



AEC

Australian Electoral Commission

POLICY

Postal Voting

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Purpose of policy

The purpose of this policy is to describe the postal voting categories, application procedures and processing of applications in accordance with the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* (the Electoral Act).

1. Postal voters

1.1 There are two categories of postal voters:

- Those people that apply for a postal vote for a particular federal event. These people have to apply to be sent voting papers for the applicable event.
- Those people that are registered as a General Postal Voter and have a registration code against their enrolment record. These people are automatically sent voting papers at the time of any election.

2. Postal voting for a particular event

2.1 A person may apply for a postal vote on specified grounds. Those grounds are set out in Schedule 2 to the Electoral Act. In general terms, an elector may apply for a postal vote if, on polling day, they:

- are outside the electorate where they are enrolled to vote
- are more than 8km from a polling place
- are travelling
- are unable to leave their workplace to vote
- are seriously ill, infirm or due to give birth shortly (or caring for someone who is)
- are a patient in hospital and can't vote at the hospital
- have religious beliefs that prevent them from attending a polling place
- are in prison serving a sentence of less than three years or otherwise detained
- are a silent elector
- have a reasonable fear for their safety.

2.2 A postal vote application (PVA) must be in writing on the form approved by the Electoral Commissioner (EC) which includes a declaration by the applicant that they are entitled to apply for a postal vote. A PVA may also be lodged online.

2.3 An application may not be made until after the public announcement of the proposed date for polling or after the issue of a writ for an election or referendum (whichever is the earlier) (s 184 and Schedule 2 of the Electoral Act). An announcement concerning an intended date for polling does not necessarily meet the requirements of s 184 of the Electoral Act. The AEC may issue advice clarifying whether PVAs may be accepted in such instances.

Note: The following clause will be affected by the decision that has been made not to visit said facilities for the next election due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further details on what arrangements will be made for these electors will be released once confirmed.

2.4 As soon as the public announcement of the election date is made, every effort must be made to ensure that PVAs are also made available at places where mobile polling facilities may not be provided during the election period, for example:

- nursing homes
- hospitals
- high-care facilities (including those in retirement villages and residential mental health facilities)
- mining camps
- prisons

Note: It is important to ensure that all places holding stocks of PVAs are made aware of the need to destroy superseded forms where the EC revokes an approved PVA and approves a replacement PVA.

- 2.5 PVAs must be received by 6 pm on the Wednesday prior to polling day to be accepted.
- 2.6 Section 184AA of the Electoral Act allows political parties and candidates to distribute PVAs with party material attached.

3. General postal voters (GPVs)

- 3.1 An elector may apply for registration as a General Postal Voter (GPV), which entitles the elector to have postal ballot papers for future federal elections automatically sent to them.
- 3.2 An application for registration as a GPV must be made on one of the grounds specified in the Electoral Act (s 184A). In general terms, an elector can register to become a general postal voter if they are:
 - enrolled at an address more than 20 km away from a polling place
 - a patient at a hospital or nursing home and unable to travel to a polling place
 - unable to travel due to being infirm at home
 - caring for a seriously ill or infirm person
 - serving a prison sentence of less than 3 years
 - registered as a silent elector
 - unable to attend a polling place due to religious beliefs
 - unable to sign their name due to a physical incapacity
 - registered as an overseas elector
 - a member of the defence force, or a defence civilian serving outside Australia
 - an Australian Federal Police officer or staff member serving outside Australia.
- 3.3 There is no requirement that the application be made on an approved form, however the AEC strongly prefers to receive applications on forms approved for this purpose. To register as a GPV, electors can complete the GPV application form, which is available from any AEC office or on the [AEC website](#).
- 3.4 An application to be registered as a GPV can be made at any time (s 185 of the Electoral Act). Accordingly, the process to register a GPV can also be done at any time. As soon as the ballot papers for an election are available, postal voting papers must be sent to GPVs (s 186 of the Electoral Act).
- 3.5 The EC must keep a register of GPVs for each division. Each register is to be made available for inspection by members of the public at the office of the DRO for the division during ordinary office hours (s 184B the Electoral Act). The GPV register must be printed from RMANS and further information can be found in [Roll-How](#).
- 3.6 The registration of an elector as a GPV may be cancelled by the EC if the ground on which the elector applied for registration no longer exists (s 185C of the Electoral Act). Although a registration can be cancelled at any such time, it is important to recognise that where that cancellation occurs after the close of the roll for an election, the elector remains entitled to a postal vote for that election. For information on the cancellation of GPV registrations, see [Roll-Why](#).

- 3.7 Unlike PVAs for a particular event, the GPV registration process does not involve supplying or authentication of a security question/answer before registration may occur.
- 3.8 Any GPV applications received between the close of rolls and the deadline for receiving PVAs can be accepted as a PVA and as a GPV registration. Because of this, the GPV forms cannot be scanned and processed as PVAs by the scanning service provider and instead should be copied and processed as PVAs manually into the AEC's automated postal vote issuing system (APVIS) by divisions. The elector should also be registered as a GPV for subsequent events – due to ongoing state and local elections the registration should be completed as soon as possible.

4. Use of PVAs by candidates and political parties

Supply of paper PVAs

- 4.1 Where the EC revokes a PVA form and approves a replacement, the Assistant Commissioner, Delivery and Support Branch is to contact all registered political parties, to advise them of the new approved form and the need to destroy superseded forms that may be being held as stock.
- 4.2 All members, Senators and candidates will be encouraged to promote the Online Postal Vote Application (OPVA) with their constituents. This service ensures that the AEC receives the applications in a timely manner and can send the postal vote pack out as soon as possible.
- 4.3 If requests for paper PVA forms (and reply envelopes) are received by states and divisions, these must be redirected to the Elector and Roll Services team. This team will then investigate the reasons for the request and if the OPVA is not suitable, will direct them to the pdf version on the AEC website. This includes requests from
- Members and Senators
 - political parties
 - candidates
 - state/territory members of parliament
 - political interest groups (unions, lobby groups, peak industry bodies).

Reproduction of PVAs

- 4.4 Subsection 184AA(1) of the Electoral Act allows a postal vote application form to be “physically attached to, or form part of, other written materials issued by any person or organisation.” This allows for political parties to provide PVAs to constituents alongside election materials.
- 4.5 The majority of paper PVA forms received by the AEC for processing during an event are those which have been reproduced by a political party or candidates. It is important that the AEC communicates to political parties and candidates the importance of reproduced PVAs aligning with legislative requirements to ensure electors are not disenfranchised and the scanning of said forms is as efficient as possible.
- 4.6 It is the State Manager's role to communicate PVA requirements with political parties in the lead-up to electoral events however Elector and Roll Services will provide information and guidance regarding the key points related to postal voting. The information obtained from political parties these meetings (e.g. what their plans are regarding postal voting) should be treated confidentially; at a minimum it should be known by the relevant State Manager, Director Operations, Director of Elector and Roll Services Section in NO, and the relevant DRO.
- 4.7 The AEC provides print-ready artwork of the approved form and guidelines for its reproduction to any person or organisation that wishes to reproduce PVAs. Requests to obtain a copy of the approved

form and guidelines are to be made to the Director, Elector and Roll Services Section in National Office (NO) through the AEC Service Desk. The office lodging this request via the AEC Service Desk must also ensure that the relevant AEO is to be advised of this request.

- 4.8 When dealing with candidates and political parties it is useful to ascertain relevant information concerning their postal vote mail campaigns and provide information to them regarding AEC processes. Relevant information includes approximate volumes, areas of letterbox drops, and dates and intended method of delivery, noting that, if a Service Provider is being used, completed paper PVAs must be sent directly to that provider. This exchange of information will assist offices to manage the workload, especially planned peaks in activity, but as this information is confidential (see 4.6) steps must be taken to ensure only the information shared within the AEC network as needed.

5. Receipt of PVAs

- 5.1 Divisional offices (DOs) are not required to stay open to the public until 6pm on the Wednesday three days before polling day to enable receipt of PVAs. However if members of the public come to a divisional office when it is closed to the public, but staff are inside working, staff should attend to the person and assist wherever possible. This may include accepting a paper form for processing.
- 5.2 The PVA scanning provider must stay open until 6pm (local time) on the Wednesday three days before polling day to enable receipt of PVAs (s 184(5) of the Electoral Act). The scanning provider must clear PO boxes, scan, vet and provide the data from the PVAs that evening to ensure the Postal Vote Packs (PVP) can be produced and lodged as soon as possible.
- 5.3 Divisions must also factor in time to process after this deadline into their staffing plans, noting that OPVA and scanned PVA data may not appear in the manual intervention or local print queues until 6.30pm (local time) due to the background system work.
- 5.4 PVAs may be made to the EC or, in the case of an application made outside of Australia, also to an Assistant Returning Officer (ARO) (s 184 of the Electoral Act).
- 5.5 While every effort should be made to ensure that superseded forms are destroyed, a PVA that is made on a superseded form should be accepted if the application substantially complies with the approved form, that is, if the application contains all the information that is required by the Electoral Act and is received before 6pm on the Wednesday three days before polling day.
- For example, a form stating it must be received by 6pm Thursday two days before polling day (forms used at 2013 election stated this) may be accepted, but only if it satisfies the essential criteria set out below.
- 5.6 The following criteria are **essential** for a PVA to be considered valid:
- the application must include a declaration of entitlement to apply for a postal vote (s 184(1) of the Electoral Act)
 - paper applications – the declaration of entitlement is the signature
 - online applications – the declaration of entitlement is the submission of the form
 - the application must be dated (note – the date is automatically generated if a PVA is submitted online)
 - the date must not be before the announcement of or issue of writ for an election or referendum (an incorrect date in the future however is acceptable provided the PVA is received on time)
 - the application must be received by 6pm on the Wednesday three days before polling day (s 184(5) of the Electoral Act) (refer to clause 6.10 in this policy).

PVAs not meeting these criteria must be rejected and a defective PVA letter sent to the applicant.

- 5.7 The following criteria are **not** essential for a PVA to be considered valid:

- applicant's full name details (e.g. an initial is given instead of a given name)
- applicant's enrolled address details
- applicant's date of birth
- postal address
- contact phone number or email address
- security question and answer

If a PVA is missing any or all of these details it must still be accepted.

- 5.8 The assessment of substantial compliance on non-PVA forms (i.e. letters, form reproductions etc.) must be sent to the Elector and Roll Services team. A decision on these will be done on a case by case basis by the Assistant Commissioner, Elector and Roll Services Section (or delegate) and advice provided to staff directly or via the intranet (if a trend emerges).
- 5.9 If a PVA meets the essential requirements set out above, the postal voting material must be sent to the applicant (s.188(1) of the Electoral Act).

6. Processing paper PVA forms

- 6.1 Information from PVA forms will be captured electronically (via a Service Provider with OCR/ICR capability) and/or manually via data entry by AEC staff in RMANS APVIS.
- 6.2 Timeliness and quality are paramount in either of the above options. If a Service Provider is used:
- 6.2.1 Arrangements will be made to ensure they receive the paper PVAs as soon as possible. This will include directions to candidates and parties to directly deliver bulk PVAs to the Service Provider, the Service Provider managing the PO Boxes advertised on the form and AEC website for returned completed forms and the electronic transfer of PVAs from AEC offices to the Service Provider.
- 6.2.2 Strict business and quality rules will be established to ensure correct identification of paper PVAs and the correct and efficient capture of data on said forms. These vetting rules will be published before each election and exceptions to these rules will be managed by Elector and Roll Services.
- 6.2.3 The Service Provider will regularly feed PVA data back to the AEC. This data will be processed in RMANS APVIS
- Note:** A paper PVA form may meet the vetting rules in 6.2.2 but will still need divisional intervention in RMANS APVIS if RMANS cannot make the necessary matches to determine entitlement.
- 6.3 The Service Provider will hold PVA images in an accessible repository for scrutiny and archiving processes. Staff will have access to these images via RMANS APVIS and Declaration Vote Scrutiny sub-systems.
- 6.4 If a Service Provider isn't being used, PVAs can be manually entered by divisional staff in AEC offices, OPCs or in state cells, depending on state management plans.
- 6.5 States must ensure that they have sufficient staff (with appropriate systems and RMANS APVIS access) and resources to:
- 6.5.1 receive PVAs and transfer them to the Service Provider (as long as the PVA is received by the AEC by the deadline); and
- 6.5.2 process PVA records received back from the Service Provider in RMANS APVIS efficiently, including after the 6pm deadline.
- 6.6 Forms processed in AEC offices must be stored securely as they contain personal information.

Forwarding paper PVAs received in an AEC office to the Service Provider

- 6.7 If a Service Provider is being used, staff are reminded that the Service Provider's processes will result in a timelier capture of data, depending on when the forms are sent to them. Therefore, staff must send **all** paper PVAs to the Service Provider either via electronic transfer or courier. For example:
- if a box of forms is dropped off (e.g. by a candidate or party official), then AEC staff must advise that they should be delivered to the Service Providers address. If they refuse to deliver them to the correct address, or they have been left by a courier, then that box of PVAs should be couriered directly to the Service Provider as is (i.e. the box shouldn't be opened and checked). If 1-100 forms are received, states and divisions must electronically send them to the Service Provider as they are received.
 - Forms electronically sent to the Service Provider must be stored securely, but separately to those in 6.6
 - However, if that box is received between 12-6pm on the Wednesday before polling day, the box should be opened and the PVAs transferred electronically to the Service Provider. Whilst strict vetting is not required in this scenario, the removal of obviously incomplete or non-PVA material should be done.
- 6.8 GPV forms must be retained in the office and processed directly into RMANS APVIS.

Failure to meet deadline for PVA

- 6.9 If a PVA is received after 6pm on the Wednesday three days before polling day, it fails to meet the deadline and the applicant should be advised of that fact and that they will have to vote by other means (s 184(5), 184(6) of the Electoral Act).
- 6.10 If the PVA is received by the Service Provider, the AEC may decide to use their services to send a "PVA received too late" message (via email or SMS) to the applicant. The Service Provider will also scan and transfer the data contained on the PVA to the AEC.
- 6.11 If the paper PVA is received by an AEC office then AEC staff should attempt to contact the elector and process the PVA in RMANS APVIS as too late.
- 6.12 If a large number of forms are received by AEC offices after the deadline but before polling day (i.e. from a candidate or party) these should be sent to the Service Provider (if being used) as they will be able to scan and notify applicants more efficiently than divisional staff.

7. Issuing postal votes

- 7.1 If the EC or an ARO receives a PVA that meets one of the specified grounds, the EC or ARO must send a Postal Voting Certificate (PVC) and the postal voting papers to the applicant.
- 7.2 Postal voting material (including the PVC) may be generated and issued centrally (via a Service Provider), locally or by a 'hybrid' method, where for certain postcodes the system will use local printing from a particular location regardless of where the PVA was processed. RMANS APVIS will be used to determine the method that ensures the best possible delivery timeframe.
- 7.3 PVCs with House of Representatives ballot paper stock attached to them are considered ballot papers. The handling, storing and transporting of PVCs must comply with requirements of the [Ballot Paper Handling Policy](#), prior to, during dispatching and upon return to the division. Preparation and issuing of PVCs must be done in a ballot paper secure working zone whether being dispatched by a Service Provider or AEC office.
- 7.4 It is expected that RMANS APVIS would be used to issue all PVCs, however in circumstances where the system is not available (e.g. due to a network or power failure) it may be necessary to issue PVCs manually (see [Producing Postal Vote Certificates SOP](#)).

8. Delivery of postal votes

- 8.1 The AEC endeavours to deliver postal votes in sufficient time for the elector to vote before 6pm on polling day. Postal vote material must be sent by post or other means, not being electronic means such as fax or email.
- 8.2 Postal votes are normally delivered to the applicant by Australia Post priority service, however for all PVAs received before 6pm on the Wednesday three days before polling day, the postal voting material must be sent to the applicant by a means considered to be the most reasonable and practicable in the circumstances (s 188(2) of the Electoral Act).
- 8.3 Therefore all divisions must develop a postal vote delivery plan that does not depend on Australia Post factors in the time taken to print locally and collate the PVC packs. This will require divisions to investigate the alternative non-Australia Post delivery options available in their divisions for sending postal voting material where the postcode is hybrid in RMANS APVIS or local knowledge indicates that delivery by means other than Australia Post needs to be considered.
- 8.4 Where the use of standard, priority or express postal services or standard courier services is likely to lead to disenfranchisement, other services can be used as long as delivery of the voting material can be achieved within the necessary timeframes and does not exceed a cost of \$100 per elector serviced.
- For example: delivering postal votes to a remote township of 20 electors at a cost of \$1,500 would be acceptable since the cost is \$75 per elector.
- 8.5 Reasonable and practicable means of delivery includes:
- commercially available couriers
 - vehicle or taxi use by an AEC staff member.
- 8.6 Reasonable and practicable means does not extend to providing a PVC to a third party authorised by the applicant.
- 8.7 The EC (or delegate) may decide that Australia Post is still a reasonable and practicable means of delivery. This would apply in circumstances where a postcode receives regular mail services.
- 8.8 A means of sending postal voting material will not be a reasonable and practicable means of delivery if it cannot be expected that the applicant would receive that material in sufficient time to vote before close of polling (s 194 of the Electoral Act).
- 8.9 DROs must receive approval (including Rule 18 financial approval) from state office if they use a means of delivery other than those described above. Any service which exceeds the cost per elector threshold is to be treated as a policy exception.

9. Silent electors

- 9.1 Most silent electors are registered as GPs, and receive postal voting material automatically through central production, however some may choose to apply for postal votes.
- 9.2 Silent electors are able to apply using the online PVA system, however it is recommended they use alternative forms of voting to ensure maximum confidentiality of their information.
- 9.3 If a silent elector chooses to lodge a PVA online or their paper PVA is sent to the scanning centre, their classified information will be suppressed in RMANS APVIS once they are matched as a silent elector.
- 9.4 If a silent elector's Postal Vote Pack (PVP) can be printed and lodged via central print, then the relevant data will be sent as part of the daily postal voting data file to the Service Provider.

- 9.5 If a local or hybrid print PVP is required, then only an AEC employee that has permission from the AEC to deal with silent electors can manually prepare postal voting materials for silent electors.
- 9.6 If the elector has included their enrolled address on a PVA (that is stored in a divisional office) it must be masked or obliterated by using a black marker pen.

10. Replacement of spoilt, missing, lost or destroyed postal ballot papers

- 10.1 A postal voter who spoils a postal ballot paper may obtain another postal ballot paper by returning the spoilt ballot paper to any AEC office. A replacement postal ballot paper may then be posted or issued personally to the voter at any time up to the close of the poll. However, the postal voting material must not be sent by post (or any other means) if it cannot be expected that the applicant would receive that material in sufficient time to vote before close of polling (s 194 of the Electoral Act).
 - 10.1.1 If a person cannot physically attend the office to return their spoilt ballot paper, and they claim that they cannot make their intended preference clear, advice should be sought from Elector and Roll Services on how to proceed (via the AEC Service Desk)
- 10.2 If an elector claims that their ballot paper (or PVC) has been lost, destroyed beyond salvage, or was never received, a new PVC may be issued by reprocessing the PVA, provided the elector has provided written confirmation attesting to this.

11. Postal ballot papers returned undelivered

- 11.1 Any postal voting material returned undelivered prior to polling day should be dealt with immediately. Every effort should be made to re-direct the postal voting materials and document steps taken, if any are possible, to achieve this (see [Postal Voting SOP](#)).

12. Receipting postal vote certificates

- 12.1 PVCs are to be receipted on their arrival at AEC premises. This may be conducted at the divisional office, state processing cell, or once transferred to the divisional out-posted centre. The process for receipting PVCs is covered in the [Receiving Postal Votes SOP](#). Note that PVCs are ballot papers and are to be handled in accordance with the [Ballot Paper Handling Policy](#).
- 12.2 PVCs must be receipted up to and after the 13 day post polling receipt period. This information flows into ELMS allowing for accurate estimates for declaration exchange, postal scrutinies and the virtual tally room advising parties, candidates and the general public as to how many votes are left to count and how many were too late. The Elector and Roll Services team will advise when the RMANS Dec Vote Scrutiny system is locked and when receipting PVCs can cease. All PVCs received after the cutoff must remain securely stored until otherwise advised.

Glossary for postal voting

Automated Postal Vote Issuing System (RMANS APVIS): is an election sub-system of the Roll Management System (RMANS EP) used for the registration of PVA details to issue PVCs or defective letters. APVIS also captures the date of lodgement with Australia Post and when the PVC is returned to the AEC.

Ballot paper secure work zone: designated and segregated area, clearly marked via use of bollards, dividers or tape, for the interim placement of ballot papers while they are in use and it is not practicable to undertake the work in a storage zone (see [Ballot Paper Handling Policy](#)).

Computershare (CCS): AEC's PVA scanning and PVP mail house services contractor who will receive, scan and vet all postal vote applications and prepare and lodge PVPs.

General Postal Voter (GPV): an elector who is registered to have postal ballot papers sent to them automatically. Electors from certain categories who have difficulty getting to a polling place on polling day can register as a GPV.

Optical Character Recognition / Intelligent Character Recognition (OCR/ICR): OCR/ICR technologies translate scanned images into data that can be used in database systems and verified against other data.

Online Postal Vote Application (OPVA): an electronic form that allows an applicant to securely submit a PVA to the AEC using any web-enabled device in Australia or overseas.

Postal voter: a voter who satisfies one of the grounds of application for postal vote set out in Schedule 2 of the Electoral Act and who may apply in writing for a postal vote using a PVA form. Upon receipt of a PVA, postal voting material will be dispatched for completion and return prior to the close of poll.

Postal Vote Application (PVA): an application for a postal vote which must be in writing on the form approved by the Electoral Commissioner which includes a declaration by the applicant that they are entitled to apply for a postal vote. A PVA may also be lodged online.

Postal Vote Certificate (PVC): the declaration specific to postal voting on which the elector declares their entitlement to vote. PVCs may be produced using PVA information entered into APVIS by either:

- **Central production:** a PVP is produced centrally to ensure timely delivery to the postal voter.
- **Hybrid print production:** where the postcode has only one or two mail deliveries per week and APVIS determines if the PVC is best printed by the owning divisions or another nominated division.
- **Local print production:** printing PVCs in divisional/state offices when central production could not ensure timely delivery of the PVP.

Postal Vote Pack (PVP) or postal voting materials: the certificate and ballot papers issued to an applicant for a postal vote. A postal vote pack consists of the following and are inserted into an outer envelope addressed to the elector.

- the printed PVC with attached House of Representatives ballot paper
- Senate ballot paper
- referendum ballot papers (if applicable)
- a domestic or overseas postal voting leaflet (*Getting help to complete your postal vote* leaflet ([EF045](#)) if within Australia, or *How to complete your overseas postal vote* ([EF610](#)) if overseas)
- Domestic or overseas return envelope.

Relevant policies and references

[Ballot Paper Handling Policy](#)

[RMANS Election Processing User Manual, Subpart 3 RMANS Automated Postal Voting Issuing System](#)

[ELMS Quick Reference Guide – Ballot Paper Printing](#)

[Preliminary Scrutiny SOP](#)

[Postal Vote Application Processing SOP](#)

[Producing Postal Vote Certificates SOP](#)

[Receiving Postal Votes SOP](#)

[Roll-Why](#)