

# The History of Enrolment in Australia

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Although this session isn't about turnout, I'll just draw your attention to official 93.2 per cent turnout figure at the 2010 election. Australians tend to be proud of our turnout numbers, invariably in the 90s. But that figure is not right. A figure for Australia that could be compared with, say, the much-quoted American one of 50-something—that is the proportion of eligible voters who cast a valid vote—would be below 80. Probably in the high 70s.

Some of that difference is in the five per cent informal vote. But more importantly, around 10 per cent of our eligible voters aren't on the roll. And our turnout figure is total votes as a proportion of the roll.

That missing 10 per cent is the 1.5 million missing voters the AEC talks about.

To me the worst consequence of this is in another number: two per cent. Several hundred thousand Australians (about two per cent of eligible voters), tried to vote in 2010 and couldn't, because they weren't on the roll. They unsuccessfully lodged provisional votes. There would have been more who upon learning they weren't on the roll, just turned around and left.

It is so important to have a comprehensive electoral roll.

I'm not a great fan of compulsory voting and compulsory enrolment, partly because it muddies the waters in discussions such as this. Some people say: well, it's the law, and so people should make sure their enrolment details are up to date.

It means things like the state of the roll are seen as a tool to force people to the polls. I prefer to see it in terms of enabling people to vote. Which is what the electoral roll and the full electoral apparatus are: an infrastructure to enable an efficient, and as full as possible, registering of people's preferences on election day.

Canada has voluntary enrolment, but a more complete roll than us. The figure they put on their missing electors is seven per cent. Why?

The answer is: because until June, at least, the AEC operated with one hand tied behind its back.

To understand what's happened, I'm going to give a two-minute history of the electoral roll in Australia. Enrolment is responsible for the shape of the AEC today. It drove the whole process, the development of a stand-alone independent electoral apparatus.

In the United Kingdom before 1832 there was no written electoral roll. The 1832 Reform Act changed that, laying out the annual process of sticking notices on public buildings like churches and courts, advising people to get on the roll if they wanted. People did this by writing up and handing in enrolment forms. There were public objections and revision courts. People paid to get on the roll. The work was done by council employees.

This was the process inherited by Australia when we started running elections in the 1840s.

It was in South Australia from the 1850s that things started to change, and diverge from both Britain and the other colonies. Registration fees were abolished.

The state became proactive: every several years police and council workers knocked on houses around the colony leaving enrolment forms (or in practice filling it out on the spot with the occupant). In between times the roll was maintained continuously. People could get on the roll or change their details at any time. By, naturally, filling in bits of paper. Births deaths and marriages records were used by officials to take people off when they died.

A standalone permanent electoral apparatus developed, the world's first, with permanent, salaried returning officers responsible for the roll in the electorate, reporting to a central figure, the returning officer for the province.

That person was the precursor to the current Australian Electoral Commissioner. These were world firsts. As far as I can tell there were no specifically designated, permanent electoral officials anywhere else.

And towards the end of the century census collectors started doubling as roll collectors. They were building a roll, and didn't particularly care if people wanted to vote or not.

In 1901 came federation, and in 1902 the Australian Electoral Office was created. Most of its organisational structure was picked up from South Australia: a chief electoral officer with spokes going out, this time to six state electoral officers, to whom permanent returning officers reported.

The first Commonwealth electoral roll was created in 1902–3, a centrally coordinated effort that in most states involved door to door knocks by police. But not South Australia,

because they already had a good roll and their franchise was virtually identical to the new one.

It seems to have been the one and only time the Commonwealth electoral roll was created from scratch (the SA part exempted). After that, there was continuous roll maintenance, electorate by electorate, as in SA.

Piece by piece joint roll arrangements were agreed upon, first Tasmania in 1905 and last Queensland in 1991 and then the ACT with its first elections the next year.

The rolls were initially kept in large books at the level of sub-division. In 1912 these were replaced with a card system, and in the 1970s databases on computers. Regular habitation reviews became the main source of enrolment information in the late 1970s.

A big change came in 1999. Continuous Roll Update (CRU) replaced habitation reviews. Under CRU, the AEC obtains data from various Commonwealth, State and Territory government bodies and cleans, crunches it.

Every year several million Australians move house and with CRU the AEC has been very efficient, with this new data, at taking them off the roll at their old address. But it has not been able to put them on at their new one. All it can do is send enrolment forms out and plead with people to fill them out, and they are increasingly discarded.

And this is probably the main reason for the deteriorating roll. The AEC has been asking for the right to do the other side. To do, for example what Canada can.

In June this year, finally, parliament passed a bill to enable just that.

Welcome to the 21st century.

The AEC is fond of saying direct enrolment and direct update is not a panacea, it's not a silver bullet, but it is a fine development. It was introduced in Victoria and NSW in 2010, and as Antony Green has written the resulting growing divergence between the state roll and state portion of the commonwealth roll has made the change at the commonwealth level even more necessary.

An associated remnant of the past is the organisation of the AEC. Those permanent returning officers are still there, with their 2.5 staff. The AEC has for years wanted rationalise them and parliament has let them a bit, with processes called 'regionalisation', 'shared premises', 'amalgamation', 'collocation', 'workload sharing', but it's still, with a few exceptions, a DRO per electorate.

At least until a few years ago it was the case that when people sent in enrolment forms to the state office of the AEC, someone would put them into the pigeon hole for the division and they would get posted out there and data-entered.

Nowadays most of them come via the website, at least.

This structure was once a significant driver of Australia's trailblazing in running elections, but it's long past its usefulness.

I want to raise a couple of concerns, that really kick in with a comprehensive roll, no matter how it is created. One is privacy. The electoral roll is given to candidates at elections, electronically. Electronic data is so easy to pass around. It is a big worry.

A full, comprehensive roll, one that is closer to 100 than 92 per cent complete, will mean a lower on-paper turnout. That's a good thing, because it is more "correct".

But it also means more people are fined. The AEC doesn't fine people for not being on the roll but it does for not voting. Do we really want that? The state/territory with the highest proportion of unenrolled is the Northern Territory, predominately Indigenous Australians. Direct enrolment won't necessarily be very effective with that portion of the population, but if it were, you would get many of them being fined for not voting.

There is the political angle. It is a sad fact that over the centuries "left" progressive parties have seen it as in their interests to get as many people as possible to vote, and conservative, right wing ones have wanted to narrow it. Unfortunately parties' attitudes to these things are driven by backroom operators who are always on the lookout for that minuscule advantage, just in case the result is close. Which it rarely is.

Some of the figures put out about the change to the vote if all these people are included are wacky. Some have suggested a 20 point two-party preferred vote advantage to Labor. By that I mean 60 40 if the rest of the country votes 50 50. That really would only apply to the minority, about 17 per cent, of the unenrolled who are aged 18-19. Overall I think it's closer to 53 47. Which, if the roll were 100 per cent complete—it will never be—and if all the new people voted and voted formally—a large minority won't—would mean a 0.3 per cent increase in the Labor two-party preferred vote.

I see roll maintenance, as electoral administration *per se*, as like maintaining the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It is there to serve the public, and its shape and nature is determined by what is in the public's interest, but there really is no need to get the people involved in the decisions. You let the experts get on with it. So I don't put a premium on engaging people in the process.

I also don't see much value in finding out why people aren't enrolling. Who cares? Just get them on the bloody roll.

It's a bit different. A bridge, unless it is torn down and built again, will always be recognisable as that structure that was opened in 1932. It will have that look.

There are reasons why the maintenance of the electoral roll is like that: the ancestor of that organisation created in 1902. So much of it is recognisable. But it doesn't have to be. And this change, to direct enrolment, is an important change.

I'll just finish by mentioning election-day enrolment, which was rejected by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) report and it not being sought by the AEC. This is a pity. Hopefully it will come soon.