Information services to the media
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Information kit

The Information Kit for the 1999/2000 Victorian State Election was prepared during 1998/99 to assist the media in providing Victorians with accurate and timely electoral information.

The kit was distributed widely to media organisations, registered political parties, members of Parliament and other interested persons during June 1999.

The revised kit comprised:

• status reports including a list of current members of the Legislative Assembly and Legislative Council, by-elections since the 1996 State election, swings required for seats to change hands at the next State election, and a list of registered political parties;
• fact sheets that were revised to incorporate changes to electoral legislation in June 1999;
• a new section that statistically ranked electorates on a range of descriptive variables; and
• electoral District profiles and a new section of electoral Province profiles. The profiles were revised to include a demographic profile of each electorate, which can be compared with the State average.

The VEC’s web site: www.vec.vic.gov.au

The VEC’s web site initially focused on providing information relating to parliamentary elections—specifically the 1999 State election and any parliamentary by-elections.

The first stage in the development of the site was to consult with representatives of the VEC’s major stakeholders regarding the content and design features they would find useful in an electoral Internet site.

The following stakeholders were consulted in January 1999:

• political journalists from major daily newspapers (The Age, Herald Sun, The Australian, The Australian Financial Review);
• journalists from AAP (State rounds);
• television political journalists (ABC TV, Channel 7 and Channel 9);
• political scientists (Monash University);
• the State Library;
• Victorian Parliamentary Library (for MPs’ requirements);
• the Australian Electoral Commission Electoral Education Centre;
• the Victorian Department of Education; and
• new voters.

The web site was designed for use during four distinct timeframes:

Non-election mode: containing information of a general and historical nature, to be used primarily by librarians, students and new voters;

Election mode: from the time of the issue of the writs until election night, providing information specific to the election. This mode is designed to be used primarily by journalists, students and experienced voters;

Election night mode: providing election night results in ‘real time’ for all electorates and the State as a whole, to be used primarily by journalists and voters; and

Post-election mode: providing results updates as postal and absent votes are included after election night, and results of any recounts, preference distributions and recounts. This information is primarily used by journalists.
It was recognised at an early stage that the site would be an information site that would need to give quick and easy access to a broad range of material.

Admiral Computing developed the web site using design specifications provided by The Hiser Group.

The web site was launched on 7 July 1999.

Media releases, media interviews and special features in the media

The VEC was keen to make good use of the media at the 1999 State election to present clear messages to voters, to promote a greater understanding of electoral processes, to respond to any issues arising and to ensure public confidence in all aspects of the electoral process.

The VEC appointed Hill and Knowlton, a public relations company, to assist with this work.

The VEC produced a number of media releases during the 1999 State election and the Frankston East supplementary election and these are listed in Appendix 8.

In addition, the Electoral Commissioner, Deputy Electoral Commissioner and the VEC’s two public information spokespersons held a number of interviews with television, radio and newspaper journalists, including:

- television journalists (on State election night): ABC TV and Channel 10;
- radio journalists: 3LO, 3AW, 3MMM, FOX FM, GOLD FM, 3BO (Bendigo), 3RPH (Radio Print Handicapped); and

Interview topics included:

- the VEC’s initiatives to encourage young people to enrol;
- the computerisation of State election processes;
- enrolling for the State election;
- voting arrangements for the State election;
- special voting arrangements for snow-skiers;
- arrangements for the tally room and the provision of election results;
- counting in the District of Geelong; and
- circumstances leading to the Frankston East supplementary election and election arrangements.

The VEC was successful in encouraging newspaper features on youth enrolment initiatives, electoral education initiatives, and the computerisation of State election processes. Copies of the resulting newspaper features are included in Appendix 9.

Media enquiries

The VEC’s spokespersons were available to respond to all media enquiries. Most political journalists already knew the VEC’s spokespersons through contact at previous elections. An effort was made to ensure that all media enquiries were responded to in a timely manner and that helpful responses were provided.

The tally room

The focus of media attention on election night is the tally room. A considerable challenge for the VEC is finding an available venue that is able to accommodate the construction of a tally board, four television studio sets, radio and print media areas, and seating for the general public. This is particularly difficult without knowing in advance the date on which the election will be held. It is therefore necessary to monitor the bookings in the small number of suitable venues over the twelve-month period during which the election could be held.

The venues identified by the VEC as being suitable for a tally room were the Melbourne Exhibition Centre; the Melbourne Sports and Entertainment Centre; the Showgrounds Exhibition Centre; and the Royal Exhibition Buildings.

The Melbourne Exhibition Centre was available for use as the tally room for 18 September 1999, election night for the 1999 State election.
Results were transmitted in real time to the tally room through the VEC’s computerised election management system (EMS 2000). The results were transmitted to printers at the tally room for posting directly on to the tally board. EMS 2000 also provided a direct data feed to television media, AAP, and political parties in attendance on the night.

The tally room was attended by major media organisations including:

- Nine, Seven, Ten and ABC television networks;
- 3LO, 3AW, Triple MMM, and Triple RRR radio stations; and
- all major Victorian and national print media.

The tally room was also attended by representatives of the National and Liberal parties.

For the first time the VEC invited the public to attend the tally room on election night. Newspaper advertisements were placed and 400 respondents were provided with passes. Large television monitors were provided to enable the public to follow television coverage within the atmosphere of the tally room. This initiative was considered to be extremely successful—there were very few empty seats and most members of the public stayed throughout the evening until nearly all results were available. A number of media commented positively on the extra atmosphere provided by a public presence.

Prior to election night the VEC had raised the possibility of the tally room for the 1999 State election being the last. With election results now capable of being transmitted directly to the media and to the public via the VEC’s web site, it was considered that there was no longer a requirement for a special venue for the posting of election results.

Feedback received by the VEC suggests that the media would like to retain the tally room at future elections as an atmospheric focal point for their election night coverage. The VEC will review this matter prior to the next State election.

Electronic transmission of results to the media

Election results were transmitted electronically to television media and some print media representatives located in the tally room.

The VEC provided a direct feed of results to each network. Data was transferred directly to the television outlets as it was keyed into the VEC’s election management system at the VEC’s returning officers’ offices.

In May 1999, the VEC had provided the television networks with the opportunity to participate in an election night trial. Channels 2, 7 and 9 took part in this trial, held at the VEC store at Maribyrnong, which proved very successful.

Media outlets and other interested parties were also given the opportunity to receive the latest results via email on election night. Pre-formatted result reports were emailed directly from the VEC’s election management system to these outlets at half hourly intervals until the close of counting on election night.
Complaints about the media

During the course of the State election the VEC received a total of six complaints about the media. In two of these cases the VEC took action to ensure that legislative requirements for the authorisation of advertising were complied with on future occasions.
The VEC’s performance in providing services to the media

The VEC’s contracted public relations company, Hill and Knowlton, undertook a survey of media to evaluate the information services provided. A total of twenty journalists from the television, radio and print media were identified for interview. Hill and Knowlton interviewed 13 journalists in the period immediately following the Frankston East supplementary election.

Overall, journalists found that the VEC was easy to contact, willing to be available to the media and provided valuable information in a timely manner. VEC personnel were considered to be very professional.

The election information kits given to media representatives were variously described as ‘excellent’, ‘terrific’, ‘easy to read’ and ‘well indexed’. All appreciated having a hard-copy version for ease of access and transportability. A small number of journalists thought the kit was too detailed.

The VEC’s news releases provided useful facts and information and the quality of the information was seen to be of a high standard.

The VEC’s spokespersons were praised for their availability, responsiveness and for the information they provided. The VEC’s efforts to be pro-active and aware of pressing media deadlines were appreciated.

The VEC’s web site received very positive feedback. One respondent wanted more information on the web site. There were comments about the web site not being completely up-to-date in the period immediately following election day.

There was very strong support for the way the tally room provides an atmosphere and exists as ‘a public demonstration of democracy’. Journalists noted that they found the tally room a useful venue for the exchange of information and ideas, and expressed concern that it should not become ‘virtual’. Services and the provision of election results at the tally room were very positively received.

In a survey of the three parliamentary parties, one party was strongly supportive of the tally room and saw it as an important part of the electoral education process. The other two parties were not committed to using or maintaining the tally room.