



**Informal voting at the 2007 election:
Preliminary notes**

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Commentary

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Informal voting at the 2007 federal election: Preliminary notes

Informal voting appears a good news story from the 2007 federal election—at least relative to the 2004 poll. The levels of informal voting dropped—substantially, and in every State. In the House of Representatives it shrunk from 5.2 per cent in 2004 to 4.0 per cent; in the Senate it was 2.5 percent, down from 3.7 per cent in 2004.

After the 2004 election, which saw the fourth successive rise in informal voting, the Australian Electoral Commission produced a report on informal voting. Among its findings was that almost half informal votes were either ballot papers with a ‘1’ next to one candidate but no other candidates chosen, or they had non-sequential numbering. Such ballot papers would be counted as formal in state elections in New South Wales and Queensland, which have optional preferential voting. Another finding was a high correlation between informal voting and electorates with large numbers of people from non-English speaking backgrounds.¹

Table 1 is taken from that report, with the last two columns—2007 numbers and percentage change from 2004 to 2007—added.

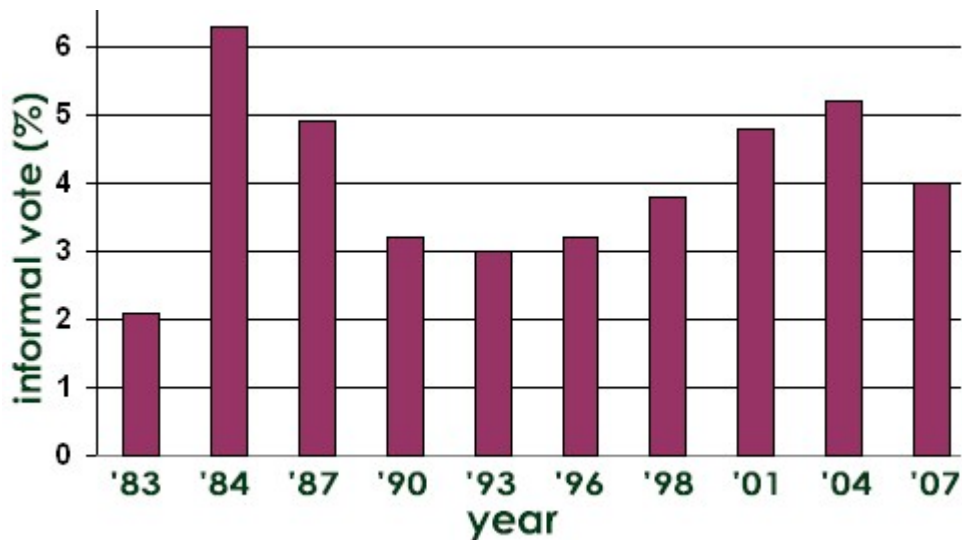
Table 1: Informal vote in House of Representatives by State at Federal elections 1983 - 2007

State	1983	1984	1987	1990	1993	1996	1998	2001	2004	2007	% chng 2004-7
NSW	2.2	5.7	4.6	3.1	3.1	3.6	4.0	5.4	6.1	5.0	-18.0
Vic	2.2	7.5	5.3	3.5	2.8	2.9	3.5	4	4.1	3.3	-19.5
Qld	1.3	4.5	3.4	2.2	2.6	2.6	3.3	4.8	5.2	3.6	-30.8
WA	2.0	7.1	6.6	3.7	2.5	3.2	4.2	4.9	5.3	3.9	-26.4
SA	2.0	7.1	6.6	3.7	4.1	4.1	4.5	5.5	5.6	3.8	-32.1
Tas	2.3	5.9	5	3.3	2.7	2.4	3.1	3.4	3.6	2.9	-19.4
ACT	2.2	4.7	3.5	3	3.4	2.8	2.9	3.5	3.4	2.3	-32.4
NT	4.4	4.6	5.8	3.4	3.1	3.4	4.2	4.6	4.4	3.9	-11.4
Australia	2.1	6.3	4.9	3.2	3.0	3.2	3.8	4.8	5.2	4.0	-23.1

Source: Australian Electoral Commission

The national data, the numbers in the bottom line, is represented in the bar chart below.

Graph 1: Informal vote in House of Representatives 1983–2007



Without lingering too long on the data, we can note several things. The massive (relative) jump from 1983 to 1984, from 2.1 to 6.3 per cent, was largely due to the new ‘above the line’ voting option for the Senate. The fact that electors could, for the first time, ‘just vote 1’ in the upper house was disseminated through a large advertising campaign, which unfortunately confused many voters who thought it applied to the lower house as well. The high informal vote was somewhat rectified at subsequent elections, but we have never returned to the 1983 level.

And although informal votes dropped by almost a quarter between 2004 and 2007, the percentage number was still larger than in 1983, 1990, 1993, 1996 and 1998.

Why is informal voting still consistently high compared with 25 years ago? Contributing factors probably include: the ‘above the line’ option in the Senate, increasing numbers of Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds, growing numbers of candidates on ballot papers, and the introduction of optional preferential voting for State elections in New South Wales (from the 1981 State election onwards) and in Queensland (since 1992).

Voters may also be increasingly alienated from the political process and deliberately spoiling their papers, although the majority of informal votes do appear to be accidental.

Table 2 ranks all 150 electorates in order of informal vote (%) in the House of Representatives in 2007. Other columns show number of candidates on the ballot paper (the national average was 7.0) and rank by the percentage of the electorate who, according to the 2006 Census, speak English not well or not at all.

Table 2: House of Representatives electorates by informal vote level at 2007 election

	Seat	State	Number of candidates on ballot paper	Rank by people in seat who speak English not well	Informal vote %
1	Blaxland	NSW	8	1	9.5
2	Watson	NSW	6	3	9.1
3	Chifley	NSW	9	26	8.0
4	Prospect	NSW	5	5	7.7
5	Fowler	NSW	4	4	7.7
6	Reid	NSW	7	2	7.6
7	Parramatta	NSW	10	28	6.6
8	Werriwa	NSW	6	29	6.5
9	Banks	NSW	6	18	6.4
10	Bennelong	NSW	13	21	6.2
11	Grayndler	NSW	7	13	6.0
12	Barton	NSW	4	12	5.6
13	Lindsay	NSW	8	66	5.5
14	Macarthur	NSW	7	74	5.4
15	Kingsford Smith	NSW	5	27	5.3
16	Murray	Vic	9	76	5.2
17	Throsby	NSW	4	46	5.2
18	Lyne	NSW	9	145	5.1
19	Leichhardt	Qld	11	80	5.1
20	Port Adelaide	SA	5	22	5.0
21	Lowe	NSW	4	11	5.0
22	Stirling	WA	9	35	4.9
23	Wentworth	NSW	11	71	4.9
24	Calwell	Vic	9	19	4.9
25	Lingiari	NT	5	95	4.9
26	Berowra	NSW	7	55	4.8
27	Mackellar	NSW	7	72	4.7
28	Charlton	NSW	8	112	4.7
29	Wakefield	SA	8	78	4.7
30	O'Connor	WA	11	124	4.6
31	Greenway	NSW	7	65	4.6
32	Forde	Qld	9	92	4.6
33	Swan	WA	10	43	4.6
34	Perth	WA	9	34	4.6
35	Rankin	Qld	7	52	4.5
36	Gorton	Vic	5	6	4.4
37	Newcastle	NSW	10	88	4.4

38	Hasluck	WA	8	73	4.4
39	Wills	Vic	7	15	4.3
40	Dobell	NSW	8	127	4.3
41	Fadden	Qld	9	77	4.3
42	Page	NSW	10	141	4.3
43	Hunter	NSW	6	137	4.3
44	Richmond	NSW	7	129	4.3
45	Hughes	NSW	5	37	4.3
46	Fremantle	WA	8	51	4.3
47	Grey	SA	7	122	4.3
48	Gellibrand	Vic	8	16	4.2
49	Gilmore	NSW	9	118	4.2
50	Oxley	Qld	6	31	4.2
51	Parkes	NSW	7	121	4.2
52	Herbert	Qld	9	104	4.2
53	Cowan	WA	9	39	4.2
54	Shortland	NSW	5	136	4.2
55	Sydney	NSW	7	25	4.1
56	McEwen	Vic	8	105	4.1
57	Kalgoorlie	WA	8	100	4.1
58	Makin	SA	7	62	4.1
59	Scullin	Vic	6	14	4.1
60	Flynn	Qld	9	128	4.1
61	Bradfield	NSW	6	36	4.0
62	Cowper	NSW	6	130	4.0
63	Maribyrnong	Vic	6	7	4.0
64	Wide Bay	Qld	7	142	4.0
65	Pearce	WA	9	101	4.0
66	Cunningham	NSW	7	53	4.0
67	Hinkler	Qld	6	114	3.9
68	Brand	WA	8	113	3.9
69	Mitchell	NSW	7	56	3.9
70	Blair	Qld	8	109	3.9
71	Cook	NSW	8	82	3.9
72	Barker	SA	6	89	3.9
73	Hindmarsh	SA	8	41	3.8
74	Kennedy	Qld	7	87	3.8
75	Riverina	NSW	5	83	3.8
76	Batman	Vic	6	10	3.8
77	Farrer	NSW	6	132	3.8
78	Dawson	Qld	6	107	3.8
79	Moncrieff	Qld	8	61	3.8
80	Corio	Vic	9	59	3.7
81	Kingston	SA	8	103	3.7
82	Bruce	Vic	7	8	3.7
83	Eden-Monaro	NSW	7	96	3.7
84	Mallee	Vic	6	84	3.6
85	Warringah	NSW	8	63	3.6
86	Paterson	NSW	8	139	3.6
87	Holt	Vic	6	32	3.6

88	Macquarie	NSW	8	144	3.6
89	Maranoa	Qld	6	123	3.6
90	Bendigo	Vic	9	148	3.5
91	Lalor	Vic	6	49	3.5
92	Longman	Qld	7	115	3.5
93	North Sydney	NSW	8	50	3.5
94	Sturt	SA	6	38	3.5
95	Calare	NSW	5	138	3.4
96	Robertson	NSW	7	116	3.4
97	McMillan	Vic	8	126	3.4
98	Hume	NSW	6	108	3.4
99	Bowman	Qld	6	99	3.4
100	Capricornia	Qld	8	134	3.4
101	Fairfax	Qld	8	143	3.4
102	Forrest	WA	8	120	3.3
103	Isaacs	Vic	7	24	3.3
104	Canning	WA	7	94	3.3
105	Hotham	Vic	7	9	3.3
106	La Trobe	Vic	7	97	3.3
107	Bass	Tas	7	125	3.3
108	McPherson	Qld	7	81	3.2
109	Moreton	Qld	7	23	3.1
110	Adelaide	SA	5	33	3.1
111	Braddon	Tas	6	149	3.1
112	Groom	Qld	9	102	3.1
113	Lyons	Tas	6	150	3.1
114	Gippsland	Vic	6	110	3.0
115	Bonner	Qld	7	70	3.0
116	Moore	WA	7	93	3.0
117	Petrie	Qld	7	90	3.0
118	Brisbane	Qld	7	69	3.0
119	Lilley	Qld	6	85	3.0
120	Aston	Vic	6	47	2.9
121	Fisher	Qld	6	131	2.9
122	Solomon	NT	6	57	2.9
123	Griffith	Qld	8	54	2.9
124	New England	NSW	6	146	2.9
125	Boothby	SA	8	75	2.9
126	Melbourne	Vic	8	17	2.8
127	Casey	Vic	6	91	2.8
128	Flinders	Vic	5	106	2.8
129	Dickson	Qld	7	133	2.8
130	Mayo	SA	6	140	2.8
131	Menzies	Vic	6	30	2.8
132	Tangney	WA	7	48	2.7
133	Franklin	Tas	6	135	2.7
134	Indi	Vic	6	111	2.7
135	Dunkley	Vic	5	98	2.6
136	Chisholm	Vic	6	20	2.6
137	Wannon	Vic	4	147	2.6

138	Higgins	Vic	8	42	2.6
139	Corangamite	Vic	6	119	2.5
140	Denison	Tas	6	86	2.5
141	Jagajaga	Vic	6	64	2.5
142	Goldstein	Vic	6	58	2.4
143	Ballarat	Vic	4	117	2.4
144	Fraser	ACT	7	60	2.4
145	Canberra	ACT	4	79	2.3
146	Melbourne Ports	Vic	6	44	2.2
147	Ryan	Qld	8	68	2.1
148	Kooyong	Vic	6	45	2.1
149	Deakin	Vic	6	40	2.1
150	Curtin	WA	7	67	1.9

Source: AEC and Parliamentary Library, <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/2007-08/08rp12.htm>
‘Table 21a: Persons who speak English not well or not at all’ last visited 30 January 2008.

Consistent with other recent elections, New South Wales (which has OPV at State level) dominates the top of the list, particularly Sydney’s western suburbs, which have high numbers of poor English speakers.

The AEC will again release a detailed study of informal votes in 2007, and the Audit will also revisit the topic in greater depth.

Should we care about the continuing high levels of informal voting at federal elections? The Audit believes electors deliberately spoiling their ballot papers is one issue, but so many ballot papers being accidentally rendered informal presents a problem for the state of our democracy. We have one of the more complicated voting systems (from the point of view of the voter) in the world—in many comparable countries, a tick, a cross or ‘just numbering 1’ counts as a formal vote, but not at elections for the Australian House of Representatives. The differing requirements for a valid vote in the differing electoral systems used at federal, State and local levels is a source of confusion, particularly for poor English speakers, and a problem that needs to be addressed.

In the meantime, the drop in informal votes from 2004 to 2007 is good news. We look forward to finding out its causes, with a view to future action to reduce informal votes.

ⁱ Australian Electoral Commission, Research Report Number7, October 2005, Analysis of Informal Voting during the 2004 House of Representatives Election, http://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/Publications/Strategy_Research_Analysis/paper7/index.htm last visited 30 January 2008.