

SUBMISSION - INQUIRY INTO THE 2007 FEDERAL ELECTION BEING CONDUCTED BY THE JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE INTO ELECTORAL MATTERS

1. Background

The ability to vote and participate in the democratic process is a fundamental human right for all citizens. Previous research by Hanover Welfare Services shows that the level of participation among those who experience homelessness is generally lower than in the broader community. Further, we have identified that barriers exist that effectively disenfranchise many people who experience homelessness, but that such barriers can be proactively addressed.

2. Hanover Welfare Services

Hanover Welfare Services, which was created in 1964, is a large independent agency with no structural links to governments, churches or institutions. It operates various services in Melbourne, including outreach to people sleeping rough, crisis accommodation, longer term housing and employment support.

3. Numbers of Australians Experiencing Homelessness

The 2001 Australian Census recorded that on census night there were 122,768 people recorded as being homeless in Australia. The data from the 2006 Australian Census on homelessness is not yet available.

4. Recommendations of the Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters of the 41st Parliament considered and made recommendations on a number of matters relating to voting among people experiencing homelessness. These were as follows:

- the AEC formulate, implement and report against a detailed, ongoing, action plan to promote and encourage enrolment and voting among persons and groups experiencing difficulty because of social circumstance; and
- that such persons and groups should include, but not be limited, to homeless and itinerant persons, illiterate persons, persons with disabilities and residents of isolated and remote areas;
- the AEC consult with and consider the views of organisations and groups representing homeless and itinerant persons, illiterate persons, persons with disabilities, residents of remote localities, and other appropriate bodies, to formulate appropriate strategies, programs and materials for use when the action plan is implemented;

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4. Recommendations of the Report of the Inquiry into the Conduct of the 2004 Federal Election and Matters Related Thereto by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters continued.....

- the AEC report back to the Committee prior to the next Federal Election with details of its action plan and implementation strategies;
- where appropriate, adequate funding be provided to enable the AEC to develop, implement and report against the action plan; and
- that following the next Federal Election, the AEC seek feedback from representative groups and community members regarding the effectiveness of the strategies implemented, and further develops its action plan to incorporate constructive suggestions where appropriate.

Hanover submits that many of these recommendations were not implemented, in particular the development of an action plan and the formulation of appropriate strategies, programs and materials to encourage enrolment and participation in voting.

Hanover attended a number of meetings with AEC staff both in Melbourne and Canberra to discuss measures to assist people experiencing homelessness to both enrol and vote. We were also asked to provide feedback on posters and other material which had been developed to send to homelessness services and discussed other measures with staff.

Hanover wishes to formally register its concerns that these materials were not actually produced and circulated. Additionally, it appears that the Action Plan as recommended by the Joint Standing Committee was not developed by the AEC.

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5. Federal Election Census

Hanover conducted a brief census just after the last Federal Election to explore if Hanover's clients were:

- eligible to vote at the election;
- to determine the proportion who actually did vote, and
- to identify any barriers to voting.

This census replicated a similar census we conducted with our clients during the last Victorian state election. (Appendix One)

A total of 148 Hanover clients provided details about their participation:

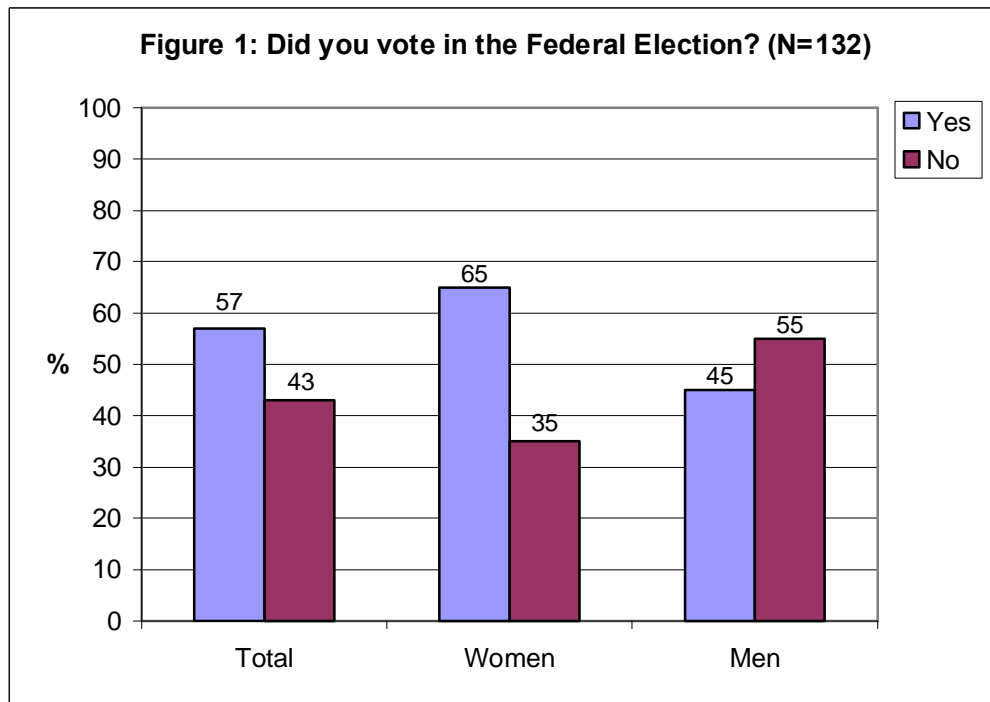
- Based on age and citizenship requirements, of the 148 Hanover clients who completed the Census, the vast majority (89%, n=132) were eligible to vote in the Federal Election held on the 24th November 2007.
- The remaining clients (11%, n=16) were not eligible to vote because they did not have citizenship.
- More women (57%, n=85) than men (43%, n=63) completed the Census.
- The youngest client was aged 18 years while the oldest was aged 64. The median age was 33.
- 49% of clients (n=73) were single/couple with dependent children and 51% (n=75) were single/couple with no dependent children.

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6. Findings

6.1 Who voted in the Federal Election?

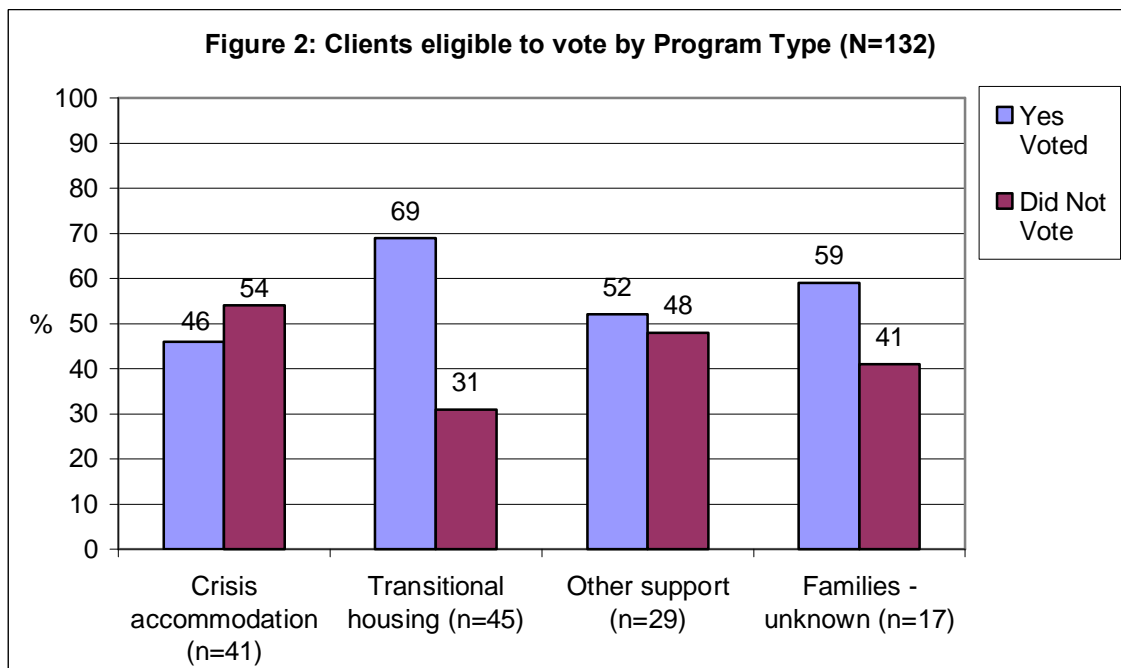
- Figure 1 shows that of the total 132 clients who were eligible to vote, more than half (57%) actually did.
- Nevertheless, this still means that a relatively high proportion of eligible clients *did not* vote (43%)
- As illustrated in Figure 1, more women (65%) than men (45%) voted in the Federal Election.



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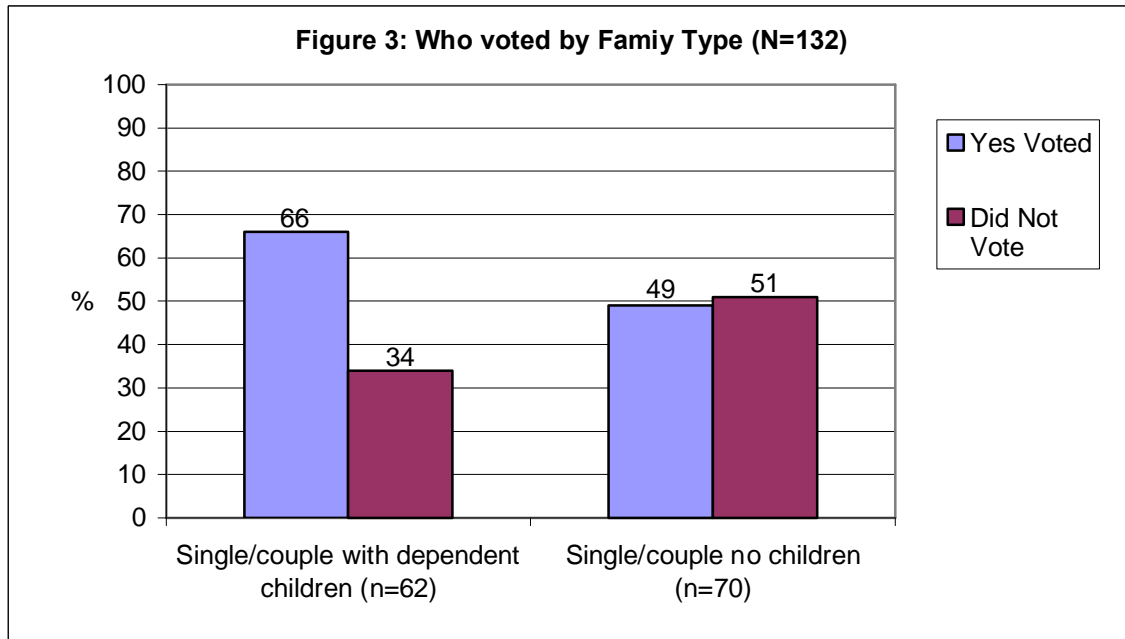
6.2 Voting & Program Type

- As shown in Figure 2, the largest proportion of eligible clients (n=132) who voted were in transitional housing (69%). Voting rates were also high among clients with other support (52%) and for those in the family program (59%).
- While a high proportion of those in crisis accommodation also voted (46%), over half did not (54%).



6.3 Voting & Family Status

- Figure 3 shows that the majority of participants (n=132) with children (66%) voted in the election. Among those without children, half voted (49%) and half did not (51%).



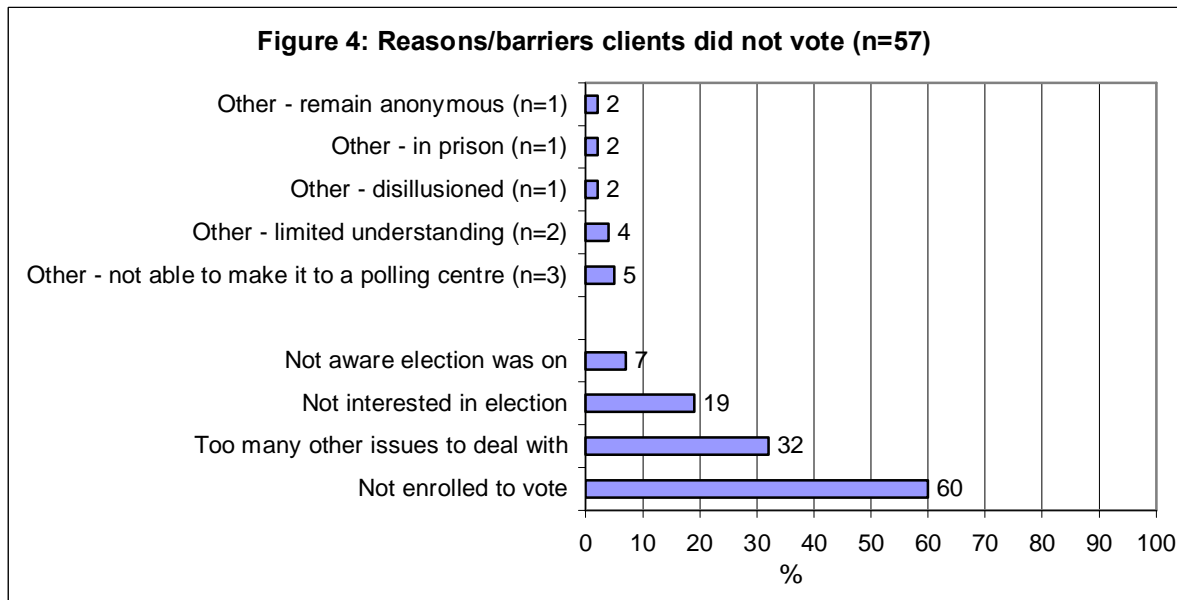
- When comparing family status for women and men, the findings showed that a majority of women voted, irrespective of whether they did or did not have children (67% compared with 60% respectively).
- Whereas for men, voting behaviour may have been influenced by family status. For example, the majority with children did vote (62%), while the majority with *no* children *did not* vote (60%).

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6.4 Barriers to Voting

There were 57 clients (women, n=28; men, n=29) who did not vote in the Federal election. They were asked to select from a list of 5 reasons that related to non-participation. This included an 'other' category where clients could specify a reason that was not listed.

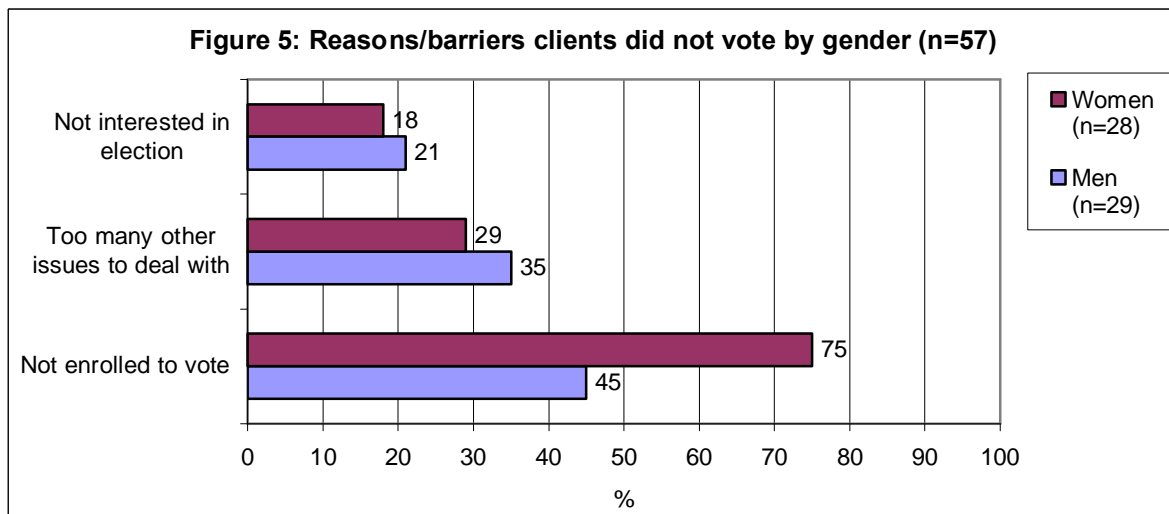
- While it was possible to nominate a number of reasons, most of the group identified only one (77%); in some cases clients reported two (11%) or three (12%) reasons.
- Figure 4 shows that the most common reason for not voting was that clients were not enrolled (60%)
- For some, there were too many other issues to deal with(32%)
- And some reported that they were not interested in the election(19%)
- In a few instances, clients were not aware that the election was on(7%).
- Other reasons identified by clients were about not being able to get to a polling centre on the day; a couple reported that they had limited understanding of the process.
- Disillusionment with politics or politicians was not generally an issue; only one person referred to it.
- Prison prevented one person from voting while another did not want to be traced in any way.



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6.4 Barriers to Voting *continued*.....

- Figure 5 shows that the reasons for not voting were similar for women and men, except in relation to enrolment. This was the main reason (75%) that women did not vote in the Federal election.
- The reasons for men not voting included enrolment (45%), but they also reported too many other issues to deal with (35%) and not interested in the election (21%).



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RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Hanover recommends that the AEC fully implement the recommendations made by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters of the 41st Parliament in relation to enrolment, voting and people experiencing homelessness.
2. To encourage a higher rate of participation in subsequent Federal Elections Hanover Welfare Services proposes that a series of practical measures can be taken by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). This includes the provision of advertising material informing people about the election and the provision of information about how to register on the electoral roll.
3. Hanover also recommends the provision of mobile polling facilities in homeless crisis services, such as Hanover's Crisis Centre operating in Southbank, and our newly opened crisis service in Dandenong. Such facilities are made available to hospitals and aged cares facilities.

This approach would be consistent with the trialing of mobile polling facilities by the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) during the 2006 Victorian State Election. However, we are disappointed that such a proposal was not actively embraced by the AEC.

We strongly suggest to the Joint Standing Committee into Electoral Matters that consideration be given to review the steps made (or not) by the AEC in increasing the participation of people experiencing homelessness during the 2007 Federal Election.
