

## Comments on Informal Voting in Western Australia

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The table below shows the rate of informal voting since the introduction of divided upper house ballot papers, Federally in 1984, and in Western Australia in 1989.

The Federal figure is for Western Australian House electorates only, not for the whole of Australia.

**Table 1 - Informal Voting in WA – House of representatives versus Legislative Assembly**

House of Representatives (WA)		Legislative Assembly	
1984 December	7.4		
1987 July	6.6		
1990 March	3.7	1989 February	7.4
1993 March	2.5	1993 February	4.1
1996 March	3.2		
1998 October	4.2	1996 December	4.4
2001 November	4.9	2001 February	4.5
2004 October	5.3	2005 February	5.2
2007 November	3.9		
2010 August	4.8	2008 September	5.3
2013 September	5.4	2013 March	6.0
2016 July	4.0	2017 March	4.5

**Source:** AEC and WAEC reports

The rate of informal voting has been slightly higher at Legislative Assembly elections compared to House elections. This is despite Western Australia having more savings provisions for incorrectly completed Assembly ballot papers than the Commonwealth Electoral Act has for House ballot papers.

I have long suspected the old Legislative Council vertical ballot papers caused more confusion for lower house voters than the Senate's horizontal ballot paper. Some of the decline in informal voting in 2017 may be due to the upper house ballot paper change.

**Table 2 - WA Legislative Assembly – Informal Votes by Broad Category**

<b>Category</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2017</b>
Blank/Scribbles	17180	25102	20879	24343	27739
Numbering Errors	29015	30861	32318	44609	31448
Others	2641	3353	8043	6705	3673
Total Informal	48836	59316	61240	75657	62860

**Table 3 - WA Legislative Council – Informal Votes by Broad Category**

<b>Category</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2017</b>
Blank/Scribbles	15778	25441	22118	23849	25433
Numbering Errors	6668	6963	5548	6399	6115
Others	5988	3652	4977	5458	5811
Total Informal	28434	36056	32643	35706	37359

**Table 4 - WA Legislative Assembly – Percentage Informal Votes by Broad Category**

<b>Category</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2017</b>
Blank/Scribbles	35.2	42.3	34.1	32.2	44.1
Numbering Errors	59.4	52.0	52.8	59.0	50.0
Others	5.4	5.7	13.1	8.9	5.8
% Informal	4.5	5.2	5.3	6	4.5

**Table 5 - WA Legislative Council – Percentage Informal Votes by Broad Category**

<b>Category</b>	<b>2001</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2017</b>
Blank/Scribbles	55.5	70.6	67.8	66.8	68.1
Numbering Errors	23.5	19.3	17.0	17.9	16.4
Others	21.1	10.1	15.2	15.3	15.6
% Informal	2.6	3.2	2.8	2.8	2.7

Source for Tables 2-5 – WAEC Election statistics, informal vote research.

**Table 6 - WA Legislative Assembly – Informal Votes by Detailed Category**

Category	2001	2005	2008	2013	2017
Blank	11315	18306	14275	16062	19892
Scribble	5865	6796	6604	8281	7847
<b>Total: Blank/Scribble</b>	<b>17180</b>	<b>25102</b>	<b>20879</b>	<b>24343</b>	<b>27739</b>
Number 1 only	14350	15986	19998	25195	17666
Tick only	7082	7429	7645	9899	5129
X and other Numbers	780	1171	2162	2697	1184
No first Preference	3936	3535	2513	3171	2876
More than one box blank	2867	2740		3647	4593
<b>Total: Numbering Errors</b>	<b>29015</b>	<b>30861</b>	<b>32318</b>	<b>44609</b>	<b>31448</b>
Others	2641	3353	8043	6705	3673
<b>Total</b>	<b>48836</b>	<b>59316</b>	<b>61240</b>	<b>75657</b>	<b>62860</b>

## Informal Voting Categories

**Table 7 - WA Legislative Assembly – Percentage Informal Votes by Detailed Category**

Category	2001	2005	2008	2013	2017
Blank	23.2	30.9	23.3	21.2	31.6
Scribble	12.0	11.5	10.8	10.9	12.5
<b>Total: Blank/Scribble</b>	<b>35.2</b>	<b>42.3</b>	<b>34.1</b>	<b>32.2</b>	<b>44.1</b>
Number 1 only	29.4	27.0	32.7	33.3	28.1
Tick only	14.5	12.5	12.5	13.1	8.2
X and other Numbers	1.6	2.0	3.5	3.6	1.9
No first Preference	8.1	6.0	4.1	4.2	4.6
More than one box blank	5.9	4.6	0.0	4.8	7.3
<b>Total: Numbering Errors</b>	<b>59.4</b>	<b>52.0</b>	<b>52.8</b>	<b>59.0</b>	<b>50.0</b>
Others	5.4	5.7	13.1	8.9	5.8
<b>Informal</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>5.2</b>	<b>5.3</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4.5</b>

Source for Tables 6-7 – WAEC Election statistics, informal vote research.

## Commentary

Blanks and scribbles are often categorised as 'deliberate' informal voting where numbering errors are usually described as 'accidental' informal voting.

At Federal elections, the number of blanks and scribbles has risen and fallen from election to election, suggesting some comment by voters on the course of party politics. For instance, the rise in blanks and scribbles at the 2004 Federal election and decline in 2007 appears to have some connection with the nature of the party contest at both elections.

However, blanks may also be an expression of confusion over the ballot paper. This is especially the case with giant upper house ballot papers at Senate and NSW Legislative Council elections. For many overseas born voters with poor English skills, some of our upper house ballot papers must be extremely confusing. At the 2016 Senate election, 64% of Senate informal votes were completely blank.

There was a significant decline in House informal voting at the 2016 Federal election. Initial observations suggest that the change in Senate ballot paper instructions to number 6/12 preferences cut the incidence of '1' only voting in the House. Further research by the AEC will reveal the full picture.

Upper House ballot papers as a source of induced '1' only voting is illustrated by AEC research at the 2005 Werriwa by-election. Where '1' only votes in Werriwa made up 35% of informal votes at the 2001 election and 37% at the 2004 election, it made up only 9% of informal votes at the by-election.

A consequence of our upper house ballot papers is higher House informal voting. Since the introduction of divided ballot papers, in every state except South Australia, lower house informal voting is now higher than upper house informal voting. South Australia is the only state with a specific 'savings' provision to allow '1' only votes to remain in the count, which is why its lower house informal vote is lower.

The most obvious way to cut lower house informal voting is to find a way to permit lower house ballot papers with incomplete preferences to remain in the count. The difficult with this approach is to avoid it becoming a de-facto form of optional preferential voting if the parliament continues to prefer full preferential voting remain in place.