

Federal election 2016 Central Senate Scrutiny frequently asked questions

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1. Why is the AEC scanning Senate ballot papers?

The recent changes to Senate voting substantially increase the complexity of the Senate count. Previously, only preferences expressed below the line (BTL) needed to be recorded and entered individually into the count system. At the last election, most votes were cast by selecting one group only above the line (ATL); approximately three per cent of all of the Senate ballot papers needed to have their preferences manually keyed and verified in the count system.

Following the changes to the Senate voting system, 100 per cent of Senate ballot papers need to have their individual preferences entered into the count system – whether the ballot paper is marked above or below the line.

The AEC is using a semi-automated process to conduct the Senate count, scanning Senate ballot papers and using optical character recognition technology to capture preferences. Once captured, these preferences are then verified by a human operator. This will significantly reduce the human effort, the time and the cost of capturing voter preferences.

2. When will results be available for the Senate?

After 6pm on election day, the first count of ordinary Senate ballot papers is conducted at all polling places. This count is simply an initial sort of ballot papers to provide first preference results for each group and for ungrouped candidates. These indicative results appear on the Tally Room.

Ballot papers are despatched to the divisional outposted centres where they are reconciled and counted again. From Monday 4 July, Senate ballot papers are despatched to the Central Senate Scrutiny (CSS) centre in the capital city of each state and territory for scrutiny using the new semi-automated process.

All issued ballot papers (except those spoilt and discarded) are sent to the CSS for scrutiny.

The Senate count always takes longer to complete than the House of Representative count due to the size and nature of the task. Counting may take four weeks or more. The AEC will return the writ on or before 8 August 2016.

3. Where will the scrutiny occur?

Each state and territory has a dedicated CSS site at a Fuji Xerox premises in the capital city. The scrutiny of Senate ballot papers occurs at this CSS site.

4. Will scrutineers be able to challenge formality?

Yes. The *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Electoral Act) prescribes that all parties and candidates have the opportunity to have their representatives attend the CSS to scrutinise the formality of ballot papers. This has not changed. Scrutineers carry out an important role in ensuring integrity in the conduct of elections. At the CSS the formality of ballot papers is determined and scrutineers may challenge the formality of any ballot paper.

5. How has the AEC developed the technology?

The semi-automated Senate count solution has been developed by the AEC in partnership with Fuji Xerox. Fuji Xerox has over 30 years' experience providing secure scanning and data capture solutions to government and corporate clients. Fuji Xerox operates the largest national distributed scanning bureau in Australia, scanning between 500 000 to 2 000 000 images per day.

IBM has performed independent third party quality assurance testing of the solution.

6. How will Senate ballot papers be counted?

All Senate ballot papers sent to CSS are initially scanned and the preferences captured and visually verified by a human operator. Preferences which have been marked on the Senate ballot papers are then entered into the count system.

In addition, ballot papers which are informal, non-standard or with unusual markings, are visually checked by two human operators to determine the preferences and formality. Scrutineers are able to oversee this entire process and can object to the formality of a ballot paper. The preferences captured are then entered into the count system.

This occurs progressively over several weeks as the ballot papers are processed through the semi-automated count process at the CSS. Once all the ballot papers have been scrutinised and the quota struck, the distribution of preferences is conducted to determine the final results, which are published to the Tally Room on the AEC website.

7. Who rules on challenges on ballot papers?

The Australian Electoral Officer (AEO) for the state or territory is the last point of escalation for all disputes, challenges and uncertainty for ballot paper formality. All decisions made by the AEO are final.

A Central Senate Scrutiny manager (an AEC officer) oversees the daily operations, monitors and supports operators in the adjudication zone.

8. What are the hours of operation for the CSS?

CSS sites will operate up to 16 hours a day, from 7.30am to 11.30pm at least five days a week.

9. What security and tracking is in place for ballot papers?

Ballot papers are kept in batches of 50 and packed into ballot paper transport containers (BPTCs) which are then palletised and handled in accordance with the AEC's Ballot Paper Handling Policy.

BPTCs are reconciled on receipt at the CSS site and moved to a ballot paper secure storage zone until sent to the ballot paper secure work zone where the semi-automated process begins. The BPTC can only be opened in the designated ballot paper secure work zone and only one BPTC is open at any one time.

Every BPTC is sealed with two unique numbered seals used to detect if the container has been tampered with. Each time a container is opened or sealed, the operator notates the label on the container (see fact sheet – Ballot Paper Security and Integrity).

10. What does the scanner capture?

As each ballot paper batch is run through the scanner, the scanner captures and stores an image of every ballot paper. This image is used by the optical character recognition technology to capture the preferences. This is then verified by at least one human operator.

If a ballot paper within a batch fails to scan for any reason, the scanning operator stops the scanner and the whole batch is scanned again.

11. How are informal ballot papers treated?

After a ballot paper has been scanned, a marked ballot paper identified as informal by the character recognition technology is sent to the informal and non-standard queue for checking by two independent human operators.

12. What happens to the ballot paper after scanning?

After each batch is passed through the scanner, the ballot papers are reconciled to ensure the number of ballot papers scanned matches the number of ballot papers counted in the batch.

The ballot papers are then loaded back into their original Ballot Paper Transport Container (BPTC) sealed (with appropriate records updated) and placed into secure storage.

13. After scanning, can the original ballot paper be retrieved?

Yes. A physical ballot paper may be requested to be viewed by a scrutineer or AEC polling official during the verification process.

14. When will ballot papers be counted?

Once all ballots in the scrutiny have been scanned and verified, the data is loaded into the count system and the AEO will conduct the count and run the distribution of preferences.

15. How will scrutineers know where to go and what's required?

Before election day, the AEC will provide all parties and candidates with Senate scrutiny appointment forms which are required to be filled out and returned to the AEC detailing nominated representatives for the scrutiny.

The AEC will provide all scrutineers with information detailing the site of the CSS, registration, induction, parking, public transport, rules and guidelines for scrutineers.

16. What is the security at the CSS site?

Security at all CSS sites includes 24 hour security guards and patrols, CCTV coverage and a visitor reception area. All staff and visitors are required to identify themselves and sign in before they are permitted to enter the CSS building. Visitors, including scrutineers, will be escorted and required to keep to designated scrutiny areas within the site.

17. How can the AEC ensure the integrity of the process?

To ensure the integrity of the count, the AEC had the Central Senate system and count process externally reviewed and count program certified by the National Association of Testing Authorities. In addition the system underwent assessment by independent, accredited Australian Information Security Registered Assessors (IRAP) Program and the

systems and networks underwent independent penetration tests.

As prescribed in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, scrutineers may oversee the count process including the first preference counts, ballot paper scanning, data verification of preferences from the digital images and, should they require, inspection of the physical ballot papers.

In line with past practice, once the distribution of preferences has been completed, the AEC will declare the result and publish the preference data for public inspection. Further detail of the process in technical environment may be found in the fact sheets: Federal election 2016: Senate Count diagram and Central Senate Scrutiny.