Services to registered political parties and candidates
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Briefings to registered political parties

At the end of April 1999, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) conducted briefing sessions for registered political parties (RPPs) on the State election process. The sessions provided information on the VEC’s preparations for the State election, the role of returning officers, postal voting arrangements, nominations procedures, candidates’ electoral expenses, the registration of how-to-vote cards, voter information through advertising and the VEC’s website, and complaints procedures.

Those attending were also provided with maps showing the location of returning officers’ offices, and lists of polling places, special hospitals and postal voting locations.

An information kit on the State election was also provided at the briefing sessions. Copies of this kit had previously been posted to all Members of Parliament and registered political parties.

The sessions were well attended by representatives from the majority of registered political parties.

The VEC’s returning officers

As at the 1996 Victorian State election, the VEC appointed fifty-four returning officers to conduct the 1999 State election.

These fifty-four returning officers conducted the election for eighty-eight members of the Legislative Assembly, twenty-two members of the Legislative Council, as well as three additional members of the Legislative Council where simultaneous by-elections were held.

Prior to the 1996 State election, a different returning officer was allocated responsibility for each of the State’s electorates. The reduction in the number of returning officers conducting elections has proved to be an efficient and effective innovation in Victoria’s electoral practice.

Appendix 1 lists the returning officers with responsibility for each of the elections being conducted.

In the period prior to an election, returning officers establish offices and employ staff to facilitate the smooth running of the election for their electorates. They issue postal votes, receive candidates’ nominations and organise the draw for the order of the candidates’ names on the ballot papers, register how-to-vote cards, and organise staff and polling places for election day. On election day, the returning officer is responsible for the conduct of the election and the counting of votes for those electorates for which he/she has responsibility.

Support for the nominations process

The VEC advertised for nominations prominently in all daily newspapers throughout Victoria on the day after the State election was announced.

Returning officers provided prospective candidates with a candidate’s kit that included:

- the appropriate District or Province nomination form;
- a How-to-Vote Card Declaration form;
- a Candidate’s Handbook;
- a Guide to Scrutineers at State Elections leaflet;
- a Registration of How-to-Vote Cards in State Elections leaflet;
- a list of polling places for the relevant District or Province;
• a District or Province fact sheet;
• the returning officer’s contact details;
• key election dates; and
• details on the number of issuing points at each polling place in the District or Province and an estimate of the number of votes likely.

Returning officers offered to meet with each candidate as soon as possible after the acceptance of the candidate’s nomination in order to outline the election process and clarify any matters.

Registered political parties were given the opportunity to submit details of their nominations in bulk, on disk, to be loaded directly into the VEC’s election management system. Three political parties took advantage of this facility.

Registered political parties submitted 319 nominations and 76 nominations were received from independent candidates, making a total of 395 candidates for the election (including candidates in the Frankston East supplementary election). In addition, eleven candidates stood for the three Province by-elections held simultaneously with the 1999 State election.

The registration of how-to-vote cards

Registered how-to-vote (HTV) cards are the only form of printed electoral material that can be lawfully handed out, distributed or otherwise made available within 400 metres of a polling place on election day.

The Constitution Act Amendment Act 1958 makes provision for persons or organisations to register their HTV cards with the returning officer for the electorate in which they wish to distribute HTV cards. Alternatively, the legislation enables registered political parties to apply directly to the Electoral Commissioner to have their HTV cards registered.

Information about the registration of HTV cards was provided to:
• registered political parties at briefings held prior to the State election; and
• candidates by returning officers directly and in the candidate’s kit.

The key dates for the registration of HTV cards at the 1999 State election were:
• submission to returning officers: 6 September to 12 noon, 9 September 1999; and
• submissions by registered political parties to the Electoral Commissioner: 4 September to 12 noon, 11 September 1999.

At the 1999 State election, 575 HTV cards were registered.

Provision of electoral rolls to candidates

Each candidate in the 1999 State election was provided with a copy of the electoral roll for the relevant electorate on floppy disk. Information and software were provided to make the file suitable for use in a mail merge process.

Provision of election results to parliamentary political parties

The VEC provided the three parliamentary political parties with computer software to enable them to view primary and two-candidate-preferred results for each electorate as they were entered into the election management system at returning officers’ offices during the count. This included results recorded on election night as well as absent, postal and pre-poll results recorded in the nine days following election day.
Candidates’ expenses

The return of candidates’ expenses at a State election is governed by Division 19 of Part V of The Constitution Act Amendment Act 1958.

The maximum amount which candidates may lawfully spend for election to the Legislative Assembly or the Legislative Council is $5,000. This limit relates only to expenditure incurred by the candidate. There is no limit on expenditure by persons or organisations on a candidate’s behalf.

As at 1 April 2000, 392 of the 406 candidates had lodged the required material. All of these logged expenditures within the prescribed limit. The remaining 14 candidates have been contacted regarding their obligations and prosecution procedures for non-compliance have commenced.
The VEC’s performance in providing services to registered political parties and candidates

The VEC engaged ACNielsen to conduct a survey of registered political parties and candidates regarding the services provided and the VEC’s performance at the State election.

Survey of parliamentary political parties

ACNielsen conducted a survey of the three parliamentary political parties: the Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party and the National Party. Interviews took place on 16 February 2000.

The survey showed that the three parliamentary political parties regarded the overall performance of the VEC as being of a high standard.

Other results of the survey are summarised below:

• all three parties were highly satisfied with the provision of information prior to the State election. The parties felt that access to the Commissioner and staff was high, questions were answered quickly, clearly and comprehensively, and suggestions were fully considered;
• two of the parties would like to see improvements in the process of electronic lodgement of candidates’ nominations, whereas one party preferred the paper based system of nominating;
• all three parties were satisfied with the registration of how-to-vote card procedure, and felt that access and responsiveness to concerns was excellent; and
• all three parties felt that the rules for the distribution of how-to-vote cards for voting at special hospitals were problematic.

The VEC did not receive any formal complaints from registered political parties about its performance during or after the election.

Survey of candidates

ACNielsen conducted a telephone survey of a random sample of 58 candidates contesting the State election. The sample was selected from candidates for the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council, and from candidates in urban, regional and rural areas.

The sample also included successful and unsuccessful candidates. Interviews took place from 29 October until 2 November 1999.

The survey showed that nearly all candidates (95 per cent) were, overall, either satisfied or very satisfied with the way the VEC managed the State election.

Other results of the survey of candidates are summarised below:

• 84 per cent were either satisfied or very satisfied with the Candidate’s Handbook;
• satisfaction with the performance of returning officers was very high, with 97 per cent rating the returning officer helpful at all times, and 95 per cent rating the returning officer as impartial at all times;
• 85 per cent had seen or heard electoral advertising prior to the election, with the highest awareness (92 per cent) in non-metropolitan areas;
• newspaper advertising was considered more effective (84 per cent) than television (73 per cent) or radio (65 per cent);
• 72 per cent were either satisfied or very satisfied with the efficiency of the pre-poll voting service;
• 60 per cent were satisfied with the VEC’s hospital and aged care voting services, with 86 per cent of candidates satisfied or very satisfied with the helpfulness of staff;
• 88 per cent considered that polling booths were located conveniently or very conveniently;
• 83 per cent were satisfied with or very satisfied with the processes involved in the counting of votes; and
• 72 per cent were satisfied or very satisfied with the communication of results once votes were counted.

The VEC did not receive any formal complaints about the performance of its returning officers during or after the election. (One complaint about the action of a returning officer in withdrawing a candidate’s how-to-vote card was later withdrawn. See the following section: Complaints by candidates about the VEC’s conduct of the State election.)
Complaints about candidates

During the course of the State election, the VEC received a total of 31 complaints against persons or organisations. Of these, 21 were about candidates; four about organisations; and six about the media. This is comparable to the number of such complaints received during the 1996 State election (33 complaints). Of the 21 complaints received about candidates, five were in relation to a letter sent to voters by the (then) Premier, the Hon Jeff Kennett, MP. The VEC replied advising that the Premier’s letters did not breach provisions of the Constitution Act Amendment Act 1958. Of the remaining 16 letters of complaint about the actions of candidates, five were in relation to a letter sent to voters by the (then) Premier, the Hon Jeff Kennett, MP. The VEC replied advising that the Premier’s letters did not breach provisions of the Constitution Act Amendment Act 1958. Of the remaining 16 letters of complaint about the actions of candidates, a total of seven resulted in actions by the VEC. One complaint regarding an allegation of bribery was referred to the Police for investigation. No prosecutions resulted.

Complaints by candidates about the VEC’s conduct of the State election

The number of complaints received about the VEC’s conduct of the election is a ‘litmus test’ of the VEC’s performance.

A total of four complaints were received from candidates or their supporters regarding the VEC’s conduct of the 1999 State election (compared with 11 at the 1996 State election).

Of these complaints, one resulted in the initiation of an appeal to the Court of Disputed Returns. On 8 November 1999, Mr Malcolm McClure, a candidate for Melbourne North Province, complained about the actions of the returning officer in having his how-to-vote card withdrawn for a period of time on election day. This, he alleged, prevented him from achieving 4 per cent of the first-preference votes and caused him to lose his deposit. The Electoral Commissioner dismissed Mr McClure’s claim for a refund of his deposit, and Mr McClure initiated an appeal to the Court of Disputed Returns, which he later withdrew.