

NON-PARLIAMENTARY & PRIVATE Elections

USING THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN ELECTORAL COMMISSION TO CONDUCT A POSTAL OR IN-PERSON VOTING ELECTION

In addition to managing all State elections and referendums and most local government elections and polls, every year the Western Australian Electoral Commission (the Commission) typically manages between 25 and 35 elections (usually consisting of multiple vacancies) on behalf of unions, universities, community organisations and private companies.

Union elections are conducted under the provisions of the *Industrial Arbitration Act 1979* and the *Industrial Arbitration (Union Elections) Regulations, 1980*. Other organisations (e.g. universities) also have governing legislation that provide for the Commission to conduct their elections. In other cases, an organisation might simply want the electoral expertise, professionalism and impartiality that the Commission can offer. The *Electoral Act 1907* makes provision for the Western Australian Electoral Commissioner to conduct postal or in-person elections on behalf of other organisations.

In a postal election, voting packages are sent out to all eligible electors by the Commission. Election packages typically contain a ballot paper(s), elector declaration envelope, reply paid envelope, candidate profiles (optional) and letter to voter or instruction brochure (optional). Voters are able to post their ballot papers back, usually within a two to four week timeframe, and the count is conducted at the close of poll, supervised by the appointed Returning Officer.

HOW AN ELECTION IS ORGANISED

The Electoral Commissioner formally appoints a Returning Officer who has the necessary skills and experience for the conduct of the election.

The Commission consults with the union or organisation to ensure that planned election procedures are cost effective (cost estimate provided if required). The Commission is able to assist by offering suggestions for the content, display, printing and advertising of the material to be presented to electors.

For postal elections the Returning Officer, in consultation with the union or organisation, calls for nominations, conducts a draw for the order of names on the ballot paper, organises the printing of ballot papers (using security grade paper), proofs candidate profiles (where applicable), mails out election packages to eligible voters, receives return packages, processes packages, issues replacement election packages, counts the ballot papers, declares the result and provides a report on the election.

ADVERTISING

The Commission can co-ordinate any advertising of the election notice for state-wide or region specific distribution and/or in local and community newspapers depending on the requirements of the union or organisation and its election rules. Where required, the Commission conducts a mail out of the election notice to eligible voters.

ADVANTAGES OF USING THE COMMISSION AND POSTAL VOTING

◆ Open Governance

- Every eligible voter is made aware that an election is being held;
- There are virtually no barriers to voting, which encourages participation;
- Elections are seen to be conducted by the impartial Commission; and
- Existing office bearers cannot be accused of bias or giving themselves an unfair advantage.

◆ Advantages for electors

- Casting a vote at home with ample time is convenient;
- Those without access to transport are not prevented from voting;
- Candidate profiles can be included to assist in decision making;
- Candidates supply contact details to enable the discussion of issues; and
- Reply paid envelopes used for the return of ballot papers.

◆ Advantages for candidates

- An experienced Returning Officer 'at arms length' from union or organisation business when conducting the election;
- The profile enables the candidate to promote his or her candidature at no cost; and
- Elected candidates can have confidence in their support base.

◆ Advantages for the union or organisation

- The workload for the union or organisation is reduced in an area that is not core business;
- Most elector and candidate enquiries are received and resolved by either the Returning Officer or the Electoral Commissioner;
- Statutory requirements are fulfilled;
- Materials and equipment used in the processes meet contemporary electoral standards;
- An election report is prepared by the Commission for presentation to the executive or CEO; and
- Disputed matters that might arise are typically handled by the Commission.

UNION OR ORGANISATION RESPONSIBILITIES IN A POSTAL VOTING ELECTION

The only responsibility that the union or organisation has is to supply the Commission with their official membership list of eligible electors, in the required format for a postal ballot.

THE COST OF POSTAL VOTING ELECTIONS

All elections are unique therefore while elections are conducted on a full cost recovery basis, this generally means covering Returning Officer and other staff costs, postage, any statutory advertising and materials.

The Electoral Commissioner can only provide an estimate of costs, based on anticipated voter numbers, participation rates, number of vacancies and candidates, and other factors that apply to a particular election.

If there is greater participation than anticipated, or there are additional complexities, total costs may increase. Conversely, costs may be lower if fewer candidates than anticipated nominate or there is a lower participation rate than expected.

In cases where an election is not required as nominations do not exceed the vacancies (candidates are elected unopposed), a minimal charge for the Returning Officer's time and the initial advertising, is the only cost.

HOW THE ELECTOR VOTES IN A POSTAL VOTING ELECTION

After reading the instructions and the candidate profiles, an elector must:

- Complete the ballot paper(s);
- Seal it in a ballot paper envelope;
- Sign the elector declaration which is attached to the ballot paper envelope;
- Place the ballot paper envelope in the return reply paid envelope; and
- Return the voting package by mail, or hand it in to the Returning Officer before the date/time for the close of the poll.

THE PROCESS FOR OPENING THE PACKAGES

A procedure for opening and checking election packages has been prescribed under the *Industrial Arbitration (Union Elections) Regulations, 1980*. Every voter is checked against the official electoral roll (supplied by the organisation). The procedures adopted for processing returned packages ensure that ballot papers cannot be linked to an elector, therefore elector anonymity is maintained.

On receipt of the returned voting package, the Returning Officer:

- Opens the outer envelope;
- Checks the elector declaration attached to the ballot paper envelope;
- Marks (by barcode scanning) the voter's name off the roll*;
- Detaches the elector declaration from the ballot paper envelope to preserve the secrecy of the ballot;
- Opens the mixed ballot paper envelopes and removes the ballot paper(s) without inspection;
- Places the ballot paper(s) in a sealed ballot box in preparation for the count;
- Opens the ballot box at the close of poll; and
- Sorts and counts the ballot papers.

* *If an elector fails to sign the declaration or it is not completed in accordance with the applicable election rules, the name is typically marked off the roll but the envelope is put aside as a rejected vote.*

INFORMATION ON THE INTERNET

There is information on each participating union or organisation on the Commission's website at www.elections.wa.gov.au. Each union or organisation can establish a link to this website.

People visiting the website can view a range of electoral information, including:

- Key dates and deadlines for the election;
- Count method to be applied;
- Previous postal voting election results;
- Lists of candidates;
- Returning Officers and union or organisation addresses; and
- Results.

Election results are entered on the above website shortly after the count is completed, or when prescribed in the union or organisation rules. This provides information to many people, who in the past would have only received results in the following days via letter, newspapers or word of mouth.

FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about the election services available from the Western Australian Electoral Commission, call 08 9214 0400 or email waec@waec.wa.gov.au.