Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into 2020 ACT Election and the Electoral Act

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Legislative Assembly for the ACT,

Email to LACommitteeJCS@parliament.act.gov.au.

From **Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy**

24 March 2021

Submission to Inquiry into the 2020 ACT Election

About the Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy

The **Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy** (CAPaD) is a volunteer community group, working to strengthen democratic government in Canberra.

CAPaD's purpose is to promote individual and community well-being and the common good in a healthy environment by:
(1)   empowering people in Canberra and Australia more broadly to own and plan for our common future by developing and supporting citizen, community and civil society engagement in public decision making,
(2)   stimulating and facilitating opportunities for citizen and community input to government deliberation,
(3)   developing and assisting citizen and community capacity to hold government more directly accountable.

We believe that when community members and their parliamentary representatives actively participate together in setting the policy agenda, designing policy and legislation and monitoring and evaluating the outcomes, decision-making for the public good is enhanced. Consequently, the power differential between elites and community members will become more balanced and political power shared more evenly. Institutionalising the processes for doing this will bring about stronger democracy.

We were set up in October 2015, consequent to the SEE-Change Kitchen Table Conversations in 2014. Out of those conversations came a strong feeling that we needed to do something about the state of politics in Australia. People felt government was not delivering what people cared about: a socially sustaining built environment, caring policy for the disadvantaged and refugees, care of the natural environment, and an economic system that put people before profits.

We want to give people a voice and a means to become involved in shaping public policy so that it delivers outcomes that will enhance the quality of life for Canberra residents.

We want government that is responsive, accountable, participatory and transparent i.e. that gives residents a voice in policy and decision making, that listens to the community, responds to ideas and explains decisions.

We would like to take this opportunity to make a submission in relation to voter turnout and informed voting, in particular regarding the requirement for Elections ACT to host statements from candidates on its website. This has been a new process and CAPaD is interested to see how it

worked during this election, and to explore if there are ways that information for voters about candidates could be improved. Based on our experience and reflection about the 2020 election, we would like to recommend some changes to make this more useful to voters and less onerous to candidates.

In this submission we outline our experience with candidate statements over recent past elections, discuss why we think focusing on quality of candidates is useful for strengthening democracy, then recommend how candidate statements might be better integrated into ACT election processes.

CAPaD's Electoral Experience
Candidate Statement Exercise
CAPaD ran its own Candidate Statement exercise for the 2016 and 2019 Federal elections and the 2016 and 2020 ACT Elections. We invited all candidates standing to send us details about:

- their skills and experience to serve as an MLA/MP;
- how they plan to represent their constituents, if elected;
- what measures they would take, if elected, to promote good government and strengthen the responsiveness, accountability and transparency of government; and
- what measures they would take, if elected, to promote and improve informed participation by their constituents in policy development and decision making.

We posted completed candidate statements [on our website](#). A copy of the 2020 ACT Election Candidate Statement is appended.

For this exercise, we were interested in providing information for voters about the candidates themselves, not their party or personal policy platforms.

Voters want to know about candidates
CAPaD believes that the more accurate information that voters have about candidates in the lead up to elections, the better equipped they will be to vote for candidates who represent their interests and values. Therefore:

- We strongly endorse the requirement for Elections ACT to invite and host statements from candidates.
- We will encourage voters to consult the candidate statements hosted on the Elections ACT website in the lead up to elections.

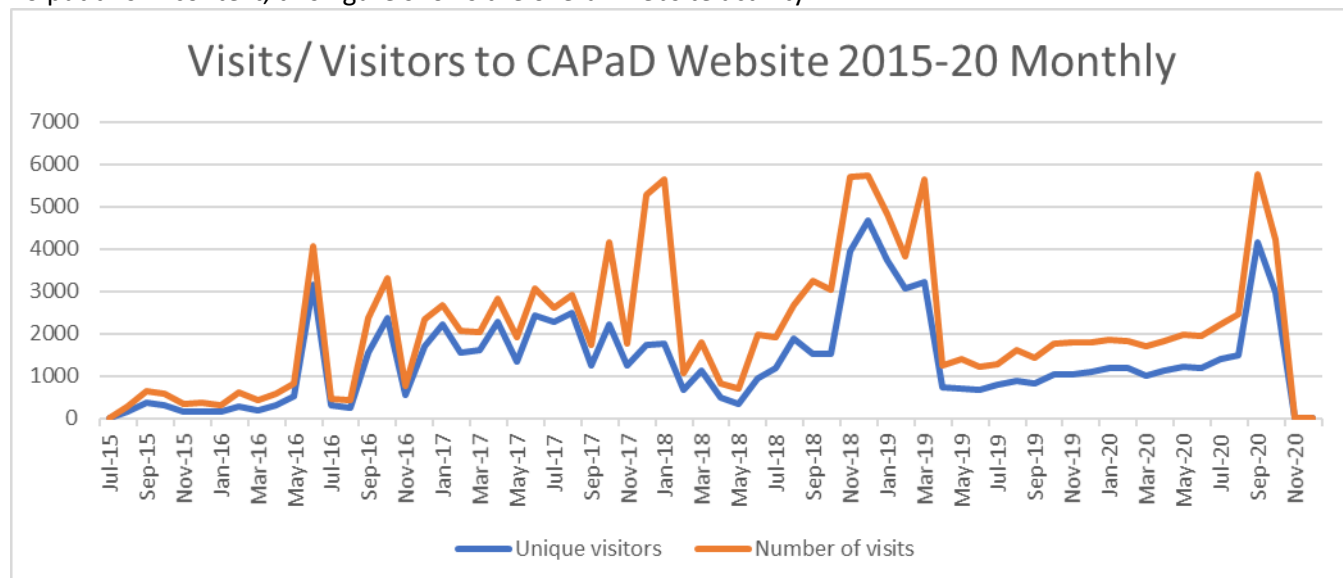### 2016, 2019 and 2020 Elections Website activity
An overview of total CAPaD website activity that relates to election relevant material is summarised here:

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Total election related activity	3559	871	654	4551	4609

The 2016 numbers include both the Federal and ACT elections, which occurred in what was essentially our first year of operations. Election related activity includes downloads/views of candidate statements, views of media releases, the generic candidate statement, and other material focused on the election. 2020 numbers do not include downloads and views of previous election

material, which has been an ongoing feature of website activity, and only includes material to mid-October.

To put this in context, this figure shows the overall website activity.

The 2016 June-July and September-October peaks coincide with the federal and ACT elections. We have no explanation for the late 2017 and mid 2018 activity. The later part of the 2019 activity covers that federal election. The September October 2020 peak is the ACT election.

For the past three elections and the 2020 elections, the number of candidates standing and candidate statements received are set out in this table:

Election	2016 Federal	2016 ACT	2019 Federal	2020 ACT
Candidates Standing	9	141	19	137
Statements received by CAPaD	unavailable	62	5	32
%age Candidates submitting a statement	unavailable	44%	26%	23%

Note Federal Elections only include candidates for the House of Representatives; no Senate candidates included.

2020 Election
During the 2020 election four groups were independently offering voters a way to find out more information about candidates. They were: the Elections ACT site, CAPaD's site, the ANU smartvote site and the VoteEasy site (no longer available).

Clearly, the fragmentation of candidate information across multiple sites and requests to candidates to produce multiple statements is inefficient and burdensome for both voters and candidates. Having one reference site is to be preferred.

Despite multiple sites, voters did use them. The spread of candidate information across sites was very uneven. The table below details the number and percentage of candidates who made a statement on each site. The VoteEasy site was the least used and Elections ACT the most. Smartvote was also well utilised.

	Yerrabi	Ginninderra	Kurrajong	M'bidgee	Brindabella	Totals	
Candidates	25	32	28	29	23	137	100%
CAPaD	6	5	11	7	3	32	23%
ElectionsACT	22	30	28	26	17	123	90%
Smartvote	18	21	25	21	20	105	77%
VoteEasy	1	2	4	2	4	13	9%

Voter use is less easy to measure but none-the-less indicates that voters are interested in information about candidates. The Smartvote site records 41,206 matches between candidate and voters up to 17/10/2020. The CAPaD election page over the six weeks leading up to 17/10/2020 received 6265 visitors and 8561 visits. Elections ACT and VoteEasy data are not available. Elections ACT estimated the eligible voter population for the 2020 election at 306,294.

Three conclusions are warranted from the 2016, 2019 and 2020 information presented here:
1. Voters are interested in finding out information about candidates themselves;
2. Candidates are keen to use the statements to communicate about themselves to voters; and
3. The diversity of avenues for candidates in the 2020 election diluted the response to CAPaD's statement exercise but was increased overall.

What do voters want to know?

We interviewed Canberrans during the 2018 and 2019 Southfest events, collected input from members and supporters, and interviewed 14 MLAs in the 9th Assembly (our report is available here). Reflecting on these inputs and collating this with other information we have developed a Statement of MLA and Citizen Expectations (appended) which set out the criteria for the roles and responsibilities for MLAs (transferrable to federal MPs) and community members.

Based on this evidence, MLAs are expected to:
1. Be knowledgeable about good governance, policy making and the roles conferred on them.
2. Be transparent about the considerations on which their decisions are based and willing to state when they are giving us facts or their opinions.
3. Support meaningful ways for community members to participate in deliberative policy making.
4. Commit to ensuring their own party sets out its platform so that the expected outcomes and strategies are clear, and the impacts can be monitored – this is fundamental for accountability.
5. Explain how they intend to vote on each piece of legislation, and why.
6. Assist the community to monitor the outcomes of policy – which is also fundamental for accountability.
7. Be open to review of their performance by their constituents.
8. Act with integrity, being aware of the influence of vested interests and commit to improving and maintaining systems of transparency and accountability.
9. Be open and honest about their own beliefs about democracy and the role of government, and be willing to have these contested.

These form the basis of what voters would want to know about candidates they might vote for, in additional to candidates personal or political party policy platform. Our Candidate Statement is obviously a much abbreviated version for the context of an election campaign.

Why the focus on good candidates?
Good government ensures better social and environmental outcomes. CAPaD asserts that the way to good government is strong democracy.

Government is strongly democratic when citizens get to participate through trusted representatives in the decisions that affect them. Trusted representatives are open and accountable for their decisions and actions. One practical way to ensure representatives are trustworthy is to know more about them as people and the skills, experience and attitudes they bring, before we elect them.

CAPaD argues this is as important as their policy platform.

We therefore argue that this information about candidates be provided to voters during the election campaign.

What does CAPaD recommend?
1. That Elections ACT continues to be responsible for collecting and publishing candidate statements as per the current legislation.
2. That the candidate statement process is rationalised, so candidates are required to provide only a single statement to reach all voters and voters have a single place to review information about candidates.
3. That the legislation is amended to require candidates to inform voters about:
   3.1. the skills they bring to the role of MLA
   3.2. how they will safeguard and strengthen good governance
   3.3. how they will involve their constituents in government policy development and decision making.
4. That there is a public information program to encourage voters to access the statements that candidates provide and encourage all candidates to submit comprehensive statements.
5. That Elections ACT be resourced adequately to carry out this additional role.

Addenda
2020 ACT election Candidate Statement
Statement of MLA and Citizen Expectations

CAPaD - *Awakening Democracy*

The Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy

www.canberra-alliance.org.au

Candidate Statement for the 2020 ACT Election

The Candidate Statement is to give voters information to guide their selection of candidates based on the candidate's ability to be an MLA and their commitment to strengthen the democratic fabric of the ACT.

My name is _____ and I am a candidate for the ACT Legislative Assembly in the electorate of

Brindabella / Ginninderra / Kurrajong / Murrumbidgee / Yerrabi . (*Cross out those not applicable*)

I am endorsed to represent the ALP / Canberra Liberals / Greens / Other_____ / Independent

These are my skills and experience for being an MLA. *(No more than 100 words in 10pt Arial font)*

Further, I have these skills and experiences that qualifies me for a role in the ministry. *(No more than 50 words in 10pt Arial font)*

If elected, this is how I plan to represent my constituents. *(No more than 100 words in 10pt Arial font)*

If elected, I will undertake these measures to promote good government and strengthen the responsiveness, accountability and transparency of government in the ACT. *(Up to 100 words, dot points, in 10pt Arial font)*

If elected, I will undertake these measures to promote and improve informed participation by my constituents in ACT policy development and decision making. *(Up to 50 words, dot points, in 10pt Arial font)*

Statement of Democratic Commitment

1. I will strictly abide by the ACT Legislative Assembly Standing Orders Code of Conduct for MLAs.

2. I will fully disclose and make public the sources and value of all political funding donations, contributions, gifts public and private towards my election campaign and political activity, within one month of receipt.

3. I will place the public interest (the welfare and wellbeing of the general population and the integrity of the planet) ahead of sectional, corporate, personal, religious or other interests.

Signed   **Date**

Please send a pdf copy of your statement to secretary@canberra-alliance.org.au for placement on the CAPaD website.
Authorised by Peter Tait, Secretary, Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy.

Statement of MLA and Citizen Expectations ᵥ₅

We live in a representative democracy, where we elect our political representatives to take decisions on our behalf about the laws that govern us and the expenditure of public funds. Those in the majority also determine who forms the government. But who exactly do these elected representatives actually represent: the constituents who voted for them; their constituency as a whole; the wider polity; the political party that put them forward for election; the less well-recognised interests which backed their election; or their own best judgment? Political theorists have argued about this for centuries and there's no simple answer.

With cynicism about the operation of liberal democracies around the world at an all-time high, the system as a whole is under threat. To protect it, we need to start spelling out what we expect of our elected representatives and playing an active role in ensuring that they live up to these expectations. To give in to cynicism is to abandon any chance of ensuring our democracy works for us. It is the responsibility of everyone within the system – representative and represented alike – to make the system work in the interests of the people as a whole, irrespective of their wealth or influence.

The Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy is calling for representatives who will, with integrity and transparency, truly represent the interests of the community they are elected to serve. We expect representatives to seek to understand and act in the interests of, and to explain and justify their decision to, their electors.

This Statement outlines our considered opinion of what the roles and responsibilities of the MLAs and of constituents are. The two sets of expectations form the basis for an effective working relationship between representatives and the community they represent.

We consider that our representatives should:
1. Be knowledgeable about good governance, policy making and the roles conferred on them.
2. Be transparent about the considerations on which their decisions are based and willing to state when they are giving us facts or their opinions.
3. Support meaningful ways for community members to engage in deliberative policy making.
4. Commit to ensuring their own party sets out its platform so that the expected outcomes and strategies are clear, and the impacts can be monitored – this is fundamental for accountability.
5. Explain how they intend to vote on each piece of legislation, and why.
6. Assist the community to monitor the outcomes of policy – which is also fundamental for accountability.
7. Be open to review of their performance by their constituents.
8. Act with integrity, aware of the influence of vested interests and commit to improving and maintaining systems of transparency and accountability.
9. Be open and honest about their own beliefs about democracy and the role of government, and be willing to have these contested.

We consider that as active and engaged citizens, we should:
1. Understand how policies and institutions impact on our lives, and those of others. (ie be policy and system literate).
2. Demand that policies be set out to show the proposed outcomes, the implementation strategies, the expected impacts and measurement strategies, so those can be assessed and monitored.
3. Work with others to set the standards for the way our representatives do their jobs.

4. Expect candidates standing for election to provide detailed information about their background, values and policy positions, and use that information to cast an informed vote.
5. Be informed about our democratic institutions and be prepared to promote and defend their role in protecting a healthy democracy.
6. Be prepared to be part of a system to scrutinise government action broadly and the actions of our representatives in particular.

The Canberra Alliance want to work with people across the ACT to further develop the content of both sets of expectations.