

Level 3 Ross House

247-251 Flinders Lane

Melbourne Victoria 3000

Telephone: 03 9654 1400

Toll Free: 1800 033 660

Fax: 03 9650 3200

Email: bca@bca.org.au

Website: www.bca.org.au

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Blind Citizens Australia

# Submission to Inquiry of All Aspects of the Federal Election

**16th September 2019**

**To:**

Committee Secretary

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

PO Box 6021

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

Phone: +61 2 6277 2374

Fax: +61 2 6277 4773

Email: [em@aph.gov.au](mailto:em@aph.gov.au)

**Contact:**

Jane Britt

Policy Officer

Blind Citizens Australia

Phone: (03) 9654 1400

Email: [jane.britt@bca.org.au](mailto:jane.britt@bca.org.au)

Table of Contents

[Submission to Inquiry of All Aspects of the Federal Election 1](#_Toc19105714)

[Background 1](#_Toc19105715)

[Context 2](#_Toc19105716)

[Current Accessible Voting Options 2](#_Toc19105717)

[Feedback from the Federal Election 3](#_Toc19105718)

[Recommendations 6](#_Toc19105719)

Blind Citizens Australia is making a submission to the Inquiry into All Aspects of the Federal Election on 18th May 2019, focussing on the aspects of accessibility, independence, verifiability and secrecy of the telephone voting system used for people who are blind or vision impaired to cast their votes.

## Background

Blind Citizens Australia has been involved on an ongoing basis in advocating for an accessible and fully independent system for voting in Australian federal and state elections. Our position is based on extensive feedback and consultation within the sector and we believe that a system should be implemented which allows people with disability to exercise their democratic right of citizenship in voting in elections in a 100% secret, independent and verifiable system which is based on the iVote system used in both NSW and WA elections.

iVote provides voters with an option of telephone (with an automated key prompt system) and internet voting, and is available outside of the polling booth. iVote should be used in conjunction with accessibility methods such as the provision of voting information and ballot papers in the voter’s preferred format.

## Context

Article 4 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, imposes an obligation on governments “To adopt all appropriate legislative, administrative and other measures for the implementation of the rights recognized in the Convention; including the right to participate fully in political and public life.”

The adoption of remote voting that has been implemented in Australia has already significantly increased the participation of people who are blind or vision impaired in the democratic process at the state and federal level.

## Current Accessible Voting Options

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) provides an official guide to the federal election, which is sent to all Australian voters soon after an election is called. It provides information on when and where to vote, assistance available at polling places and how to vote correctly. The lists of candidates for the federal election will also be available once the candidates have been announced. The AEC produces the guide and candidate lists in accessible formats, including braille, audio and large print. Some of the formats will be available from the AEC’s webpage, or can be ordered through the AEC when the election, is announced.

Other voting options include:

* Postal voting
* Assistance to vote at a polling place – assistance can be sought by a polling officer, or can be provided by a friend or family member
* Wheelchair accessible polling places
* Telephone voting

Further information on voting accessibility is available at: <https://www.aec.gov.au/Voting/people-with-disability.htm>

Telephone voting for the Federal Election uses human operators to take the person’s vote over the phone. The registration and voting process, using registration numbers connected to the voter’s chosen PIN, is such that the voter is not identifiable by the operator. This voting system is generally available in the pre-polling time period, as well as on election day. This system was used for the Federal Election held on Saturday, 18th May 2019.

## Feedback from the Federal Election

On Saturday 18th May, 2019, the Australian federal election was held. The option of telephone voting was used for citizens who were unable to access polling booths and the format of the physical materials used in voting.

Blind Citizens Australia engaged in consultations with members after the election to ascertain their experiences of the voting system and the accessibility of it. 11 BCA members provided feedback.

Out of the 11 members, 9 used the telephone voting system. The remaining 2 members had different reasons for not using it.

One member did not trust the process of the telephone voting system, with the uncertainty that the operator would actually follow the instructions they provided. This member voted at a polling booth using a magnifier to cast their vote, and their choice to use a magnifier meant it took longer leading to the frustration of the booth organisers and other voters about the time they took to cast their vote and clear the booth.

The other member was unaware of the telephone voting option and instead attended a polling booth to cast a vote. They requested AEC staff assistance to complete their vote, placing trust in the staff member to correctly mark their ballot paper according to their preferences. Therefore, they felt their voting experience was not secret, independent or verifiable and noted that their voting experience was stressful. It was repeatedly noted that it would be better to be able to cast a vote without having to rely on another person to input preferences.

The feedback received emphasised that although telephone voting was accessible, it was neither independent or secret. Members canvassed alternate options like online or automated telephone voting instead. The primary preference was for an electronic voting system

Specifically, despite members reporting that telephone voting issues noted about the telephone voting system were:

* Despite the telephone voting system being accessible and verifiable with staff acting in a courteous manner, it was **not independent nor secret;** someone accessing telephone voting is dependent upon the trust of two strangers receiving their voting preferences and marking them accordingly on ballot papers.
* Polling booths are often physically inaccessible therefore telephone voting was necessary despite not being fully independent or secret.
* Lack of accessible format for the list of candidates in this election, where previously, theyhad access to a Braille list.

BCA received numerous suggestions to improve the voting process:

* In the instance of calling to register for voting, when a person requests the code to be received via text message, the text should be generated in real-time to the request, with a telephone transfer to another operator occurring to allow the person to cast their vote at the same time.
* Operators have access to ‘how to vote’ cards and a person who has registered to telephone vote could simply instruct the operator to vote in accordance with the ‘how to vote’ card for a particular political party in the House of Representativeswhich would mean less time would be taken up by making a call. The person would simply indicate their preference for the Senate afterwards as per usual.
* The phone voting system would be improved by having preferences read back by a second individual to verify that instructions were correctly entered.

Feedback also canvassed for alternate options to telephone voting like electronic voting, automated telephone voting or other options:

* Repeated requests for an online voting option like the one used in the NSW election would be better than the telephone voting used in the Federal Election. This would also give the ability to easily review candidates in the upper house.
* An automated telephone system would alleviate the issue of having to disclose voting preferences to strangers and trusting that they will appropriately mark these preferences, by allowing for less human intervention through the key pad or similar being used to make selections.
* A specific booth could be set-up for people who are blind or vision-impaired at a blindness service provider location with accessible equipment available for people to independently cast their vote. Electronic Voting, known in some states as VoteAssist, or VI Vote, is available via a computer system to allow people who are blind or vision impaired to be able to cast their vote independently.This provides an electronic option of navigating the ballot paper, selecting candidates using a key pad. Audio prompts guide the elector through the voting process, via headphones. The completed ballot paper is printed on-site which the voter places into an envelope, then in the ballot box situated next to the computer. The system is stand-alone, and not connected to the internet. This option is available in some State Elections.

Additional feedback was received around preparing to vote, with the issue of a lack of accessible format options for ‘how to vote’ cards, which primarily impacted the ability to follow the changes in the voting process for the Senate.

## Recommendations

1. BCA recommends the implementation of an independent, secret, verifiable and accessible remote voting option via phone or internet (iVote) similar to the systems used in NSW and WA for state elections.

2. A secondary measure would be the implementation of an automated telephone voting option whereby users can select their own voting preferences via the keypad or by verbally indicating the numbering for preferences to an automated computer system.