



Legislative Assembly for the
Australian Capital Territory

Standing Committee on the Integrity
Commission and Statutory Office
Holders

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the operation of the 2024 ACT Election and Electoral Act 1992

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Community starts here

ClubsACT



Submission to the Standing Committee on the Integrity Commission and Statutory Office Holders Inquiry into the operation of the 2024 ACT Election and the Electoral Act 1992

Executive Summary

This submission by ClubsACT recommends replacing the ACT's five multi-member Hare-Clark electorates with 35 single-member electorates/Districts (SMDs) and a 35-member Legislative Assembly. This reform would:

- strengthen local accountability (one MLA, one community) and sharpen focus on municipal functions;
- provide a clearer pathway to majority government when voters choose it, improving mandate clarity and policy certainty;
- simplify voting and reduce the risk of exhausted preferences;
- broaden the pipeline for high-quality, community-based candidates;
- enhance economic outcomes by giving each business precinct a single, accountable local advocate; and
- improve ministerial portfolio clarity, reduce overlap, and expand backbench capacity for scrutiny and consultation.
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The ACT Electoral Commissioner's Report on the 2024 ACT Election (Commissioner's Report), ACT Population Projections 2025–2065, and ABS estimated resident population (ERP) data indicate a growing, diversifying Territory. Enrolment in 2024 was approximately 313,156 with turnout around 87.5%, varying by district.

Under Hare-Clark, accountability is diffuse across five MLAs per electorate, ballot complexity is higher, and majority formation is structurally constrained. A 35-seat SMD model is democratically viable (the Northern Territory operates 25 single-member divisions at a smaller population) and party-neutral when paired with independent redistribution and tight enrolment tolerances.

Recommendations:

1. Legislate 35 single-member electorates and a 35-member Assembly.
2. Retain independent redistribution with tight tolerances and forward growth projections.
3. Align polling-place, early voting and electronic voting access consistently across all SMDs.
4. Simplify ballot papers and instructions.
5. Update funding and expenditure settings for SMD contests while maintaining transparency standards.
6. Formalise MLA obligations for local business engagement (biannual roundtables; annual local priorities reports).
7. Conduct a post-implementation review after the first SMD election covering participation, competitiveness, casework responsiveness, ministerial accountability and business outcomes.

Context and Rationale

The ACT currently elects 25 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) from five multi-member electorates using Hare-Clark proportional representation. While this supports pluralism, it increasingly struggles to meet the Territory's needs for clear local accountability and decisive governance in a growing and diversifying community.

- Population and growth: The ACT's ERP is approximately 483,767 (ABS, March 2025) and is projected to exceed 800,000 by 2065 (ACT Population Projections 2025–2065).
- Enrolment and turnout: The Commissioner's Report records 2024 enrolment of about 313,156 with turnout around 87.5%, with variation between central and outer districts.
- Administration and access: The Commissioner's Report highlights opportunities to improve voter engagement, polling-place planning, and the clarity of instructions and materials—areas where SMDs inherently simplify processes.

These dynamics support reform to a model that strengthens the representative link, clarifies responsibility for municipal services, and maintains electoral integrity.

Limitations of the Hare-Clark Model

- Majority formation: Proportional representation across small multi-member electorates makes majority outcomes less likely even when voters consolidate, blurring mandates and delaying policy implementation.
- Diffuse accountability: With five MLAs per electorate, responsibility for municipal issues (roads, paths, waste, amenity, local safety, planning bottlenecks) is spread, weakening incentives to resolve problems quickly.
- Complexity and exhaustion: Multi-member STV voting rules and longer preference chains increase cognitive load and the risk of informal or exhausted ballots, despite education efforts.
- Incumbency dynamics: Within-party competition and transfer patterns can entrench incumbents and deter high-quality non-incumbent candidates who have strong local profiles but limited ticket or machine support.

The Case for 35 Single-Member Electorates

- Clear accountability and municipal focus: One MLA per defined community provides a direct line of responsibility for local issues, aligning with the ACT's hybrid state-local responsibilities and the community's expectation of place-based problem-solving.
- Majority government when voters choose it: SMDs more reliably translate decisive public sentiment into stable governing mandates, improving policy certainty for long-horizon priorities (housing, infrastructure, health, climate adaptation).

- Stronger candidate pipeline: Local leaders—community advocates, small-business owners, and professionals—have a clearer, place-based pathway to election without navigating quotas or complex transfers.
- Simpler voting, fewer exhausted votes: Simpler ballots and instructions reduce errors and effort for voters, complementing the ACT's established electronic voting capability.
- Party-neutral competitiveness: With independent redistribution, equal-enrolment rules and transparent criteria, a 35-seat SMD map can be competitive for all parties and not favour any one in particular.

Democratic Viability and Interstate/International Comparisons

- Northern Territory benchmark: The NT elects 25 MLAs from single-member divisions at a smaller population scale, demonstrating viability and accessibility at modest sizes.
- ACT electorate scale: On current population and enrolment, 35 SMDs would create viable electorates comfortably within Australian norms for constituency service and representation. On current projections, each single-member electorate would contain around 14,700 residents and roughly 9,500 enrolled voters.
- International context: Westminster democracies (United Kingdom, Canada) and mixed systems (New Zealand MMP) retain single-member electorates for the strong constituency link and accountability they provide.

Participation, Voting Processes and Access

- Engagement and turnout: With turnout around 87.5% in 2024, there remains variation by district. SMDs' clearer contests and direct accountability can sustain or improve participation, especially in lower-turnout areas identified by the Commissioner's Report.
- Polling-place distribution: SMDs support better alignment of polling places and early/electronic voting access with local boundaries, improving convenience and reducing queue variability across electorates.
- Voter comprehension: SMDs simplify instructions and reduce preference complexity, supporting informed participation and lowering informality risks.

Municipal Focus and Candidate Incentives

- Alignment with ACT functions: The Territory's combined state-local role heightens expectations for swift, place-based action. SMDs align political accountability with service delivery footprints.
- Incentivising quality candidates: Removing the effective quota hurdle and intra-party ticket dynamics lowers barriers for credible local non-incumbents with deep community ties and professional expertise.

Economic Benefits: Localised Business Advocacy and Growth

SMDs enhance responsiveness to commercial and business interests by giving each precinct a clearly accountable local advocate.

- **Single point of contact:** Each MLA is the go-to representative for business precincts, industrial areas and town centres, creating a dependable channel for issues and opportunities.
- **Faster resolution of bottlenecks:** Local MPs can escalate planning, licensing and compliance delays, reduce time-to-investment and improve certainty for SMEs and major employers.
- **Structured engagement:** Mandate MLA-led business roundtables at least twice per year in each electorate, with published action lists, timelines and agency escalation protocols.
- **Targeted infrastructure and policy alignment:** Clear local mandates drive better alignment of transport, streetscape, digital connectivity and safety improvements that support trade and employment; MLAs can champion precinct-level initiatives (e.g., night-time economy, hospitality precinct enhancements).
- **Measurable outcomes:** Require annual electorate-level reporting on business satisfaction, casework turnaround, vacancy rates, footfall, and small-business formation, allowing performance benchmarking and responsive policy adjustments.

These measures improve investment confidence, precinct competitiveness and local jobs across the Territory.

A Larger Assembly: Portfolios, Accountability and Scrutiny

Moving to 35 Members enables a more effective ministry and stronger oversight.

- **Clearer portfolios with less overlap:** Additional capacity allows portfolios to be separated along logical lines (e.g., transport operations vs. infrastructure delivery; housing supply vs. planning approvals; skills vs. employment services), reducing duplication and confusion for stakeholders.
- **Sharper accountability:** Defined responsibilities make it easier for the Assembly, media and public to assess performance, and for Ministers to be held to account against clear metrics.
- **Stronger backbench and committees:** A larger non-executive cohort expands committee resourcing and expertise, supports deeper scrutiny of expenditure and legislation, and enhances community consultation and casework capacity.
- **Leadership pipeline:** A broader backbench develops future ministerial talent, supporting continuity and resilience in government.

Competitiveness and Fairness for All Parties

- Independent redistribution: Preserve and strengthen the ACT's independent redistribution framework with equal-enrolment tolerances, forward growth projections, and community-of-interest criteria (suburbs, town centres, transport links, service catchments).
- Transparency and review: Publish data and draft maps; enable community submissions and objections; ensure decisions are reviewable to guard against partisan advantage.
- Funding neutrality: Update expenditure caps and public funding to SMD contests while maintaining donation transparency, authorisation and truth-in-advertising rules.
- Post-implementation evaluation: After the first SMD election, review swing responsiveness, marginality distribution, turnout, informality, candidate diversity, and business/community satisfaction.

Benefits for ACT Licensed Clubs: Diversification and Land Development

ACT licensed clubs are anchor community institutions that fund sport, recreation, culture and local services. They are also navigating structural change—tightening gaming margins, rising operating costs, and changing member preferences—which makes diversification of income critical. Moving to 35 single-member electorates (SMDs) would materially improve the operating environment for clubs by creating clear, accountable local advocacy and more predictable pathways through planning and approvals. Key benefits include:

- One accountable local advocate
 - Each club would have a clearly identified MLA responsible for its local area—someone who can champion club priorities, broker multi-agency solutions, and escalate delays.
 - Regular MLA-led business roundtables would give clubs a standing forum to raise issues such as outdoor dining, parking, safety, late-night transport, event approvals and precinct activation.
- Faster, clearer planning and approvals for diversification
 - A larger Assembly enables sharper portfolio separation (planning approvals vs. strategic planning; housing vs. land supply; infrastructure delivery vs. transport operations). For clubs, this means fewer overlapping ministerial touchpoints and clearer responsibility for decisions.
 - With SMDs, local MLAs have stronger incentives to resolve practical blockages in:
 - Territory Plan interpretation and zone variations
 - Development Applications (DAs) and call-in risks
 - Lease variation charges and betterment assessments
 - Environmental and heritage referrals

- Utilities and access/traffic requirements
 - Clear escalation pathways reduce holding costs and project risk, improving the feasibility of non-gaming income projects.
- Support for land development on club-owned sites
 - Many clubs have under-utilised land (car parks, surplus verges or airspace) suitable for community-beneficial developments. SMDs help progress:
 - Build-to-Rent or mixed-use residential above club facilities
 - Seniors' living, supported accommodation and allied health hubs
 - Childcare, education, or training facilities integrated with club precincts
 - Community sport and recreation upgrades linked to modest commercial uses
 - Local MLAs can convene planning, TCCS, transport, utilities and economic development officials to align requirements early, lowering redesign cycles and DA resubmissions.
- Stronger social licence and place-based partnerships
 - Clubs' social dividends (junior sport, volunteer support, community grants) are more visible in smaller electorates. This strengthens the case for sensible planning outcomes and precinct improvements that deliver net community benefit.
 - Local representation encourages co-investment models (e.g., streetscape upgrades, active-travel links, public realm enhancements) that lift patronage and neighbourhood amenity.
- Precinct vitality and night-time economy
 - With one MLA accountable for each area, precinct-level initiatives—wayfinding, lighting and safety, outdoor trading, live-music facilitation—are easier to scope and deliver.
 - Clubs benefit from coordinated event calendars and transport scheduling (late services, rideshare bays), improving attendance and spend.
- Transparent, consistent regulatory engagement
 - Standardised early engagement protocols—pre-DA conferences, issue registers, decision timelines—can be embedded as part of the business roundtable framework, giving clubs clearer expectations and reducing uncertainty.
 - Local MLAs can monitor service standards (time to first response, assessment duration, conditions turnaround), creating feedback loops that improve regulator performance.
- Economic development and jobs
 - Diversification projects support local employment during construction and operations (hospitality, facilities management, allied health, childcare).
 - By reducing approval friction and holding costs, SMDs improve project viability thresholds, enabling more clubs to bring forward shovel-ready investments.

Practical measures to lock in these benefits:

- Formalise MLA-led precinct business roundtables twice a year in every electorate, with action lists, agency owners and timelines published.
- Establish a “Clubs Diversification Pathway” within Planning/Economic Development that offers:
 - early feasibility guidance on zoning, lease variation and betterment;
 - a single coordinated pre-lodgement meeting with all relevant agencies; and
 - a named case manager for complex, multi-stage proposals.
- Publish service standards for key milestones (pre-DA advice, DA completeness checks, statutory timeframes, condition-negotiation windows).
- Use local MLAs to facilitate neighbourhood consultation, capturing community benefit commitments (sporting facilities, open space, accessibility upgrades) that can be reflected in conditions or voluntary planning agreements.
- Track outcome metrics at the electorate level: number of club-led diversification DAs lodged/approved, median assessment times, capital invested, construction and ongoing jobs, community benefit contributions, and activation outcomes.

Why SMDs make the difference:

- In multi-member electorates, responsibility for precinct performance is diffuse. SMDs assign clear ownership for problem-solving and stewardship of local economic vitality.
- Smaller electorates increase visibility of clubs’ community role, strengthening social licence and support for pragmatic development that funds sustainable, diversified operations.
- Clearer ministerial portfolios in a larger Assembly reduce cross-over and finger-pointing, giving clubs a more navigable route from concept to delivery.

Outcome:

With one accountable MLA per locality and clearer ministerial lines, ACT licensed clubs can accelerate diversification—moving beyond gaming-dependent income into mixed-use, health, childcare, seniors’ living and housing partnerships—while enhancing community facilities. The result is a more resilient club sector, better neighbourhood amenities and stronger precinct economies.

Implementation and Transition

- Legislation: Amend the Electoral Act 1992 to provide for 35 SMDs and a 35-member Assembly.

- Redistribution: Use close-of-roll enrolment, ABS data and ACT growth projections; apply tight tolerances and community-of-interest principles.
- Polling and voting access: Align polling-place networks and standardise early/electronic voting availability across all SMDs.
- Voter education: Run a clear campaign on “your local MLA for your local area,” tailored to SMD ballots and instructions.
- Business engagement: Formalise MLA obligations for local business roundtables and annual priorities reporting, with cross-government escalation protocols.
- Evaluation: Commission an independent review after the first SMD election to inform refinements.

Recommendations

1. Adopt 35 single-member electorates for the ACT Legislative Assembly and legislate a 35-member Assembly.
2. Retain an independent redistribution process with equal-enrolment tolerances, growth projections and robust public consultation.
3. Align polling-place networks and ensure consistent early and electronic voting availability across all SMDs.
4. Simplify ballot papers and instructions to improve comprehension and reduce informality and exhaustion.
5. Update funding and expenditure settings for SMD contests; maintain transparency, authorisation and truth-in-advertising provisions.
6. Formalise MLA business-engagement obligations: at least two roundtables per year and an annual local priorities report with measurable outcomes.
7. Conduct a post-implementation review after the first SMD election covering participation, competitiveness, ministerial accountability, casework responsiveness and business stakeholder satisfaction.

Conclusion

The ACT’s growth, hybrid responsibilities and diverse local communities call for clearer accountability and stronger place-based representation. Moving to 35 single-member electorates will strengthen the link between representatives and communities, simplify voting, enable majority government when voters choose it, broaden the candidate pipeline, and improve responsiveness to business needs. With independent redistribution and robust integrity settings, the reform will be fair, competitive and future-ready.



References

- ACT Electoral Commission, Report on the 2024 ACT Election (Commissioner's Report).
- ACT Government, ACT Population Projections 2025–2065.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Estimated Resident Population, Australian Capital Territory, March 2025.

Kind regards

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Annex A: Nominal electorate size for 35 single-member divisions at the next ACT election (2028)

Purpose

- Provide a clear estimate of the average population and enrolled-electors counts per single-member electorate (SMD) if the ACT adopts 35 SMDs for the 2028 election.

Data sources

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Estimated Resident Population (ERP), ACT: March 2025 baseline.
- ACT Government, Population Projections (medium series), used to frame a plausible 2028 ERP range.
- ACT Electoral Commission (2024): close-of-roll enrolment and turnout (to infer enrolment share of ERP).

Key assumptions

- Timing: Next general election due in 2028.
- ERP growth: 2028 ACT ERP range of 505,000–525,000 residents (central case ~515,000), consistent with recent ABS growth and ACT projections.
- Enrolment ratio: Enrolled electors $\approx$ 64–65% of ERP (anchored to 2024: enrolment 313,156 versus ERP just under 485,000).
- Seat count: 35 single-member electorates.

Calculations

- Population per SMD = $\text{ERP} / 35$
 - Low ERP (505,000): $505,000 / 35 \approx 14,430$ residents per SMD
 - Central ERP (515,000): $515,000 / 35 \approx 14,715$ residents per SMD
 - High ERP (525,000): $525,000 / 35 = 15,000$ residents per SMD
- Enrolment per SMD = $\text{Total enrolled electors} / 35$
 - Low enrolment ($\approx 327,000$; 64.8% of 505,000): $327,000 / 35 \approx 9,345$ electors per SMD
 - Central enrolment ($\approx 333,000$; 64.7% of 515,000): $333,000 / 35 \approx 9,515$ electors per SMD
 - High enrolment ($\approx 340,000$; 64.8% of 525,000): $340,000 / 35 \approx 9,715$ electors per SMD.