



## A shrinking Australian electoral roll?

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As the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) gears up for a Federal election due late this year or early the next, the slow growth of the Commonwealth electoral roll has not gone un-noticed. Most recently, ABC election analyst Antony Green wrote in *Crikey* that ‘legislative inaction combined with Byzantine administrative procedures is undermining compulsory enrolment’<sup>1</sup>. Others have claimed the electoral roll is actually shrinking.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper we examine evidence from Government gazettes, AEC Annual Reports and Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) population data. We look at changes in electoral enrolment from two perspectives: recent, month by month developments over several years, and annual changes over 27 years. Our conclusion is that the growth in the electoral roll has indeed slowed dramatically, and we identify a substantial reason for this: re-enrolments are not keeping up with objections. However, recent monthly changes in enrolment have been promising, with the qualification that objections have been held back, so artificially inflating numbers.

Enrolment, like voting, is compulsory in Australia. Should we expect the Commonwealth electoral roll continually to grow? If so, by how much? We will see below that any approach to this issue involves assumptions.

The AEC publishes monthly enrolment totals<sup>3</sup>, and the ABS publishes quarterly population estimates.<sup>4</sup> From 30 September 2002 to 30 September 2006 (the latest data available from ABS), the estimated resident population of Australia grew from 19 754 844 to 20 674 445, an increase of 4.66 per cent. The electoral roll, meanwhile, increased from 12 725 641 to 13 122 066, just 3.12 per cent for the same period. At face value the difference is dramatic: the population grew, in percentage terms, at one and a half times the electoral roll.

But there is, of course, much more to the story than this.

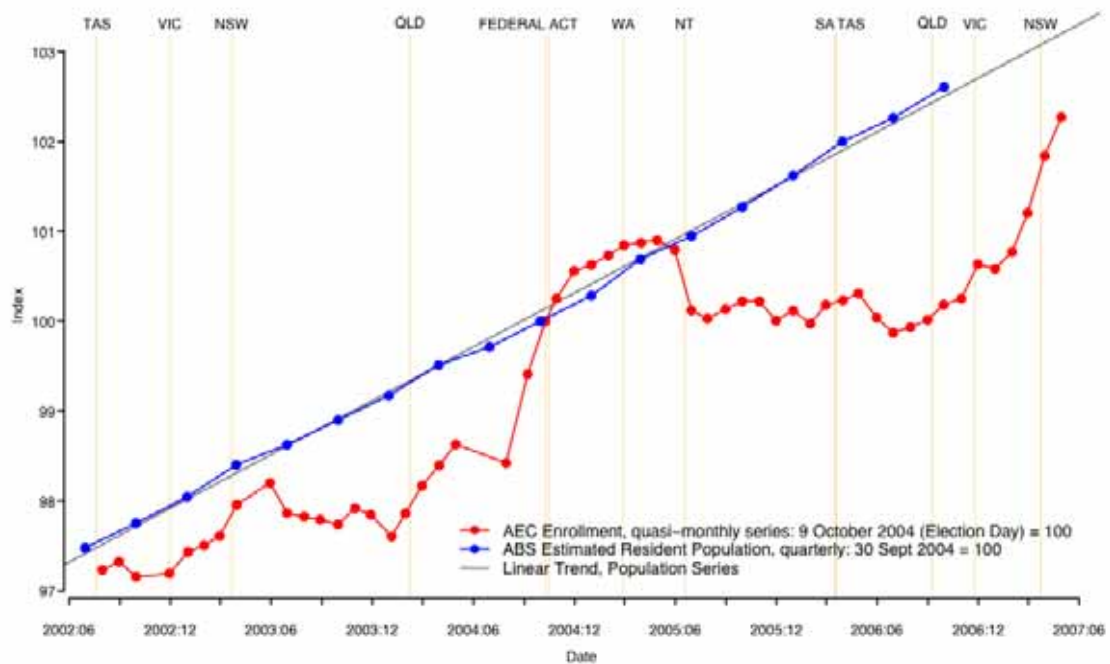
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<sup>1</sup>Antony Green, ‘Kafkaesque bureaucratic procedures and the electoral roll’, *Crikey*, 19 April 2007 <http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20070419-Kafkaesque-bureaucratic-procedures-and-the-electoral-roll.html> last visited 15 May 2007.

<sup>2</sup>For example, Australian Greens analyst Stephen Luntz in *Crikey*, 22 January 2007 <http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20070122-Where-have-all-the-voters-gone.html> last visited 15 May 2007.

<sup>3</sup>[http://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling\\_to\\_vote/Enrolment\\_stats/index.htm](http://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/index.htm) last visited 14 June 2007. Note the AEC site was redesigned in June 2007 and now gives current, but not past, enrolment data.

<sup>4</sup><http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@archive.nsf/log?openagent&310104.xls&3101.0&Time Series Spreadsheet&E0B4DDE16C92DA31CA2572A500188882&0&Sep 2006&22.03.2007&Latest> last visited 15 May 2007.



**Figure 1:** Voter Enrolment and Population Growth, Australia, June 2002-May 2007. The vertical lines indicate the timing of state and Federal elections.

Sources: Australian Electoral Commission on-line enrolment reports; Australian Bureau of Statistics Resident Population Estimates (ABS publication 3101.0, series ID A2060842F).

Figure 1 shows both sets of data from September 2002 to the present: the most recent enrolment data is from April 2007, while the latest ABS resident population estimates are from September 2006 (we fit a linear trend to extrapolate population estimates through to the present, which seems an excellent approximation on this short time scale). We have normalised each series to the value 100 on or around the time of the 2004 Federal election. This type of normalisation is commonly used to compare changes in series on different scales (e.g. economic indicators, or stock prices), and allows us to assess how enrolment is changing in proportion to population movements; the raw, unnormalised enrolment and population estimates appears in the Appendix.

Vertical lines indicate State and Federal elections. Enrolment appears to drop off before rising sharply in preparation for the 2004 election. It then drops off again. If we expect it to once again join the top line—such that the enrolled electorate will constitute the same proportion of the resident population as it did in 2004—it will require a Herculean effort between now and the next election. However, the last several red dots do indicate substantial increases in enrolment over recent months. Some of this would be due to the March election in NSW, and so it will be interesting to see if these recent, impressive gains in voter enrolment will continue over the next six months to the next Federal election. (Evidence recently given by the Australian Electoral Commissioner to the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee casts doubt on these recent numbers. We will come to this later in the paper.)

The comparison in Figure 1 rests on some perhaps questionable but necessary assumptions. For parliamentary elections, an Australian voter must be an Australian citizen<sup>5</sup>, but not all Australian residents are citizens. As well, children and persons of ‘unsound mind’ are excluded from enrolling. (Prisoners convicted of offences other than treason or treachery are entitled to enrol, but are not permitted to vote in Federal elections.)

While the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) does not publish estimates of the size of the resident, adult, citizen population (which is roughly the set of eligible voters), the Census does provide an estimate of the adult, citizen population, but this is available only every five years (the 2006 Census figure will be released in June 2007). There would also be many Australian citizens overseas who are on the electoral roll but not counted in ABS figures. Instead of attempting to make our own citizen estimates, we use the ABS estimates of the resident population as a proxy for the size of the eligible electorate, and the comparison in Figure 1 turns on the quality of that proxy over time.

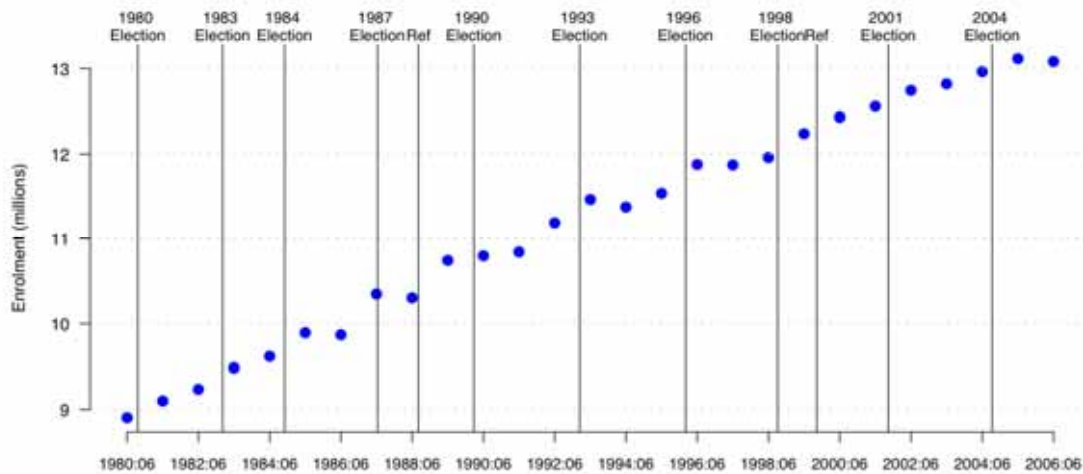
It is possible that the proportion of the resident population who are ineligible to enrol (children, people of ‘unsound mind’ and non-citizens) has grown since 2002. It may also have declined, and there will surely have been some fluctuation over the five-year period. But we proceed on the assumption that such changes are not sufficient to disrupt the conclusion that enrolment growth has lagged behind growth in the eligible electorate.

With this qualification in mind, we now move to a longer time frame. Figure 2 shows the number of enrolments from 1980 to the present (as of 30 June each year), using data reported in various annual reports of the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC, formerly the Australian Electoral Office). At the right-hand edge of the graph we see the decline in enrolments from 2005 to 2006, a fall from 13.11 million enrolled voters to 13.08 million, or about 33 000 voters.

Figure 2 shows that year-on-year declines in voter enrolment are not wholly unusual.

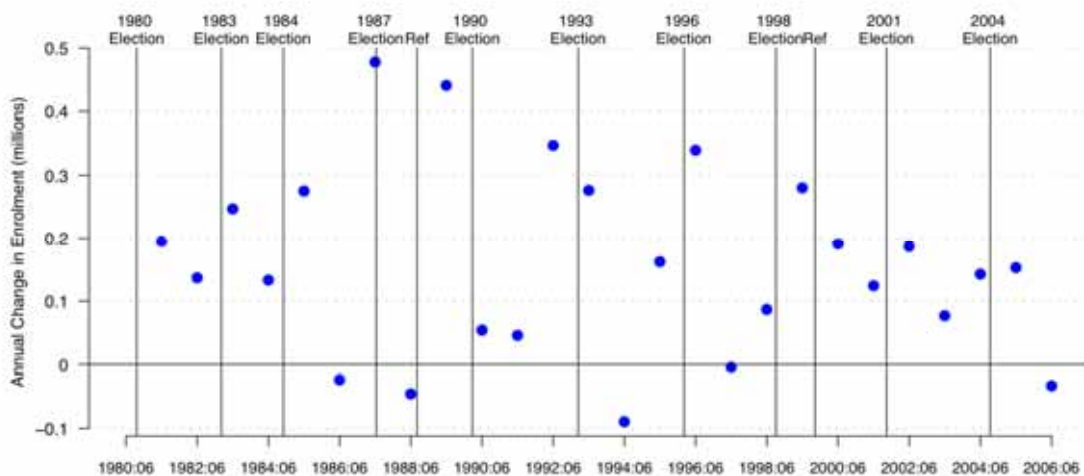
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<sup>5</sup> An exception is British citizens who were on the electoral roll before 1984.



**Figure 2:** Annual Enrolment as of June 30 (Source: Annual Reports of the AEC, formerly the Australian Electoral Office). The dates of federal elections and referenda are indicated with vertical reference lines.

In Figure 3, below, we show year-on-year changes in the annual enrolment totals. (This is simply obtained by subtracting each number in Figure 2 from its immediate predecessor.) Most of the changes are positive, but five of the 26 annual changes are negative. The decline in 2005–06 was the largest since the electoral roll shed almost 100 000 enrollees in 1993–94. We will see, however, that there were factors involved in previous declines that did not apply in 2006.



**Figure 3:** Year-on-year changes in voter enrolment, millions of enrollees.

Figure 3 also makes clear that annual enrolment growth has always been uneven. A substantial reason for this is the timing of federal elections. The prospect of an election tends to galvanise electors and parties—and the AEC itself—into action, and so those year-on-year changes that bracket a Federal election tend to be large increases in enrolment. In the seven day grace period after the writs were issued for the last election in 2004, for example, 78 816<sup>6</sup> people enrolled for the first time, while many others, who

<sup>6</sup> <http://results.aec.gov.au/12246/enrolment.htm> last visited 4 June 2007

we conservatively estimate to number 40 000 or more<sup>7</sup>, got back on the roll after being taken off (for example, because they moved house).

This flurry of activity is then followed by a quiet post-election period, when the last thing on people's minds is their enrolment details (save perhaps, for an impending State or Territory election or a referendum). In addition, the months after every Federal election have invariably seen a significant drop in the electoral roll. This 'culling' largely results from the AEC sending letters to people who didn't vote, and then learning that the elector no longer lives at the address. In this way, tens of thousands of people are taken off the roll. Gradually, over the rest of the three year cycle, most people who were struck off the electoral roll have re-enrolled.

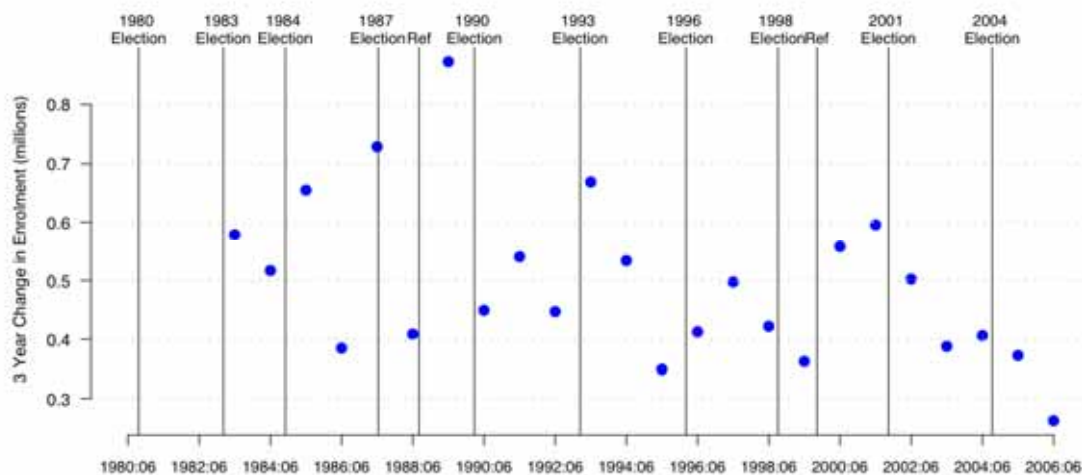
Following the Federal elections of 1993 and 1996 (in March of both years), the 'culls' occurred largely in the next financial year—after 1 July. This helps explain why in both 1993–94 and 1996–97 (1 July to 30 June) the changes dip into the negative. Meanwhile, the three most recent Federal elections (1998, 2001, and 2004) took place in October or November, and the post-election 'culling' occurred in the same financial year as the election. In other words, the drop in enrollee numbers in 2005–06 cannot be due to the same factors as those in 1994 and 1997.

A crude method of 'smoothing' the unevenness in the annual changes is to look at changes over a longer time period. We choose a three-year window (the length of a full term of the Federal parliament), such that any particular three-year change will include a mix of pre-election enrolment growth and post-election enrolment decline. But we use a rolling three-year period for every year, for example the most recent figure covers July 2003 to June 2006, and the previous figure is for July 2002 to June 2005.

Figure 4 displays the resulting series of annual, three-year changes in enrolment, starting with the 1980–83 change and ending with the 2003–06 change. This method of displaying shows the three-year increase over 2003–06 was the smallest in the past 23 years—and by a considerable margin. Between 1 July 2003 and 30 June 2006 only a net 262 800 voters were added to the electoral roll. This corresponds with growth of two per cent over the three years to 30 June 2006, an annualised rate of increase of just 0.66 per cent.

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<sup>7</sup> We have been unable to find published data of re-enrolment numbers for the 2004 close of rolls period. However, the corresponding figure for 2001 was 47 672 ([http://www.eca.gov.au/reports/Roll\\_Update\\_6873.pdf](http://www.eca.gov.au/reports/Roll_Update_6873.pdf) last visited 4 June 2007)



**Figure 4:** Three-year changes in enrolment, 1980-83 to 2003-06

Figure 4 also verifies that the rate of growth in enrolments is declining over time. Visual inspection suggests the data cleave into two periods: a period of relatively high growth (1980–94), and a period of relatively low growth thereafter. With the exception of boosts in enrolment, apparently attributable to the combination of the October 1998 election, the election of delegates to the Constitutional Convention in late 1997, and the November 1999 Republic referenda, enrolment growth has been slowing over the second half of the data window. Since 1994, the three-year percentage increases in enrolment have averaged 3.45 per cent (or 1.14 per cent on an annual basis), while in the 1980–94 period the three-year percentage increases in enrolment averaged 5.40 per cent (or 1.77 per cent on an annual basis).

How can we explain these changes? A comparison of data from July 1997 to June 2006 (detailed data is not available for the earlier periods) reveals continuing, substantial changes in one general area.

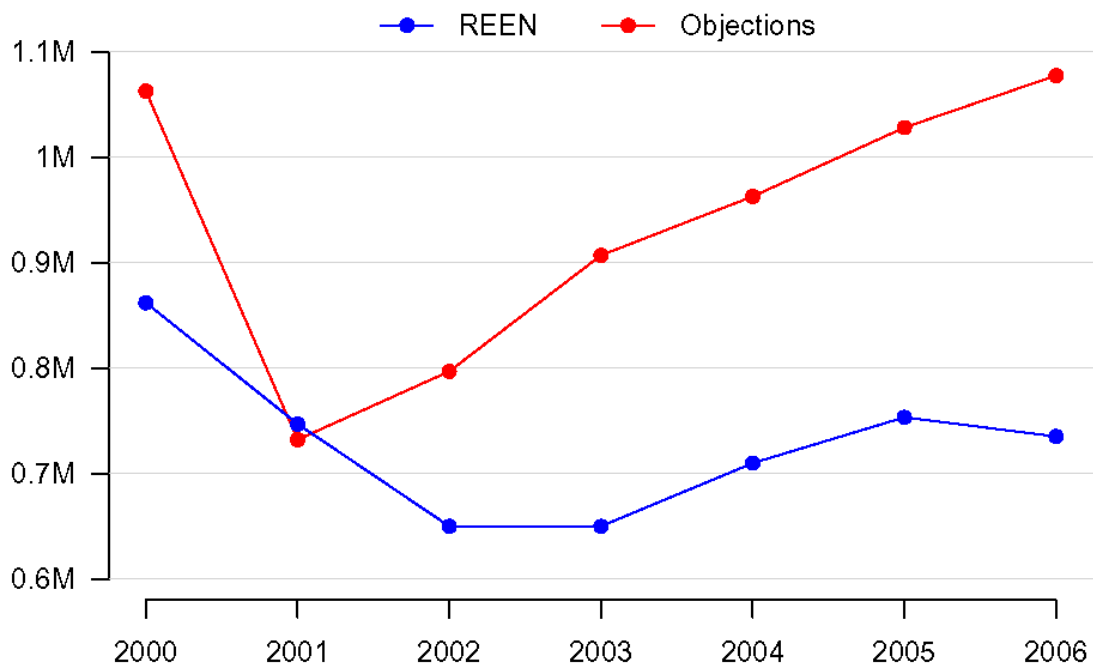
### Objections, re-instatements and re-enrolments

Every year, hundreds of thousands of registered electors move residence without notifying the AEC. Usually the Commission eventually discovers that they are no longer at the address they are registered at, and takes them off the roll. The previously mentioned post election ‘culls’ were an example of this. If and when the AEC locates them at their new address, it sends them letters asking them to re-enrol. (The AEC does both of these by, in the main, running checks against the databases of various State and Federal agencies—post office or motor registry, for example. It also runs selective door-knock habitation reviews. People who have died are also taken off the roll in this way and they of course stay off.) Or electors eventually take action themselves. When people are taken off the roll like this it is called an ‘objection’. When electors who have been struck off, are put back on, for example by enrolling at a new address, it is called a ‘re-enrolment’. A much smaller number of names are also recognised to have been taken off due to official error; they go back on the roll and are called ‘re-instatements’. For our purposes we have added re-instatement and re-enrolment and called the resulting quantity REEN.

Figure 5 shows that objections dropped from a high in the 1997–2000 period, but have climbed ever since. REEN also dropped briefly before levelling out and rising a little in recent years. Overall, apart from the 1998–2001 period, objections have been higher than

REEN. Put in simple terms, this means that the declining rate of growth in the electoral roll is, at least in part, due to the gap between objections and REEN. That gap has been growing recently, which means that more people are being taken off the roll, but not as many are being put back on.

But how much difference does this make? We reveal more by looking at the difference between objections and REEN. In Figure 6 we subtract REEN from objections, and call the result 'net objections'. The graph below shows net objections were in the negative for the three years to June 2001, which meant that more people were put on the roll than taken off. Once again, we should note that this three-year period contained a Federal election four months into the first year and a Constitutional referendum in 1999. As well, June 2001 was five months away from a Federal election.



**Figure 5:** 3-year numbers of objections and REEN (reinstatement and re-enrolment). 2000 numbers are for July 1997 to June 2000, 2001 numbers are for July 1998 to June 2001 etc.

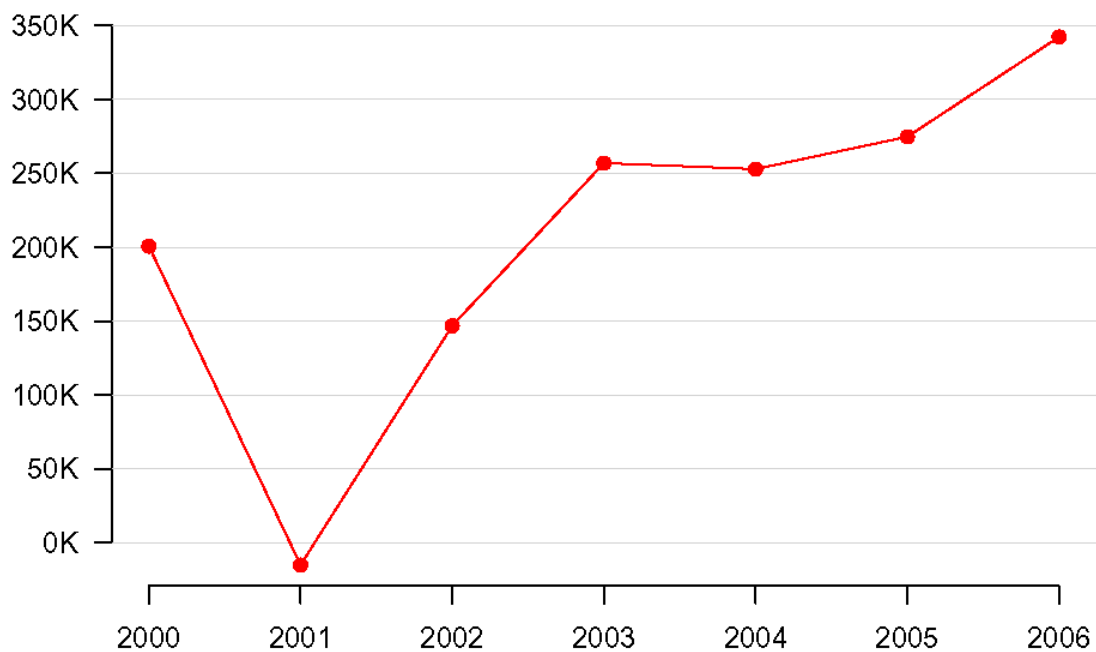
It is when we compare the numbers involved here, with changes to the overall electoral roll, that the magnitude of net objections becomes clear. Let us look for example at the two time periods from July 2000 to June 2003, and July 2003 to July 2006. In the first period the electoral roll grew by 387 888. During that same period there were 256 964 net objections. We could say that if it weren't for net objections, the roll would have grown by 644 852.

In the second period, July 2003 to June 2006, the roll grew by 262 800, and during that time there were 342 320 net objections. That is, net objections outnumbered the roll



growth. If it weren't for net objections, the roll would have grown by 605 120. So if we factor in net objections, the growth in the electoral roll has only dropped a little.

We are certainly not suggesting those objections were unwarranted. Instead, this is to point to the large role played by net objections in the slowing of the growth in the electoral roll. From the data, it is reasonable to surmise that, no doubt in large part due to technological advances, the AEC is getting better at taking people off the electoral roll. But it is getting worse at getting them back onto the roll.



**Figure 6:** Three-year net objections – objections minus REEN (reinstatement and re-enrolment). 2000 numbers are for July 1997 to June 2000, 2001 numbers are for July 1998 to June 2001 etc

This is perhaps not surprising. Australians are increasingly mobile. The Commission does not need someone's permission to take them off the roll. The Commission merely has to satisfy itself they are, for example, no longer at the address they were enrolled at. But getting back on the roll requires action from the elector. If the AEC finds, through perhaps similar data matching techniques, where a person has moved to, it cannot simply put them onto the roll at their new residence. It can only send enrolment forms to the elector and ask them to fill them in, sign and witness<sup>8</sup> them, and send them back. In these days of direct marketing overload, and perhaps decreasing interest in the electoral process itself, it may not be surprising that an increasing number of people are failing to do this.

<sup>8</sup> New enrolment forms and change of enrolment forms no longer require a witness if the elector has a driver's license.

There is one further point that needs to be made. We noted in Figure 1 the impressive recent monthly increase in enrolment numbers. On 24 May 2007 the Australian Electoral Commissioner (with colleagues) appeared before the Senate Finance and Public Administration Committee. He made two statements of direct interest here. One was that the AEC has in recent months been ‘conducting a very substantial targeted door-knocking process’ in order to get people onto the roll. Secondly, he stated that recent published figures are over-stated because the AEC was ‘still holding’ about 180 000 objections. The reason he gave was that ‘in effect we know where they have moved to’. He told the committee that the AEC planned to send the objections out in early June.<sup>9</sup>

We make two observations. First, by holding back objections, monthly enrolment numbers have been artificially inflated. Second, objections that have not been responded to are struck off the electoral roll three weeks after they are sent out. Therefore, objections sent in early June stand a good chance of not being struck out before the end of the financial year. This would artificially inflate the enrolment numbers in the Annual Report as well.

### **Conclusion**

We intend to return to this topic in the near future. The AEC’s 2006–07 Annual Report, which will presumably again contain a break-down of objections et al, will make interesting reading. In the meantime, the size of the electoral roll has increased significantly in recent months, and the continuing rise in April indicates this was not only due to the NSW election. We look forward to seeing whether it was influenced by a drop in objections, or an increase in REEN, or both.

We have not mentioned the electoral amendments, often described as ‘controversial’, passed by federal parliament last year, for the simple reason that they only came into operation in April 2007 and have no bearing on the numbers examined here. But the changes to enrolment procedure, and the closing of the roll for additions on the day the writs are issued, and the three business day post-writ period for transfers (previously seven days for both new enrolments and transfers), are bound to impact on enrolments in the run up to the election. Just what consequences—both in total enrolment numbers and partisan consequences of who is left off the roll—remain to be seen.

We conclude by emphasising the apparent paradox Australian electoral officials and Australian citizens find themselves in. Enrolment is compulsory in Australia, and this requirement would seem an important complement to compulsory voting. But for all practical purposes, voting is compulsory only for those citizens who choose to enrol. Why? Well, for one thing, it is much easier for the Commission to ensure that enrollees vote than it is to ensure that all eligible citizens are enrolled. Apart from intrusive, time-consuming and expensive ‘habitation reviews’ (where the Commission attempts an

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9 Commonwealth of Australia, Proof of Committee Hansard, Senate, Standing Committee on Finance and Public Administration, Estimates (Budget Estimates), 24 May 2007, 25-6  
<http://www.aph.gov.au/hansard/senate/commtee/S10245.pdf>, 25-6.

exhaustive household-level review of the roll in a given electoral division)<sup>10</sup>, compliance with the compulsory enrolment provisions of the *Electoral Act*<sup>11</sup> is almost entirely at the discretion of the eligible citizen.

This is not to say the AEC isn't active in encouraging enrolment—it is—but there is little the organisation can do in the face of voter inertia. In fact, the only effective punishment for failing to enrol is losing the right (obligation!) to vote at the next election. Meanwhile, voting is compulsory, but the only people who risk a fine for not fulfilling their duty are those who have complied with the legal requirement to get on the roll in the first place. A person who breaks both laws isn't, in practice, fined.

In most countries, enrolment and turning out to vote is optional. Yet in many of these, the state is more active than in Australia. In Germany, for example, electoral rolls are automatically compiled and adjusted by local government authorities, using their existing records. If an elector moves, their name moves from one roll to the other without their lifting a finger. Enrolment is not compulsory, so individuals can request to be taken off the roll.<sup>12</sup> Contrast this with Australia, where the onus is the other way: the elector must 'apply' to get onto the roll.

In an international comparative study of electoral administration, Massicotte et al. examine state pro-activity in enrolment, classifying nations as either having state-initiated enrolment or leaving it to the voter. They describe Australia as among the '20 countries ... where qualified electors must make the initiative'<sup>13</sup>; meanwhile, '[e]very European country but two (France and Portugal) has state-initiated registration'.<sup>14</sup> They are referring specifically to initial enrolment—usually young people reaching voting age—but the distinction applies to enrolment per se. (Many of these countries have internal passport systems, which more easily facilitates 'state-initiated' enrolment activity.)

Thus, for a country with compulsory voting, Australia has a peculiar position with respect to enrolment. On the one hand, the Electoral Commission is quite effective in ensuring compliance with the compulsory voting provisions of the *Electoral Act*. And since voting is compulsory, the state ensures that it is relatively straightforward to comply. For instance, voting is on a Saturday; one can vote at any polling place in one's electorate; the ballot forms and voting procedures are the same everywhere in the country; postal, pre-poll and provisional balloting are all reasonably straightforward; special teams of AEC workers visit remote locations and hospitals; almost 20 sections of the *Electoral Act* are concerned with voting by the relatively handful of electors working in Antarctic research

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<sup>10</sup> See for instance, the "full habitation review" of the Victorian seat of Isaacs in 2004.

[http://aec.gov.au/content/What/enrolment/riu\\_reports/RIU415\\_Isaacs\\_FHR\\_Report.pdf](http://aec.gov.au/content/What/enrolment/riu_reports/RIU415_Isaacs_FHR_Report.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> S. 101(4), *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*

<sup>12</sup> Louis Massicotte, André Blais, and Antoine Yoshinaka, *Establishing the Rules of the Game: Election Laws in Democracies*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p.77.

<sup>13</sup> Massicotte et al., *Establishing the Rules of the Game*, p, 67.

<sup>14</sup> Massicotte et al., *Establishing the Rules of the Game*, p.73

stations. That is, largely because it is compulsory, turning out to vote is made *easy* in Australia.

However, the ease with which one can comply with the compulsory enrolment requirement seems to be going in a different direction. The Commission asks the elector to do what they are legally required to do, and the elector must then prove they are eligible to be allowed to vote: that is, enrolment is compulsory but the elector must 'apply'. Failing to enrol generally results in no sanction, and indeed, even 'liberation' from the compulsory voting requirement (since for all practical purposes, unenrolled citizens are invisible to the Commission). And as our results show, at the same time as it has become more onerous to get on and stay on the roll, the Commission has become more effective at removing people from the roll. That is, voting is compulsory in Australia, but as a practical matter enrolment isn't, and in whose interests is that?

## Appendix

### September 2002 to March 2007: Population and enrolment. Raw data.

