voting, sometimes involving delays and additional paperwork such as completing a declaration envelope. On the whole, the exit survey participants did not complain about the hassle or inconvenience of voting, and in fact seemed highly appreciative of the opportunity to vote at a mobile polling booth which 'came to them'. The problem came the next step up, when participants were sceptical about how much attention would be paid to what people experiencing homelessness had to say and how much understanding there was of their circumstances.

The interview results echoed this. The participants who had voted in the 2019 Federal Election, at both mobile polling booths and regular polling places on election day, had mainly positive things to say about their actual voting experience. None of the interviewees found voting to be a particular hassle or inconvenience and three reported actively enjoying the process. However, most thought their votes would have little impact and they were dissatisfied with the choice of candidates and policies available. This is in marked contrast to the broader electorate who, despite reporting growing cynicism in other respects, are generally happy with the political offer at election time (Crosby 2019).

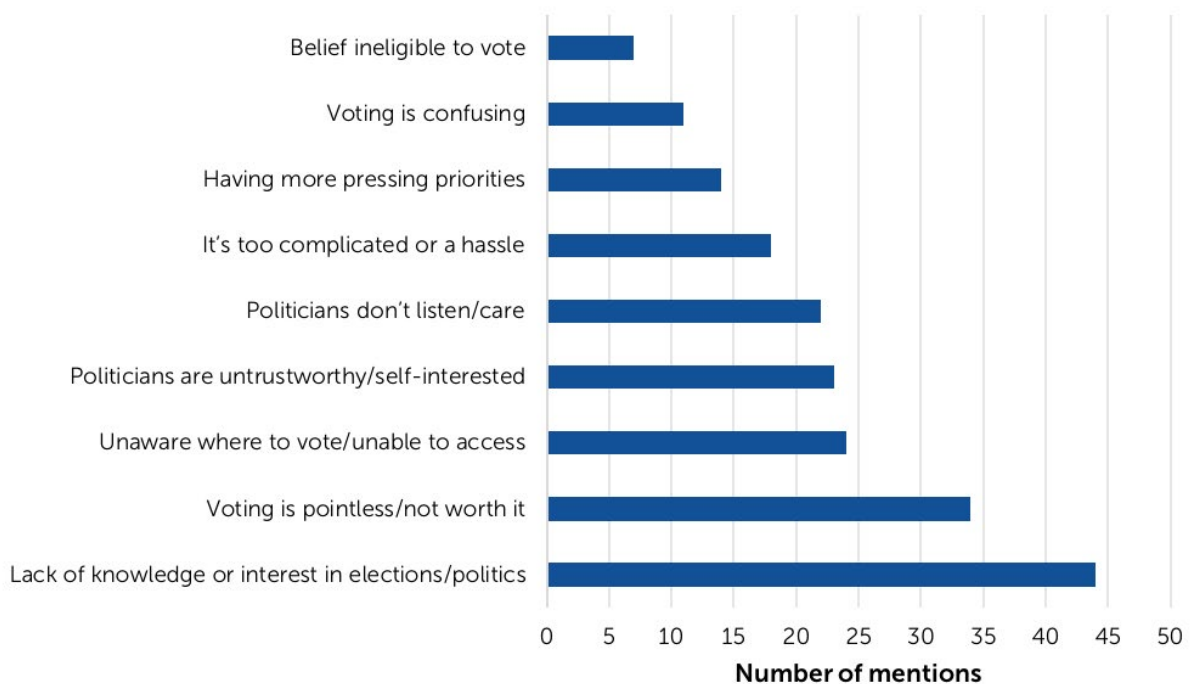
## Obstacles to voting

Logistical issues did play some role in discouraging participants from enrolling and voting, but a general disillusionment with politics had more impact on their electoral engagement. A key reason for not voting was not being enrolled. Combining the responses in the information sessions, main survey and interviews, the most commonly cited obstacles to enrolling are set out in Figure 24 (and tabulated in Appendix 5, Table 13).



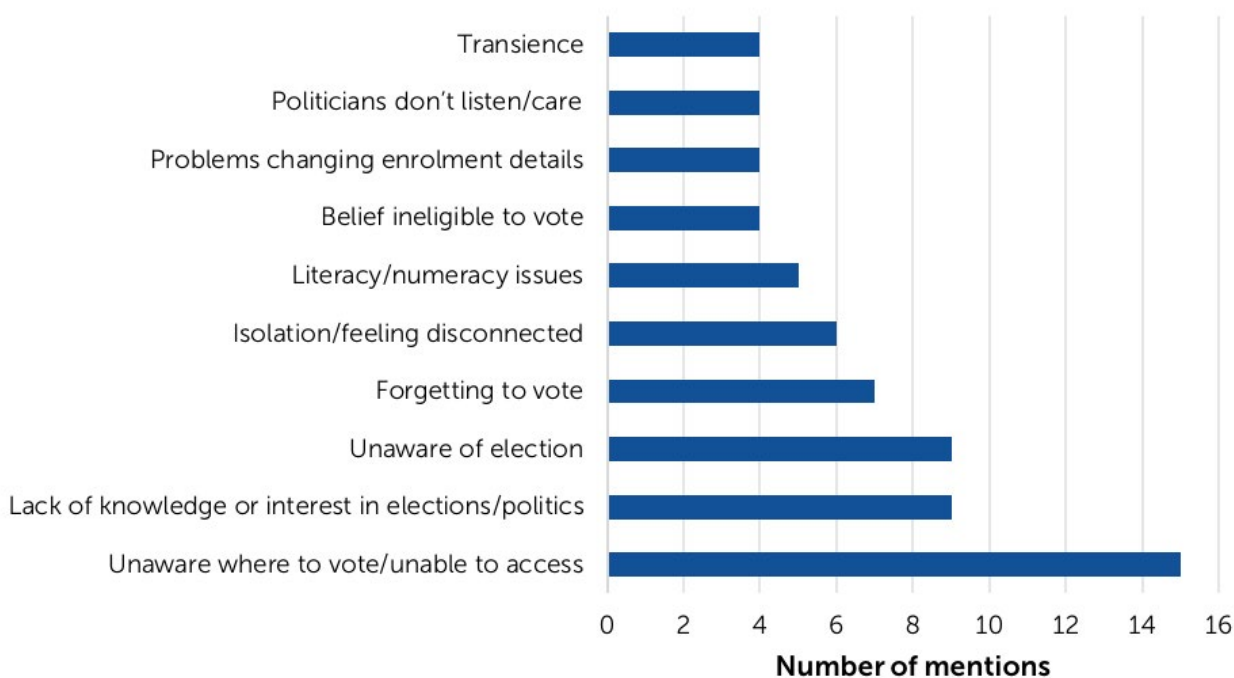
**Figure 24:** Combined responses – obstacles to *enrolling* (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Combining the responses in the information sessions, main survey and interviews, the most commonly cited obstacles to voting are set out in Figure 25 (and tabulated in Appendix 5, Table 14).



**Figure 25:** Combined responses – obstacles to *voting* (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Note that these factors were cited both by participants who were not enrolled and participants who were enrolled but did not always vote. Some factors are mentioned twice because they were cited as reasons not to enrol *and* not to vote, or it was unclear which was being referred to. In the main survey, the most commonly cited reasons for not voting by participants who were enrolled to vote are set out in Figure 26 (and tabulated in Appendix 5, Table 15) (these mentions are additional to the tallies above).



**Figure 26:** Main survey – reasons for not voting by those enrolled (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Some of the issues that were expected to be obstacles to voting did not loom large: there were five mentions of a lack of faith in the integrity of the electoral system discouraging voting, four mentions of literacy/numeracy issues, three mentions of being in jail and one mention of illness. These mentions include participants from across multiple phases of data collection, which may mean the same participant mentioned an issue more than once.

A reasonable number of participants were concerned about having their names on the electoral roll but only 18% of the main survey participants were aware that it was possible to enrol as a silent elector (11% of those enrolled said they were in fact silent electors). Twenty-three percent of main survey participants said they were somewhat or a good deal more likely to vote if they could be a silent elector.

The ability to enrol as a voter of no fixed address was also not widely known, although it may have addressed the concerns of some of those who said their transience and not knowing which division to enrol in was an obstacle. Thirty percent of main survey participants said they were aware they could enrol as voters of no fixed address. The survey results in relation to silent voters and voters of no fixed address may not be as reliable as other results because some participants appeared to be confused about what was meant by these terms.



Given the obstacles to voting, it is interesting to note that the rate of informal voting from the mobile polling booths at Hutt St Centre, Baptist Care SA and Neami National Street to Home was 11% (for ordinary votes<sup>20</sup> for the House of Representatives). The base rate of informality for House of Representatives voting across Australia in the 2019 election was 5.54% (and 3.81% for the Senate) (private correspondence from the AEC, 27/8/19). The result from the mobile polling booths is from a small sample size (54 ordinary votes, of which 48 were formal and 6 informal), but it indicates an area for significant improvement, where any growth in improved turnout for people experiencing homelessness must be accompanied by appropriate support, engagement and education. After all, an informal vote is a lost vote and informal voting is therefore effectively a form of abstention.

## Lack of information

Lack of information was reported as a common barrier to enrolling and voting and many participants had an appetite for more information. Television was the most accessed medium for participants – Internet messages were much less likely to reach this audience. Nearly a third reported family or friends, usually outside the service centre, encouraging them to vote, making social contacts another potential source of information about elections and voting for the participant group. Hutt St Centre and Baptist Care SA are also trusted sources of information for people experiencing homelessness, as was demonstrated by their assistance with recruiting participants for the research. Partnering with service centres that have heavy client traffic to promote voter enrolment and elections offers a good way forward for enhancing communication strategies.

The present study provided little hard evidence that the information sessions held at Hutt St Centre increased voter enrolment and turnout among participants. One interview participant reported that attending the information session had been very beneficial and had sparked his newfound interest in voting. One exit survey participant aged 40 said he was voting for the first time in the 2019 Federal Election and had attended an information session. On the other hand, two information session participants who subsequently completed the exit survey did not recall their attendance at the session (another two exit survey participants recalled attending a session when in fact they had not).

The information sessions and the main survey administration appeared to raise awareness about the upcoming election among the target population, although there was no evidence that this led directly to increased enrolments or turnout. The information sessions were received positively by participants, even those with little interest in learning more about voting, despite the fact that they were time and resource-intensive. Softer communication strategies such as posters/notices and direct text or hard copy messaging to clients, delivered in partnership with specialist homelessness services, may also be effective. The experience at Neami National Street to Home, where direct, real-time text messaging to residents of the adjacent accommodation facility produced a rush at the mobile polling booth, was instructive in this regard.

<sup>20</sup> The absent and provisional votes are not included as they are distributed to their home divisions for formality checking and counting.

There may be other small changes that can be made to minimise some of the informational obstacles to voting experienced by participants. Some participants in the exit survey and interviews said they would have appreciated more information about how to vote and who to vote for at the mobile polling booths. It could be made clearer that mobile polling booth staff are able to provide some assistance to voters with completing their ballot papers if necessary. It is also possible for mobile polling booth staff to make how to vote materials available to voters, but this depends on materials being supplied by parties.

**Future communication strategies by the AEC targeting people experiencing homelessness need to focus on raising awareness and providing information about the following areas:**

- The option to enrol as a voter of no fixed address.
- The option to enrol as a silent elector.
- The lack of any follow-up or issuing of fines for failure to vote in federal elections by those enrolled as voters of no fixed address.
- How to enrol to vote and the option of having another elector (such as a service centre staff member) verify identity rather than relying on documentation.
- The availability of assistance with enrolling and voting for those with literacy issues.
- Upcoming election dates.
- The presence of mobile polling booths at service centres.
- The availability of how to vote materials at mobile polling booths.

Ideally it would be possible for people experiencing homelessness to be permitted to use the address of a specialist homelessness service which they access as their 'home address' for the purpose of being allocated to an electoral division. It is already common for people experiencing homelessness to receive messages and mail via these services. Specialist homelessness services are more likely to be located in areas where their clients spend time, including nights. In many cases, people experiencing homelessness feel a greater sense of connection to these locales than to an area where their next of kin resides or where they used to live. They should have the right to influence representation in the location where they feel most connected and spend their nights, as other electors do.

This may raise concerns about electoral stacking but this could be effectively managed. Specialist homelessness services could be asked to verify that people using their addresses to enrol to vote were clients who spent time at the relevant location. Permitting enrolment on this basis would accurately reflect the geographical distribution of voters in terms of their physical presence and bring the treatment of people experiencing homelessness in line with the way other voters are treated. Voters of similar circumstances are already clustered together in electoral divisions across the country, with many electorates deviating substantially from the average in terms of median income, age, education levels and other variables.

The AEC should consider amending its candidate handbook to remind candidates of the importance of reaching out to marginalised communities that are targeted via mobile polling teams. The advice to candidates currently reads:

HTV [how to vote] cards for electors serviced by mobile polling teams may be supplied by party workers to the team leader of a mobile polling team. It is not the responsibility of the team leader to

arrange for this or to remind party workers to do so. Mobile polling teams will provide the electoral material to electors on request. (Australian Electoral Commission 2019b)

Two amendments could be made here. First, the advice should note (and allow for) specialist homelessness services, if they so wish, to request the electoral material from the AEC so that they may display the material (at an appropriate distance in accordance with Act). Second, that the AEC, within their remit of fully enabling the franchise, remind candidates that, while it is not the responsibility of the AEC, ensuring the availability of electoral material will improve access, inclusivity and a potential reduction in informal votes. Noting the limitations of what the AEC can say, the final line of the the above quote could simply be extended to say: 'Mobile polling teams will provide the electoral material to electors on request to *assist with levelling the electoral experience for all citizens*'.

It would also be very helpful for candidates running in the relevant seats to visit homelessness service centres during the election campaign, but we are aware that this is not something the AEC is likely to have any influence over. It may also be useful for service centres to make available flyers summarising major parties' or candidates' positions on various relevant issues, especially those affecting people experiencing homelessness. Providing access to the ABC's Vote Compass could also be beneficial here. Again, this is not something the AEC will be able to implement.

Ideally, AEC staff running the mobile polling booths which visit specialist homelessness services' premises will have some background or training in working with people who are experiencing disadvantage or marginalisation. This will help ensure staff are able to support voters at these booths with the voting process. Staff should also be trained in using the online electoral roll system to reduce delays for people voting outside their electoral division

The AEC will need to continue to work closely with specialist homelessness services to maximise enrolment and voting rates amongst people experiencing homelessness. One way of doing this could be to recruit service provider staff, including part-timers and volunteers, as members of the mobile polling booth teams at service provider premises. This should be possible under the AEC's existing temporary employment workforce provisions and would represent a way of drawing on the expertise of service provider staff without over-burdening providers. The exchange of expertise could be two-way: service provider staff who had experience as temporary AEC employees would bring enhanced knowledge of electoral processes and voting back to their roles supporting people experiencing homelessness.

## Disillusion

The results of this study suggest that for people experiencing homelessness, one of the biggest obstacles to electoral participation is negativity towards the political system. Across the information sessions and interviews, there were 83 mentions of such adverse opinions as: 'voting is pointless,' and 'the voice of the homeless isn't heard'. These attitudes reflected the general belief among our interviewees that there was little-to-no attention paid to issues affecting people experiencing homelessness during election campaigns, such as social housing, rent assistance, poverty and Newstart, structural unemployment and mental health. Many of the participants who said they

didn't know much about or were not interested in elections and politics communicated that they had disengaged because of their disillusionment with the political system.

The participant population in this study aligns to some extent with the broader Australian population in this area. Australian Election Study (AES) data from 2016 found satisfaction with democracy was at 60%, an all-time low in the life of the survey, which has been running since 1996 (Cameron & McAllister 2019). Only 26% of people, also an all-time low, thought people in government could be trusted, while an all-time high of 56% said government was run for just a few big interests. An all-time high of 52% of people in the AES said politicians didn't know what ordinary people thought. With trust in the political system declining across the population, it is not surprising that this is a significant issue for a highly marginalised group such as those experiencing homelessness.

Many participants were appreciative of the efforts made to engage them by the AEC, especially by the use of mobile polling booths, although some felt more information needed to be provided about voting to make these efforts effective. However, it was common for participants to be sceptical about the extent to which their views would be listened to and this came through strongly in the interviews.

Many participants felt frustrated and impotent, and being able to vote was not enough to restore their sense of empowerment or social inclusion. In fact, in the face of a system they felt excluded from and overlooked by, *not* voting (or lodging an intentional informal vote) appeared to some as more effective political action than voting. They felt that voting properly would be tantamount to colluding with a system from which they felt completely alienated. Choosing not to vote became one of the few forms of resistance and protest open to them, delivering a sense of agency that could potentially outweigh the empowering effects of voting.

Some participants expressed resentment about being expected (or required) to make their voice heard through voting when it was obvious to them that no one was listening. They didn't see any reason as to why they should engage until they were engaged with.

# Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

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The civic life of people experiencing homelessness is little understood and even less systematically studied, something this research has sought to, at least partially, rectify. But there is still much to learn, particularly with respect to the electoral attitudes and behaviours of certain subsets of the homeless population, such as women, the young, rural and suburban citizens and Indigenous peoples. There is also a long way to go in terms of supporting people experiencing homelessness to connect and reconnect with political participation.

The dominant and recurring theme of almost every conversation that took place over the course of this study was that, regardless of how they felt about democracy or government, people with lived experience of homelessness do not feel heard and do not feel that they count as much as everyone else. Since the whole point of democracy is to ensure that everyone is an equal unit of public concern, this is a problem that all sincere democrats would wish to remedy. A first step in remedying this situation would be to increase voting by people experiencing homelessness because voters are more likely to be heard than non-voters: they do tend to command the attention of politicians. A higher rate of electoral participation by people experiencing homelessness would better draw attention to their circumstances and needs. A higher profile for issues affecting this group may even motivate the homed to vote with their interests in mind.

The AEC's key goal, as we understand it, is to run elections with probity and integrity. A well-run election in the Australian context is one with high levels of turnout, inclusivity across all social cleavages, impartiality, ease of access and integrity in which outcomes are trusted and the principle of 'one vote, one value' is honoured. Our electoral regime, arguably, approaches the gold standard as far as the industrialised voting world is concerned, partly because it is constantly seeking to perfect itself according to the above standards. Bringing more people experiencing homelessness into the electorate would be a major achievement in terms of that perfective process.

This study has developed a unique dataset that relates to the electoral participation of people experiencing homelessness in Adelaide's city centre. Working closely with the AEC and specialist homelessness services, the findings of this report draw from a deep engagement with the lived experience. The AEC is to be commended for actively engaging with people experiencing homelessness in a global context of relative indifference to the civic standing of this constituency.

A number of key recommendations are offered for consideration:

**1. The introduction of any legislative, procedural, or operational changes to the conduct of elections and to electoral requirements should expressly take into account their potential effect on the participation of people experiencing homelessness and avoid or minimise the imposition of additional barriers (identifying potential barriers should be formalised and be inclusive of homelessness broadly defined). Areas of potential concern include:**

- 1.1. Any potential requirement for identification to cast a ballot;
- 1.2. Changes to or a requirement for a home address; and,

- 1.3. Updating of incomplete enrolment details (e.g. direct enrolment updates).

**2. Specialist homelessness services' premises where people experiencing homelessness gather regularly and in numbers (i.e. day centres) should be provided with an exemption within the legislation so that they may be classed as 'home' for enrolment purposes. This will have the added benefit of establishing a stronger sense of belonging for individuals experiencing homelessness and will also enhance the efficacy of the 'homeless vote' by concentrating the vote of individuals who share a similar life experience within the electorates with which they have the most connection.**

**3. The AEC should develop and expand its links with specialist homelessness services nationally. This expanded relationship should move beyond an 'outreach' mindset and focus on sustained partnerships to better engage, educate and empower individuals who are or have experienced homelessness. With support from the AEC, specialist homelessness services could:**

- 3.1. Run voter information sessions and incorporate relevant information or activities into other programs.
- 3.2. Proactively encourage people experiencing homelessness to enrol to vote at any time (e.g. in conjunction with completing other government paperwork);
- 3.3. Promote the possibility of enrolling as a voter of no fixed address;
- 3.4. Assist people to complete voter enrolment forms, including identity verification.
- 3.5. Develop an appropriate communication strategy and promote the presence of mobile polling booths ahead of elections; and,
- 3.6. Assist people with completing postal votes if possible.

**4. The AEC should engage in enhanced 'enrolment drives' at specialist homelessness services' premises where people experiencing homelessness gather regularly and in numbers (i.e. day centres) prior to elections, with a focus on:**

- 4.1. Assuring people experiencing homelessness that they are eligible to enrol as electors of no fixed address and to vote;
- 4.2. Assuring people that enrolling as an elector of no fixed address means they will not be fined for failing to vote;
- 4.3. Making people aware they can enrol as silent electors;
- 4.4. Making people aware of when, where and how they can vote;
- 4.5. Countering the perception that voting makes no difference by providing illustrations of how small numbers of votes can affect outcomes in some cases; and,
- 4.6. Explaining the principle of 'one vote, one value' (legal equality) and how this means that *every* citizen is formally equal when casting a vote.

**5. The AEC should continue to conduct mobile polling at specialist homelessness services' premises where people experiencing homelessness gather regularly and in numbers (i.e. day centres) prior to elections, with an improved focus on:**

- 5.1. Promoting the booth's visit ahead of time;

- 5.2. Promoting the booth's visit *at the time*, such as via SMS, in conjunction with specialist homelessness services.
- 5.3. Making the presence of the booth as prominent as possible to specialist homelessness services' clients;
- 5.4. Partnering with specialist homelessness services' staff ahead of and during elections, including recruiting service staff to work on mobile polling teams;
- 5.5. Ensuring AEC staff proactively provide assistance to voters, including in the case of disability, literacy and cognition issues and lack of understanding about how to complete ballot papers correctly;
- 5.6. Finding ways to reduce unintentional informal voting among people experiencing homelessness (e.g. see recommendation 3.1);
- 5.7. Ensuring that AEC staff are appropriately trained to work with marginalised and vulnerable community members;
- 5.8. Making available how to vote materials provided by candidates (at least for the local electoral division);
- 5.9. Amending the AEC Candidate Handbook to note the importance of levelling the access to candidate election materials via mobile polling booths; and,
- 5.10. Streamlining processes for people voting outside their home electorates, which will be common at mobile polling booths (e.g. ensuring at least two laptops are available to access the online electoral roll, mobile polling booth staff are trained in using the system and declaration voting procedures are as efficient as possible).

**6. The AEC should continue to provide and enhance targeted mobile polling, electoral engagement and enrolment opportunities through service providers that specifically work with women, young people, veterans and Indigenous people. This will require the development of ongoing partnerships with service providers supporting these communities.**

**7. Bearing in mind that this is a pilot study, the AEC should commit to further research in partnership with universities and specialist homelessness services. This should incorporate:**

- 7.1. Producing an evidence base around electoral participation and homelessness over time. In addition, to developing such longitudinal baselines, this should include the measurement and evaluation of:
  - 7.1.1. Mobile polling and enrolment drives;
  - 7.1.2. Staff training and engagement practices;
  - 7.1.3. The impact of activities and information sessions; and,
  - 7.1.4. The effectiveness of partnering with service providers.
- 7.2. Developing an expansive study across multiple sites which is inclusive of the full spectrum of those experiencing homelessness, focusing on:
  - 7.2.1. Analysis of the link between voting, meaningfulness and belonging;
  - 7.2.2. Better understanding of the psycho-social benefits to voting;
  - 7.2.3. Tracking changes in behaviours and attitudes to voting.

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## Appendix 1: Participant Information Sheet (sample)

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**PROJECT TITLE:** Electoral participation among people experiencing homelessness in Adelaide

**HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL NUMBER:** H-2019-038

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Professor Lisa Hill

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in the research project described below.

#### **What is the project about?**

This project explores whether people experiencing homelessness vote in elections and what could make it easier for them to vote.

#### **Who is undertaking the project?**

This project is being conducted by Professor Lisa Hill and Dr Jonathon Louth with the help of a broader research team and community sector organisations in Adelaide. The Australian Electoral Commission has provided funding for this project as part of its community engagement activities.

#### **Why am I being invited to participate?**

You are being invited as a person experiencing homelessness or insecure accommodation in Adelaide.

#### **What am I being invited to do?**

You are being invited to complete a short survey with assistance from one of the researchers. You will be given a \$10 supermarket gift voucher to compensate you for your time (around 15 minutes). If you choose to vote at a mobile polling booth at the Federal Election to be held in May, you may also be asked to answer some simple questions about your experience afterwards.

#### **Are there any risks associated with participating in this project?**

There are no significant risks involved in participating in this project other than inconvenience. If you are concerned about filling in forms or providing personal information, the research team can assist you and answer any questions.

#### **What are the potential benefits of the research project?**

It is hoped that the project will result in changes that make it easier for people experiencing homelessness to have their say in federal and state elections. It is important in a democracy that all adult citizens have an equal opportunity to express their political preferences. Governments are usually more responsive to groups of citizens who vote and policymaking should reflect a diverse range of interests.

#### **Can I withdraw from the project?**

Whether you participate in this project is completely up to you. The project does not affect your access to services offered by community support organisations. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw from the study at any time.

**What will happen to my information?**

If you participate in this study the research team will record your name, gender, age and an email or mobile phone number (if available) against your 'participant number' in an electronic document. Your responses in the study will be registered against your participant number, not your name. The document with your name recorded will be password-protected and will only be seen by members of the research team while they are conducting the study. When data collection is finished, the document will be destroyed and there will be no way of identifying you as a study participant. No participants will be mentioned by name in any public discussion of the research or publication of project outcomes.

**Who do I contact if I have questions about the project?**

Any members of the research team can answer questions about the project. Participants may also contact Project Manager Jonathon Louth (email [Jonathon.Louth@unisa.edu.au](mailto:Jonathon.Louth@unisa.edu.au)) or Research Assistant Veronica Coram (email [veronica.coram@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:veronica.coram@adelaide.edu.au)) at any time.

**What if I have a complaint or any concerns?**

The study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Adelaide (approval number H-2019-038). It will be conducted according to the NHMRC National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007). If you wish to raise any concerns, you should contact a member of the research team. If you wish to speak to an independent person, please contact the Human Research Ethics Committee's Secretariat via phone on 8313 6028 or email [hrec@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:hrec@adelaide.edu.au). Any complaint or concern will be treated in confidence and fully investigated. You will be informed of the outcome.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Lisa Hill  
University of Adelaide

Dr Jonathon Louth  
University of South Australia

## CONSENT FORM

1. I have read the attached Information Sheet and agree to take part in the following research project:

<b>Title:</b>	Electoral participation by people experiencing homelessness in Adelaide
<b>Ethics Approval No:</b>	H-2019-038

2. I have had the project and the potential risks and burdens explained to my satisfaction by the research worker. I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation. My consent is given freely.
3. I agree to participate in the following activity by completing a survey.
4. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time.
5. I understand that information from the project may be published in a book, journal article, media report, conference presentation or other publication but I will not be identified.
6. I agree to my information, which will not be traceable back to me, being used for future research purposes.

### Participant to complete:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Researcher to complete:

I have described the nature of the research to \_\_\_\_\_ and in my opinion she/he understood the explanation.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Position: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix 2: Main Survey



### Survey: Electoral participation and homelessness

Consent form signed:	Location:	Date:	Researcher:
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Participant number:	
---------------------	--

#### A: About you

What year were you born in? \_\_\_\_\_

Which gender do you identify with?

- Female       Male       Neither

Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?

- Yes       No

Were you born in Australia?

- Yes       No

Are you an Australian citizen? (if no, continue to work through relevant questions)

- Yes       No

What is your first language?

- English      Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a physical or psychological disability?

- Yes       No

## B: Electoral Participation

1. Are you enrolled to vote?

- Yes - go to q.3       No       Don't know – go to q.3

2. If no, can you name the reasons you are not enrolled to vote (select all that apply, then go to q.5)?

- Not knowing how to enrol
- Not wanting to be on the electoral roll
- Belief that you are not eligible to enrol/vote
- Difficulties with the enrolment process
- Fear of being fined
- Isolation / Feeling disconnected from society
- Literacy or numeracy issues
- No interest in voting
- Because governments ignore my concerns/interests
- Lack of information about elections or politics
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. Have you ever failed to vote in a Federal election? (for which you were eligible to vote)

- Yes       No       Don't know

4. If yes, can you name the reasons you did not vote?

- Not knowing HOW to vote
- Not knowing WHERE to vote
- Unaware that there was an election taking place
- Could not get to a polling station
- Forgot to vote
- Belief that you are were not eligible to vote
- Difficulties with changing enrolment details
- Isolation / Feeling disconnected from society
- Literacy or numeracy issues
- No interest in voting
- Because governments ignore my concerns/interests

- Lack of information about elections or politics
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. Are you enrolled as a voter who is 'of no fixed address', 'homeless' or 'itinerant'?

- Yes - go to q.7     No     Don't know

6. Did you know you can enrol as a voter 'of no fixed address'?

- Yes     No

7. Are you enrolled as a silent elector?

- Yes - go to q.9     No     Don't know

8. Did you know you can enrol as a silent elector?

- Yes     No

9. Does or would being a silent elector increase the likelihood of you voting?

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

10. Have you ever voted in a Federal election?

- Yes     No (go to q.11)     Don't know (go to q.11)

11. Did you vote in the last Federal election?

- Yes     No     Don't know

12. Do you intend to vote in the Federal election on 18 May?

- Yes     No     Don't know

13. Generally speaking, how much interest do you usually have in what's going on with an election?

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

14. Generally speaking, how much attention do you pay to **reports** about elections:

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

Specifically:

In the newspaper?

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

None at all

On television?

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

On the radio?

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

On the Internet?

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much

15. How much interest would say you have in elections **overall**?

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

16. Has a friend, family member, neighbour, work colleague or other acquaintance tried to persuade you to vote in an election (select all that apply)?

- No
- Yes, by phone
- Yes, by mail
- Yes, face-to-face
- Yes, by text message/SMS
- Yes, by email
- Yes, by social networking site or other web-based method

17. Overall, how important do you think voting is?

- A good deal
- Some
- Not much
- None at all

## Appendix 3: Exit Survey

### Exit Survey: Electoral participation and homelessness

#### A: About you

What year were you born?      Which gender do you identify with?  Female  Male  Neither

Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?  Yes  No

Are you an Australian citizen?  Yes  No

What is your first language?  English  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have a physical or psychological disability?  Yes  No

#### B: Electoral Participation

1. Do you identify as homeless or having no fixed address?  Yes  No

2. Did you vote today?  Yes  No

3. Have you voted previously in a Federal election?  Yes  No  Unsure

4. Did you recently undertake a survey about voting?  Yes  No  Unsure

5. Did you recently participate in a workshop on why your vote counts?  Yes  No  Unsure

#### C: Voting as creating meaning

\*If participant is not rushed: *What did voting today mean to you?*

6. Is voting an important part of being a citizen?  
 Very important  Somewhat important  Not very important  Not at all

7. Does voting make you feel a greater sense of acceptance?  
 A good deal  Some  Not much  Not at all

8. Does voting create a feeling of greater equality?  
 A good deal  Somewhat  Not much  Not at all

9. Does voting make a difference to your life?  
 A good deal  Somewhat  Not much  Not at all

10. Is it important that everybody votes?  
 Very important  Somewhat important  Not very important  Not at all

\*\*If questions 6-10 don't seem to resonate with participant: *Why did you come and vote today?*

## Appendix 4: Interview Questions

### Client Interview Questions for AEC Homelessness Project

*Questions in bold followed by possible follow-ups/probes*

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**Session Plan**     Methodology  
Many of the participants will not be comfortable with a formal structured or semi-structured interview. We intend to use a 'yarning' approach. Given that a large percentage of rough sleepers in Adelaide identify as Indigenous this will mean all participants are given an opportunity to respond in a manner that is most appropriate to them

#### Social Yarning

Informal and unstructured (and potentially) wide ranging conversation. The aim is to develop trust and build a relationship



#### Research Topic Yarning

The purpose is to gather information through participants' stories that are related to the research topic. It is relaxed yet purposeful



#### Collaborative Yarning

Exploring similar ideas or bouncing different ideas in explaining new concepts

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**Introduction**     Ensure recording device is turned on.

Introductions -> Social yarning

---

**Consent**     Ensure consent forms are signed.

Read out script in relation to consent to ensure interviewee understands. Clarify any questions and discuss confidentiality. Seek verbal consent if required.

---

The intention is to move from social through to research topic yarning. As this is a form of semi-structured interviewing, the aim is to develop an organic two-way conversation around a set of core questions. The following questions will form the backbone of the conversation (but may be introduced in a roundabout way):

1. **Can you tell us a little bit about the community here? Do people talk about voting? Did people around you discuss the election?**
2. **How did you find out about the research?**

- Did you take part in the survey?
  - Did you take part in our workshop that we held on [insert date]?
3. **Did you vote in the Federal election?**
    - Was this the first time you voted?
    - How many times have you voted in elections?
    - Why didn't you vote?
  4. **Is voting important? Why? Why not?**
  5. **What makes it hard to vote?**
    - Provide prompts (drawn from survey)
  6. **What would make it easier or more likely for you to vote?**
    - Provide prompts
  7. **Do you feel that voting will mean that you are more listened to?**
    - Follow-up questions around the meaning of voting (drawn from the exit-poll survey)

## Review

### Collaborative Yarning

Identify key themes – echo or clarify them with the participant – in line with yarning principles this will involve a two-way conversation.

This will be akin to an on the spot verbal coding exercise (in vivo) and it will be integral to recognises themes that may not be clear or obvious to the researchers.

**Ask: Is there anything else you wish to tell me that may be useful to the research or the community?**

## Conclude

Thank them for their involvement. Remind them that their responses are confidential and will be anonymised.

Copies of the report will be made available to the community and a debriefing session will be offered if the community would appreciate hearing directly back from the researchers.

End.



## Appendix 5: Additional Tables

Benefit/reason	Number of mentions
It gives me a voice/empowering	10
It's about being part of a community	9
It's important for democracy	9
I don't see any benefits to voting for me	8
Because it is my right/duty	7
Voting gives a voice to the homeless	7
It is compulsory	7
To influence who forms government	6
Voting would be better if it was voluntary	6
To hold politicians to account	5
I can influence the policies that affect society as a whole	4
Not voting means you end up with politicians who others have voted for	2
Voting seems even more important now I've been homeless	1
Voting would be better if it was online	1
Voting would be better if we could elect the PM	1
We have a better system of voting than the US	1
Free BBQ and refreshments would encourage the homeless to vote	1

**Table 8:** Perceived benefits of voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Obstacle	Number of mentions
I don't know anything about politics	20
There's no point in voting	18
I can't get to a polling place	14
Politicians are liars/untrustworthy	13
I don't know which electoral district I would be enrolled in	12
I'm worried I'll get a fine	12
Voting is confusing	11
I don't want my details on the electoral roll	10
I have too many other things to worry about	8
Voting is too much hassle	8
I don't like filling in forms	7
I don't know where to go to vote	6
I've never voted before	3
I don't think I'm eligible to vote	3
The adversarial system is off-putting	2
Running elections is a waste of money	2
Politicians don't represent people like me	2
I don't have the correct documentation to vote	2
Votes are not counted honestly	2
Polling places are intimidating	1
Don't like 'running the gauntlet' of volunteers at polling places	1
I'm concerned about privacy of my vote	1
I need help with forms without being made to feel bad	1
I can't read English	1
There are too many levels of government	1
Being in prison with a sentence of >3 yrs	1
Revolution would have more impact	1

**Table 9:** Perceived obstacles to voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Reason	Number of mentions
No interest in voting	14
Not wanting to be on electoral roll	11
Governments ignore my concerns/interests	8
Lack of information about elections/politics	6
Isolation/feeling disconnected from society	6
Not knowing how to enrol	5
Fear of being fined	5
Belief they were not eligible to enrol/vote	4
Difficulties with the enrolment process	3
There is no one worth voting for	3
Literacy or numeracy issues	2
Religious reasons	1
Lack of trust in integrity of electoral process	1

**Table 10:** Reasons for not being enrolled to vote (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Benefit/reason	Number of mentions
Unaware there was an election taking place	9
Could not get to a polling station	9
Forgot to vote	7
Not knowing where to vote	6
Isolation/feeling disconnected from society	6
Literacy/numeracy issues	5
Lack of information about elections/politics	5
Belief they were not eligible to vote	4
Difficulties changing enrolment details	4
Governments ignore my concerns/interests	4
Travelling/transience	4
No interest in voting	2
Not knowing how to vote	2
In prison for sentence over 3 years	1
In hospital	1
Overseas	1
Current government is not democratic	1
Failing to vote as a protest	1

**Table 11:** Reasons for not voting despite being enrolled (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Benefit/reason	Number of mentions
To give people, especially the homeless, a voice	22
Voting is important in principle/for democracy	18
To influence who forms government and their policies	15
Because it is a right or civic duty	10
Because it is compulsory	10
To feel part of a community	9

**Table 12:** Perceived benefits of voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Obstacle	Number of mentions
Not knowing much about/not being interested in elections or politics	44
Voting is pointless/there's no one worth voting for	34
Politicians are untrustworthy/self-interested	23
Politicians don't listen/care	22
Not wanting name to appear on the electoral roll	22
It's too complicated or a hassle	19
Being concerned about a fine for failure to vote if enrolled	16
Having more pressing priorities	14
Not knowing how to enrol or finding the process difficult	8
Belief they were ineligible to vote	7
Isolation/feeling disconnected from society	6

**Table 13:** Perceived obstacles to voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Obstacle	Number of mentions
Not knowing much about/not being interested in elections or politics	44
Voting is pointless/there's no one worth voting for	34
Not knowing where to vote or being unable to access a polling place	24
Politicians are untrustworthy/self-interested	23
Politicians don't listen/care	22
There's too much complicated paperwork/it's a hassle	18
Having more pressing priorities	14
Voting is confusing	11
Belief they were ineligible to vote	7

**Table 14:** Perceived obstacles to voting (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

Reason	Number of mentions
Not knowing where to vote or being unable to access a polling place	15
Not knowing much about/not being interested in elections or politics	9
Lack of awareness an election was taking place	9
Forgetting to vote	7
Isolation/feeling disconnected from society	6
Literacy/numeracy issues	5
Belief they were ineligible to vote	4
Difficulties changing enrolment details	4
Politicians don't listen/care	4
Transience	4

**Table 15:** Reasons for not voting by those enrolled (Source: Fieldwork 2019)

