Digital technology, the electoral system and the
Parliament: a quick guide

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Background
This Quick Guide provides brief background information about digital technology in relation to the electoral system, the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), and the Parliament.

Electoral system: electronic voting
Official investigations into electronic voting by Australian electoral commissions and parliaments have generally been less than enthusiastic about embracing large-scale electronic voting. There is a clear preference for reserving its use for those voters who are not otherwise able to vote, such as those who have a vision impairment or who are interstate or overseas.

In 2013 the Electoral Council of Australia and New Zealand (ECANZ), a forum for Australian and New Zealand electoral commissions, published a commissioned report on internet voting in Australian election systems. The report noted that internet voting for public elections remained rare and that there was no real need for Australia to rush to such a fundamental change in the electoral process. It noted that any moves towards internet voting would require robust risk assessment and strong and informed public consensus in favour of the change. The report recommended an initial focus on voters who would not otherwise be able to vote, or cannot vote personally and in secret, such as voters with a severe vision impairment.

In 2015 the Victorian Legislative Assembly referred electronic voting to the Victorian Parliament’s Electoral Matters Committee for inquiry. The Committee’s May 2017 report provided a comprehensive overview of electronic voting. The Committee gave in-principle support to a system of remote voting at Victorian state elections, but only for a limited category of voters, such as those who are blind or have low vision, and overseas or interstate electors. The report also recommended other reforms, such as electronic ballot paper scanning and electoral roll mark-off.

Despite the relative rarity of electronic voting in Australian elections, Australia actually has considerable experience with electronic voting. Electronic voting has been used in ACT elections since 2001. Electronic voting is available only in pre-poll voting centres from three weeks before
polling day, and at some polling places on election day. Remote voting is not supported; votes are not taken or transmitted over the Internet.

iVote is a remote internet voting system used in elections in NSW and Western Australia. In 2017 the NSW Electoral Commission conducted an inquiry into whether iVote is still appropriate for NSW elections. One of the report’s recommendations was that ‘electoral commissions in Australia should jointly develop a national platform for internet voting that could be jointly owned and maintained’. Many of the other recommendations related to the security and risk management processes for internet voting, in particular that the security of the system be thoroughly tested and understood by the electoral commission and the government.

In its report into the 2016 federal election, the Commonwealth Parliament’s Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) argued against the adoption of large-scale electronic voting, although the Committee noted that it could be beneficial for certain groups of voters such as those with physical or mobility impairments. The JSCEM also produced an interim report on electronic voting as part of its inquiry into the 2013 federal election. The recommendations of the report focused on electronic roll-mark-off and scanning of ballot papers.

The procurement and use of services for the 2016 federal election, particularly the vote scanning process used to count the votes for the new Senate voting system, was the subject of a 2018 Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) report. The ANAO found that the procurement of the Senate ballot paper scanning services did not constitute value for money, and that the AEC accepted IT security risks above its usual tolerance. The AEC, in response, argued that it was given only three months to implement the most significant reforms to Australia’s electoral system in 30 years, and that while the AEC was aware of the consequences of failing to implement the reforms, the system that it put in place worked well.

**Australian Electoral Commission: election systems modernisation**

Through the Public Service Modernisation Fund, the 2017–18 Budget allocated the AEC funding of $1.3 million over the forward estimates to improve internal coordination, communication and capabilities.

In October 2018 the AEC issued a Request for Information (RFI) as a preliminary step towards procurement to support the design and delivery of an Election Systems Modernisation program. The RFI documentation was reported to have stated that ‘the vision for Election Systems modernisation is to create an Integrated Roll and Election Management System (IREMS). The new IREMS will replace the AEC legacy systems’. The Electoral Commissioner is reported to have stated that ‘the overhaul was not driven by any intention to introduce electronic voting’.

It has been reported that the AEC will establish ‘a short-term, event based security monitoring of internal AEC systems, via the provision of a 24x7 Security Operations Centre (SOC) … until the end of the 2019 Federal Election’. An Australian academic has warned of ‘potential Russian state-sponsored cyber interference in the forthcoming election’.

**Parliament House: cybersecurity**

In the 2018–19 Budget, the Department of Parliamentary Services was allocated ‘$9.0 million over four years from 2018–19 (including $0.3 million in capital funding in 2018–19)’ to establish a cybersecurity operations centre for the parliamentary computing network, and $0.3 million was allocated to the four largest parliamentary political parties ‘to improve the security of voter information held by those parties’. In February 2019, there was a malicious intrusion into the Parliament House computer network, and the networks of some political parties were also affected.
House of Representatives: electronic voting for divisions

In May 2018 the Leader of the House, Christopher Pyne, noted that, according to the World e-Parliament Report 2016 published by the Inter-Parliamentary Union, ‘67% of respondent Parliaments use some form of IT system to support voting in the plenary chamber’, and:

In April 2016, the bi-partisan House of Representatives Standing Committee on Procedure in its report Division Required? recommended that electronic voting be implemented in the House of Representatives.

Mr Pyne stated that electronic voting would be operational in the House of Representatives in 2019 and ‘will reduce significantly the time required for each vote in the chamber’. The December 2018 Mid-Year Economic and Fiscal Outlook (MYEFO) statement confirmed funding for the project:

The Government will provide up to $4.5 million over four years from 2018-19 (including $2.2 million in capital funding in 2018-19) to the Department of Parliamentary Services to provide electronic voting for divisions in the House of Representatives Chamber [and] funding for this measure has already been provided for by the Government.

It was reported in December 2018 that the system would use a ‘highly secure phone app’ to allow voting from within the chamber, with the time per vote reduced from six minutes to one minute. Labor noted that it had not been consulted by the Government on the plan, with Labor’s Manager of Opposition Business, Tony Burke, reportedly stating that he ‘can’t imagine Labor supporting changes like this’.

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