



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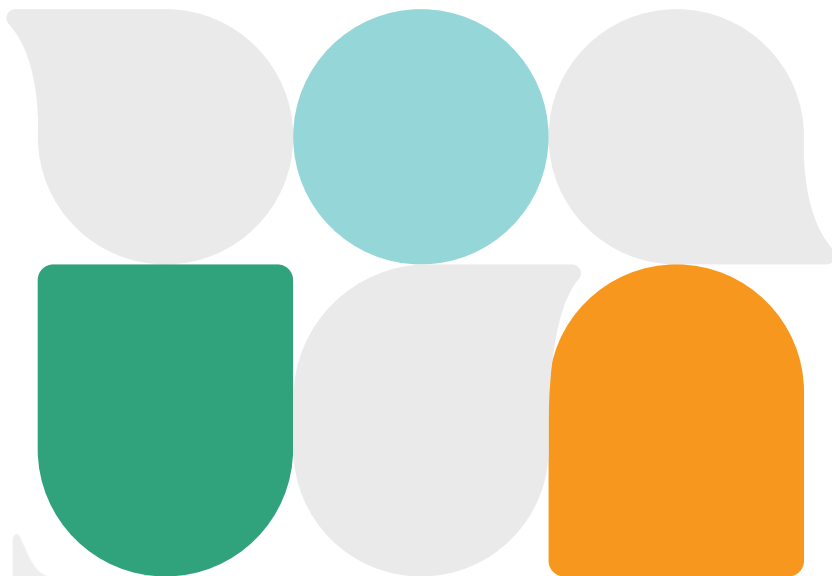
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Submission to the Standing Committee on the Integrity Commission and Statutory Office Holders inquiry into the operation of the 2024 ACT Election and the Electoral Act 1992



We are the peak body for parent associations, representing over 60,000 parents in ACT public schools.
Authorised by Veronica Elliott for ACT Parents.

We acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands where we live, work and learn, and pay our respects to elders
past, present, and future.

Introduction

ACT Parents is a non-profit, non-government organisation representing the interests of parents and carers across ACT public schools. Our goals are to foster a high-quality public education system, support our member parent and citizen associations (P&Cs), and represent parent voices in policy discussions.

ACT Parents represents over 80 ACT public school P&Cs. Elections offer these associations valuable opportunities to fundraise, through sausage sizzles, cake stalls, and community events and help create a welcoming, civic-minded atmosphere at school-based polling places.

Following the 2024 ACT Election, we surveyed our members to understand their experiences. Alongside feedback on fundraising, we asked for comments on the conduct of polling and voter experience. By being at the polling places throughout the day our P&C members are well placed to provide practical insights.

Feedback received from our member P&Cs indicates that interactions with Elections ACT staff on polling day were, overall, very positive. Volunteers appreciated the professionalism and approachability of the on-site officials. One member described the team at their school as “an excellent group,” while another noted, “The election team at our school were fantastic, super friendly.” A third added, “It was great to build rapport with the Elections ACT staff throughout the day and offer sausages etc. to help keep them fuelled.”

We acknowledge that polling place locations change from election to election. However, we were disappointed to see a notable reduction in public school-based booths in 2024. This impacted not only fundraising opportunities for school P&Cs, but also the voting experience, particularly for older and less tech-savvy community members.

Should the Committee require further information, please contact us at (02) 6241 5759 or contact@actparents.org.au.

Discussion

This submission focuses on three specific Terms of Reference:

- 1 The report of the ACT Electoral Commissioner into the 2024 ACT Election;
- 2(b) Number and location of ordinary polling places; and
- 4(d) Restrictions on campaigning activities outside polling places.

These areas reflect where our member P&Cs have direct, on-the-ground experience and can provide informed feedback. While ACT Parents recognises the broader scope of the Inquiry, we have limited our comments to matters where our members' insights are most relevant. We have also provided feedback on issues related to voter accessibility as our members provided some observations that we feel should be addressed.

Term of Reference (1): The report of the ACT Electoral Commissioner into the 2024 ACT Election

ACT Parents notes that on page 25 of the Commissioner's report, a list of stakeholders in the 2024 ACT Election is provided. While public schools are presumably included under "other ACT Directorates," we believe it is important that schools, as polling venues, are explicitly recognised as key stakeholders in their own right.

Public schools play a vital role in the conduct of elections, not just as physical locations but as active community hubs. P&Cs support voter engagement by providing welcoming, accessible environments and facilitating fundraising activities that contribute to the civic atmosphere of the day. The omission of schools from the stakeholder list may have been unintentional, but we believe it reflects a broader issue: the lack of direct and meaningful consultation with school communities regarding polling place selection and set-up. Better engagement with schools, both in the lead-up to and on election day, would improve logistical planning, accessibility, and the overall voter experience.

Term of Reference 2(b): Number and location of ordinary polling places

Importance of School-Based Polling Places

For many public-school communities, polling days provide a rare and valuable opportunity to raise funds through a range of parent-run activities, such as:

- Election day BBQs and cake stalls
- Plant and book sales
- Community mini-fetes and school open days

These initiatives not only raise essential funds to supplement public school resources but also strengthen community cohesion and support school pride and engagement.

In the past, public schools have commonly served as well-located, accessible polling booths. This longstanding arrangement has created a sense of community expectation that these schools will be available for local voting. These venues are trusted, accessible, and familiar to local communities. Their removal caused confusion and inconvenience for many voters, especially older people.

Members reported:

- Elderly voters arriving at their usual booth to find it closed or relocated.
- Poor signage and over-reliance on QR codes, which some voters could not use.
- Volunteers being diverted from fundraising tasks to assist distressed or disoriented voters.

One member shared:

"Many elderly people had already attempted to vote at their regular polling place, only to find it was not in operation – and were confronted by a sign with a QR code... By the time they arrived at our polling place, they were out of breath, distressed and angry."

Another noted:

“Please don’t take polling places away from schools. They are such a great way to engage with the school and surrounding community.”

Although ACT Parents acknowledges that polling places can change from election to election it would be helpful if consultation with host schools and their communities occurred early. Some P&Cs use election days to run significant community fundraising events that require extensive planning. There were several P&Cs that had planned events, only to find out that they weren’t a polling place. Early advice on this could have reduced the frustration of affected P&Cs.

Concerns Regarding 2024 Election Polling Locations

We were disappointed to observe that in the 2024 ACT election:

- The number of public-school polling places was significantly reduced compared to previous elections.
- In several instances, private schools were used as polling places over nearby public schools.

These changes had a number of consequences:

- Frustrated voters: Members of the public arrived at former polling venues only to find they were no longer operating. This created confusion, especially among long-time local voters who were unaware of the changes.
- Lost fundraising opportunities: Many P&Cs were unable to hold election day stalls due to the absence of polling places at their school sites. For some schools, this is a significant loss of income.

We acknowledge that increased pre-polling and early voting locations have altered the overall voting landscape. However, we believe this makes it even more important to maintain a strong network of accessible, community-based polling places on election day, particularly in public schools, which are often central to local communities.

Term of Reference 4(d): Restrictions on campaigning outside polling places

ACT Parents received mixed feedback on the current restrictions preventing campaigners from operating close to polling places.

Some P&Cs appreciated the calmer environment, which improved queue management and allowed stalls to operate more smoothly. Others, however, noted that this restriction contributed to an increased burden on volunteers. Without campaign representatives on site, some voters turned to P&C volunteers with questions about where to get how to vote materials. This resulted in confusion for some voters and added unexpected responsibilities for P&C volunteers who were there in a non-political capacity.

Members also raised accessibility concerns, voters with mobility issues found it difficult to locate campaigners when they were set up far from entrances.

Feedback included:

“We also enjoyed not having the party teams so close... That made it easier for us to manage our queues, and people being able to access us.”

“This was the first time the spruikers weren’t allowed near the polling station. We missed them!!”

ACT Parents supports a balanced approach that allows voters to access campaign materials easily if they choose, while keeping entrances clear and accessible.

Other Issue: Accessibility

Some P&C associations raised concerns about inadequate accessibility arrangements at polling sites. In one case, the school’s main carpark, which included designated disability parking, remained locked throughout the day. As a result, individuals with mobility impairments were forced to park further away and walk down a steep staircase to access the polling booth. An alternative accessible ramp was available but not signposted or promoted.

Additionally, at some schools there was no directional signage provided by Elections ACT to guide voters to the polling entrance. Some parent volunteers had to spend significant time assisting elderly and mobility-impaired voters, some of whom were visibly distressed by the lack of access and information. These accessibility failures not only created an undignified experience for affected voters but also placed significant pressure on school-based volunteers to fill the gaps left by inadequate site planning.

Older voters also struggled with accessing information online about the location of polling places. The use of signs with QR codes posted on school fences to advise of the polling booth locations may seem like the modern way to engage, however it proved inaccessible for a number of older voters, especially those with older mobile phones or no personal technology.

Recommendations

1. Reinstate the number of public-school polling places, recognising their value as community hubs and fundraising venues.
2. Prioritise public schools over private schools as polling venues where both are available and suitable.
3. Engage early with host schools to support planning for polling-day events.
4. Ensure all polling places have adequate and clearly marked disabled access, and that accessible entrances are opened and clearly signposted.
5. Provide clear and visible signage directing voters to polling entrances, with printed alternatives to QR code-based redirections.
6. Review the implementation of the 100-metre campaigning restriction to strike a balance between reducing crowding and ensuring access to voter information.

Conclusion

School-based polling places play an important role in ACT elections. They are familiar, accessible, and foster a strong sense of community engagement. ACT Parents urges the Committee to ensure these venues remain central to future elections.

With practical improvements to signage, accessibility planning, and campaign activity layout, Elections ACT can enhance the voting experience while preserving the unique community role that school venues and their P&Cs provide.

ACT Parents thanks the Committee for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and would welcome the opportunity to provide further feedback or appear at a hearing.