

**Submission  
No 7**

**PROPOSALS TO INCREASE VOTER ENGAGEMENT, PARTICIPATION AND  
CONFIDENCE**

**Organisation:** The NSW Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party

**Date Received:** 13 August 2024

# Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

**From:** The NSW Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party

**Date:** 13<sup>th</sup> August 2024

**Subject: Inquiry into Proposals to Increase Voter Engagement, Participation, and Confidence**

## Introduction

The NSW Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party (SFF) is dedicated to representing primarily the interests of rural and regional communities, as well as advocating for responsible firearm ownership and use, Conservation Hunting, sustainable fishing practices, and the rights of our farmers, along with other minority interest groups needing support and advocacy in the political process, that aligns with party policies and beliefs.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry into electoral matters, which aims to enhance voter engagement, participation, and confidence. Our submission addresses each of the inquiry's terms of reference, emphasising the need for equitable funding and support for smaller parties to ensure all democratic viewpoints are effectively heard and represented in NSW State Parliament.

It is clear over recent decades in NSW that with the decline of primary support of the major parties and an increase in cynicism of the electorate that our bicameral system in NSW is increasingly important. The need for minor parties is growing and must be enhanced.

The role of the Legislative Council (LC), certainly in the last 30 years has expanded far beyond merely being a limited house of review. Its current and developing composition clearly demonstrates the electorates expressed need and want for more direct representation and diverse representation and voice. Though the LC role of review is still of primary importance, the growing voices of a diverse electorate need to be expressed without the constraints of the major parties.

### **1. Maintain confidence in the integrity of electoral processes:**

Maintaining public confidence in the integrity of our electoral processes is paramount to our democracy. We support measures that enhance transparency and accountability in elections, such as rigorous auditing of electoral rolls, ensuring the independence and adequate funding of the NSW Electoral Commission, and implementing robust mechanisms to detect and address electoral fraud. Additionally, clear communication and education campaigns about the integrity of the electoral process can help build public trust in this important pillar of the democratic process. This is not done adequately at present, for example: given the number of inquiries and criticism that parties receive about preference distribution in a system of optional preferential voting that has operated for decades. This highlights clear failures in education not being led by the Commission.

## **2. Strengthen the security and integrity of the electoral system:**

To strengthen the security and integrity of our electoral system, we advocate for the adoption of appropriate technology and best practice in election security. This includes the use of secure, verifiable electronic voting systems for those that cannot vote using current paper formats, comprehensive cybersecurity measures, and regular security audits. Furthermore, ensuring that all voting equipment and software are transparent and open to independent scrutiny will enhance voter confidence. We do not support black box hardware or software solutions to voting systems. We believe that maintaining tangible records of votes cast is crucial to maintaining the electorate's confidence in the electoral system.

The ability and right of all Parties and Independent members to scrutinise and observe systems and counts must be maintained and enhanced, regardless of where future systems development takes us, even extending to the provision of a financial budget allocation to allow independent systems audits, by the Parties and Independents.

## **3. Reduce barriers to participation, particularly for voters with disabilities and historically lower turnout groups:**

It is crucial to address the barriers that prevent full participation in the electoral process. For voters with disabilities, we support the implementation of accessible voting options, such as technology-assisted voting and improved physical access to polling places. For groups with historically lower enrolment and turnout rates, including people in remote rural and regional areas, Indigenous communities and young people, targeted outreach and education programs are essential. Simplifying the enrolment process and offering more flexible voting options will also help reduce barriers to participation.

## **4. Implement options for technology-assisted voting (TAV):**

The NSW Electoral Commission's November 2023 report on technology-assisted voting (TAV) presents some valuable recommendations.

We support exploring the feasibility of limited-scale kiosk trials at the 2028 Local Government elections, subject to a request for information to the market demonstrating the availability of suitable technology solutions and the provision of budget supplementation to the Electoral Commission before July 2026.

We do not support the recommendation for a common national election technology platform. This is simply not feasible in our view, given the large variation in voting systems and law at federal and in state level in Australia. One size does not fit all, the larger the system the more opportunity for systemic failure and corruption.

TAV has the potential to significantly increase voter participation, particularly among those who face barriers to traditional voting methods, though we understand the

challenges of using current networks and lack of reliable internet coverage in the bush.

We do not support black-box software solutions for voting systems or indeed any system currently used by the Commission. We have also seen in the recent past the attempted roll out of the iVote system which failed comprehensively not just to aid those that need TAV in remote areas, but also as a total voting solution. This was well beyond its original scope and purpose.

We believe that the JSCEM should take an active direct role in planning and selection of solutions for the future development of digital voting systems and attendant voter support systems with the Commission. To this end, given that all the systems currently used for voting are outdated and in need of significant overhaul and updating, a “*World’s Best Practice*” search should be commenced. We stress that this should not just be outsourced to the Commission and “*hope for the best*”. The attempt by the Commission to implement iVote as a technology assisted system and eventually rolling it out as an overall technology solution has been a complete failure. We do not want a repeat of this.

#### **5. Improve systems for political donations, electoral funding, and party governance:**

Ongoing oversight and evaluation of the systems for political donations, electoral funding, and party governance is essential for maintaining public confidence in our democracy. We endorse the recommendations of the Independent Commission Against Corruption’s (ICAC) report on political donations.

Transparent and accountable real-time donation reporting, strict donation caps, and enhanced oversight of party finances are necessary to prevent undue influence and corruption. Additionally, providing extra and more equitable public funding for smaller parties will ensure a level playing field and enable diverse voices to be heard and compliance with enhanced reporting requirements.

Currently minor parties are having to cope with funding from the one “grant” of Administration monies in the areas of staff and committee governance education, software systems applications and highly restrictive and changing interpretation of what can and can’t be spent out of the pool of funds. As an example of the latter, SFF recently were instructed that the Commission would no longer approve asset purchases with bank loans, we were forced to finance with leasing options, at much higher cost. No reason for this change was given!

Major parties have the funds and critical mass, to easily if they wish, train, acquire state-of-the-art systems and avail themselves of the best and cheapest options when it comes to asset purchases, such as computers, motor vehicles etc. this is not a level playing field.

Minor parties should be provided with a separate pool of monies for each area of expenditure to improve governance, acquire compliance software systems and be free to finance their operations at the lowest available market cost. They should not be forced into high-cost options.

## **6. Amend electoral laws in relation to electoral funding and political parties:**

**Allowable Administrative Fund expenditure under section 84 of the Electoral Funding Act 2018:** We propose broadening the scope of allowable administrative fund expenditure to include essential activities that facilitate voter engagement and education, particularly for smaller parties with representation in the NSW Parliament. There is a clear need for an increase in this funding, to cover consultants, audit costs, office accommodation and office supplies as simple examples.

Even with current Cost of Living adjustment the current administration funding is inadequate. Simple CPI increases over the years, especially after Covid, haven't catered for the real level of inflation in administration costs. We believe there should be a review and potentially a substantial increase to administration funding. Minor parties especially are disadvantaged.

**Residence requirements for political party officials:** We recommend revisiting the residence requirements for political party officials to ensure that the place of residence must be a requirement to hold party official status just as only bona-fide NSW residents can vote in NSW. Party officials must be bona-fide residents of NSW and be registered on the NSW Electoral Rolls.

**Expenditure of the Election Campaigns Fund within New South Wales:** The Election Campaigns Fund should be utilised for the political purposes only of a NSW registered Party, controlled by NSW authorised resident officials. The funding should primarily be spent on staff and resources from NSW and only on elections in NSW.

Regarding political donation limits, minor parties should be allowed a higher donation cap, as generally speaking they have a much lower membership base. A possible solution could be that minor parties, with say two members but no more than four members, be allowed a donation cap of 2 X the current cap of \$7,900 and independents 2 X the current cap of \$3,800. This approach would be a more equitable outcome and promote confidence in the general public that minor parties are being given an opportunity for a greater voice at election time.

## **7. Any other related matters:**

Electoral funding should also be extended to cover the changing, broadening role of the LC, particularly the increase in parties, so that they can establish LC member representation in areas outside of the limited office availability in Parliament House. The establishment of electorate offices for crossbench LC members will enhance representation and engagement with the electorate and improve the reputation of the Parliament through more diverse advocacy and representation. Our member for example in Victoria, has an office in Parliament house and an electorate representation office as well.

We also urge the Committee to consider the broader context of electoral engagement, including the role of media and public discourse in shaping voter perceptions and participation. Ensuring fair and balanced media coverage of all

political parties, including smaller ones, is a major challenge in an age where headlines are more important than substance in electronic and social media and our national government media agencies. Education in civics and our democracy is of the utmost importance, we do not support legislation that limits freedom of speech.

Our young people should not be learning about the so-called "*failures of democracy*" from social media but should be educated in the success of our democracy over the last nearly 240 years. The Electoral Commission should take a lead in this, which it currently does not.

**Conclusion:**

The NSW Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party is committed to enhancing voter engagement, participation, and confidence in the electoral process. By addressing the specific needs of smaller parties and underrepresented groups, and by implementing comprehensive reforms to ensure the integrity and security of elections, we can strengthen our democracy and ensure that all voices are heard in NSW State Parliament.

We thank the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for considering our submission and look forward to contributing to a more inclusive and representative electoral system.

**Robert C Borsak**  
**Deputy Chairman**

**Grant Layland**  
**Treasurer**

**NSW Shooters Fishers and Farmers Party**