



Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on
Electoral Matters inquiry into civics education,
engagement, and participation in Australia

21 June 2024



FECCA pays its respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past and present and recognise the land we live and work upon was never ceded. FECCA proudly supports the Uluru Statement from the Heart and its call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice protected by the Constitution.

FECCA acknowledges that our work on behalf of multicultural Australia has learnt from and been enriched by First Nations peoples and organisations. We are committed to continuing to listen, learn and support First Nations peoples in the journey to a more inclusive society.

Foreword

The Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) welcomes the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into civics education, engagement, and participation in Australia (the Inquiry) and the opportunity to provide input representing Australia's multicultural communities. Civic participation and engagement are key pillars of a thriving democracy. With Australia becoming a more diverse society it is important to ensure that all eligible members of society are supported to fully participate in democratic processes and civil society. This submission focuses specifically on point four of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry - "opportunities for supporting culturally diverse, geographically diverse, and remote communities to access relevant, appropriate, and culturally suitable information about Australian democracy, electoral events, enrolment and voting to promote full electoral participation".

A significant focus of FECCA's work includes a framework for multiculturalism submitted to the [Multicultural Framework Review](#) in which we call for full participation, including civic participation as one of the key policy pillars to build a strong, inclusive and equitable multicultural Australia.

For enquiries, please contact FECCA CEO Mary Ann Geronimo [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Who we are

FECCA is the national peak body representing people from multicultural communities and their organisations across Australia. Through the membership of state, territory, and regional councils, we represent over 1,500 community organisations and their members.

What we do

For 45 years, FECCA has proudly worked alongside culturally and linguistically diverse communities, the broader Australian society and the Commonwealth Government to build a successful, productive and inclusive multicultural Australia where everyone, no matter their background or how long they have lived in this country, can belong, contribute and reach their full potential.

FECCA draws on the lived experiences of the people and their descendants that have migrated to Australia and the expertise of its extensive and diverse membership to develop and promote inclusive, innovative and responsible public policy that reflects the needs and perspectives of multicultural Australia. We are dedicated to building a multicultural nation that harnesses its greatest strength, the diversity of its people.

Introduction

A democratic system thrives with fair electoral processes, systems to oversee elected officials' work, and structures promoting citizen engagement. Citizen engagement and participation benefit citizens and governments, delivering citizen-centric policies and solutions, building trust in institutions and modelling the principles of a good democracy. The 2021 Census reveals more than half of Australian residents (51.5%) were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas; and over 5.5 million Australians speak a language other than English at home¹. As the peak body representing 1500+ multicultural communities, FECCA strongly advocates for inclusive systems that respond to the needs of all citizens, including those newly arrived in Australia, those with limited English and those with varied intersecting vulnerabilities.

Multicultural communities are incredibly diverse. While some community members are fully aware of and engaged in political and civic processes, others can be hard to reach, disconnected, and disempowered. There are many reasons for this including low literacy levels, low English language proficiency or trauma related to political engagement in their countries of origin. There are many who may not have the time and resources to engage; arrival, settlement, establishing themselves and learning a new language and a new culture take priority².

To ensure Australia's strong and vibrant democracy, all citizens – existing, new and future, must be engaged in civic participation. An important part of building inclusive participation is the provision of information in an accessible manner. FECCA welcomes the Australian Electoral Commission's (AEC) provision of in-language information and community engagement programs with multicultural community leaders and members to improve their understanding of the Australian electoral process. FECCA also welcomes the AEC initiatives such as the Multicultural Community Electoral Participation Officers (Multicultural CEPOs) pilot program in the next elections and the multicultural voter research. These programs provide crucial support to multicultural community leaders and community members to fully participate in democratic processes. In our submission, we make a few recommendations to improve programs such as these, including the use of data, the use of an intersectional lens and co-designing programs with community leaders. We also call for specific programs that respond to the needs of young people from multicultural communities.

Our submission also highlights the importance of using a strengths-based approach to tap into the rich experience and expertise of multicultural Australia and adopt a range of approaches and processes to support wider participation in all civic and parliamentary processes. Multicultural Australia is made up of strong and resilient individuals and communities that bring with them varied lived-experience, knowledge and insights. This diversity is a key strength of our multicultural country and one that can improve civic participation and outcomes for all Australians.

Lastly, our submission asserts that diverse ethno-cultural parliamentary representation is key to ensuring the participation of all Australians in civic matters. Despite making strides to build broader ethnic and cultural representation, the Australian Parliament is not representative of the diversity of Australian society. This disparity needs to be addressed with strong commitment and policy focus towards building a truly representative parliament.

Recommendations

Recommendation 1: Community engagement programs that aim to build civic knowledge and understanding must be evidence-based using data to identify and target communities with low engagement including newly arrived migrants, new and emerging communities, refugees and asylum seekers.

Members of multicultural communities come from diverse cultural backgrounds with varying levels of engagement, exposure and understanding of democratic processes and political systems. Many may be unfamiliar with Australia's political landscape, electoral system, or the role of different levels of government, and some may have faced persecution in their home countries due to their political beliefs, forcing them to flee. These are issues that are experienced more frequently by newly arrived migrants, new and emerging communities, refugees and asylum seekers and are just a few reasons that may contribute to disengagement or apathy towards the electoral process and civic participation.

The AEC provides in language information and conducts community engagement programs to engage with multicultural community leaders and members, improving their understanding of the Australian electoral process. It is important such programs are delivered to communities that need it the most, particularly newly arrived migrants, new and emerging communities, refugees and asylum seekers. **Data is a crucial tool to identify geographic locations and communities that may need support to understand and meaningfully participate in Australian democratic processes.** Using data to build and deliver civic knowledge is an important step to ensure the most disadvantaged groups are identified and supported to fully engage with and participate in our democracy.

However, it must be recognised that there are issues with data standards and administrative data on culturally and linguistically diverse communities in Australia, resulting in either a lack of data, or inconsistent data. This leads to a number of issues, including a lack of understanding of the various needs of multicultural communities and the resultant inability to identify services that need to be available, and a lack of visibility of uptake among multicultural communities when services are available. Policies and interventions built without this knowledge and evidence result in efforts that are ineffective, possibly with unintended consequences, and can result in inequitable access to essential government services and information.

Recommendation 2: Adopt an intersectional lens to identify the most disengaged communities and create customised programs.

People from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are affected not only by their cultural and ethnic identities, language and lived experience, but also by other intersecting social and political identity markers such as age, gender, sexual orientation, impairment, class and religion. These identities do not exist independently; each informs the other and can have overlapping and compounding effects. These effects can also be influenced by other factors, for example living in a rural or remote area. It is not these diverse identities that generate vulnerability, but the compounding impact of discrimination and systemic exclusion that creates entrenched forms of disadvantage. This results in some people from culturally and linguistically diverse people having higher levels of vulnerability than others making engagement in civic matters challenging. For a fair and just society, an intersectional lens must be used to identify and cater to the needs of society's vulnerable groups, ensuring these groups are provided with the support they need to fully engage with and participate in society.

Recommendation 3: Co-design civic engagement programs with trusted community leaders and community organisations that fully understand, reflect and serve the diverse needs of migrant communities.

Community leaders and community organisations play a vital role among migrant communities. In addition to providing community services, they are places where people from migrant backgrounds find the support they need to navigate unfamiliarity – be it unfamiliar systems, processes or social norms. They provide a suite of tangible and intangible supports and benefits to multicultural communities. These include harnessing the protective factors of culture and community, providing culturally safe and accessible assistance to navigate the social, civic and economic institutions of Australia, and are trusted sources of information.

With their deep understanding of the specific circumstances and needs of their communities, multicultural community leaders and community organisations serve as a bridge between government and communities and ensure the diverse range of experiences, perspectives and needs of culturally and linguistically diverse people are meaningfully included in policy and practice design.

Co-designing civic engagement programs with trusted community leaders and community organisations is a step towards ensuring these programs are fit to purpose; fully understanding, reflecting and serving the diverse needs of multicultural communities.

Recommendation 4: Invest in building media literacy capabilities within multicultural communities

Patterns of communication and media consumption have changed significantly over the last decade. Digital platforms have increasingly taken precedence over traditional forms of media, with social media increasingly used by people as a source of information. While the benefits of digital platforms are vast, there is growing concern about the spread of harmful misinformation on these platforms.

Studies show misinformation causes mistrust in political institutions, and vice versa.³ The impact of mis and disinformation is disproportionately experienced by culturally and linguistically diverse communities due to the primacy of these platforms as sources of information and connection in many communities, and the prevalence of harmful tropes targeting specific communities in social media. This has been identified by culturally and linguistically diverse communities as a significant problem, and research shows people from multicultural backgrounds are more likely than the rest of the population to say that recognizing and preventing misinformation is important to them⁴. Varying levels of English language proficiency within multicultural communities contribute to this, making it difficult to recognise harmful and false information and access credible sources.

Mis and disinformation can affect the delivery of free and fair elections. While it is important for government to create legislation that addresses mis and disinformation, it is equally important to support vulnerable communities to develop critical media literacy capability. This training needs to be targeted to the specific needs of vulnerable communities to identify and stop the spread of harmful misinformation.

Recommendation 5: Adopt a range of approaches and processes to enable wider participation in all civic and parliamentary processes

Society-wide participation in civic and parliamentary processes ensures a more representative response to the needs of the Australian people by supporting parliamentarians to act on behalf of those they represent. However, studies show that migrant community members experience many barriers that stop them from participating in parliamentary processes. In their research paper on Engaging Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities in Parliamentary Inquiries, authors Fung and Macreadie (2018) identify several barriers including language and literacy barriers, concerns about being misunderstood or publicly embarrassed, fear of government due to past trauma in their country of origin etc. The authors further assert parliamentary committees also face barriers to engage with migrant communities “including time constraints, a lack of resources, a lack of knowledge or cultural awareness among committee secretariat staff and Members, and unconscious bias.”⁵

To ensure representative responses to parliamentary processes, awareness needs to be raised among multicultural communities about the importance of these processes in the Australian democratic system and the ways in which people can participate. It is equally important to ensure processes are made more accessible to people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and that staff, committee members and those involved in parliamentary processes undergo training, including cultural sensitivity training.

Recommendation 6: Engage young people from multicultural communities using safe, relevant and culturally appropriate channels

Studies have found that “while young migrants of Pacific Islander, African and Arabic backgrounds expressed a strong desire for social engagement, experiences of racism and social exclusion, and formal practices labelling them as ‘migrant’, ‘refugee’ or ‘CALD’ had the effect of marginalising them further, preventing them from voicing their opinions outside their own ethno-cultural communities.⁶ Such experiences and expectations on young people from multicultural communities make it important for the government to create culturally safe engagement programs for young people from multicultural backgrounds. This can be done by tapping into existing ethno-cultural community hubs to create safe and culturally appropriate spaces to impart education and encourage participation. An example of this we have heard about from our communities is to offer voter registration assistance and support services in community centres and places of worship. This will support the next generation of voters from multicultural backgrounds to be actively engaged in civic participation, and have their interests and aspirations reflected in the future of the Australian nation.

Recommendation 7: Focus on building diverse ethno-cultural representation in Parliament

Ethno-cultural diversity in the Australian Parliament is increasing, with the current 47th Parliament the most diverse yet. However, there is still a major gap between the cultural and linguistic diversity of the Australian people and parliamentary representation. In the last census, 23 per cent of Australians claim a non-European ancestry, however only 6.6 per cent of Members of Parliament (15 out of the 227) have non-European backgrounds.⁷ Parliamentary representation of diverse ethno-cultural groups is key to ensuring the participation of all Australians in civic matters. “Whether minorities and Indigenous peoples are actually present in legislatures, whether their voices are heard, and whether their interests are taken into account are all important indicators of minority/Indigenous participation in decision making on a national level.”⁸ Such participation benefits society at large - bringing different perspectives, improving political debate, and strengthening belonging and social cohesion.

An analysis of the 2022 Federal Election results in Australia show that both major parties discriminate against ethnic minority candidates. This occurs through the lack of nomination for party strong seats, relegating ethnic minority candidates to unsafe seats to create a ‘glass cliff’ effect despite evidence of ethnic voting.⁹ This approach can lead to the long-term marginalisation and exclusion of ethnic minorities in the political system. Instead, political parties need to build representation that reflects the diversity of Australian society. To achieve this, environments need to be created that support people from diverse backgrounds to become successful political candidates and parties need to promote a strong political narrative around the importance of building ethno-cultural diversity across all realms of political representation.

-
- 1 <https://www.abs.gov.au/media-centre/media-releases/2021-census-nearly-half-australians-have-parent-born-overseas>
 - 2 Fung, P., & Macreadie, R. (2018). Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in parliamentary inquiries.
 - 3 Frischlich, L., & Humprecht, E. (2021). Trust, democratic resilience, and the infodemic.
 - 4 Notley, T., Chambers, S., Park, S., Dezuanni, M. 2021, Adult Media Literacy in Australia: Attitudes, Experiences and Needs. Western Sydney University, Queensland University of Technology and University of Canberra
 - 5 Fung, P., & Macreadie, R. (2018). Engaging culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities in parliamentary inquiries.
 - 6 Lam, K., Harris, A., Hartup, M., Collin, P., Third, A., & Quek, S. L. (2022). Social Issues and Diverse Young Australians.
 - 7 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2022/jul/25/the-47th-parliament-is-the-most-diverse-ever-but-still-doesnt-reflect-australia>
 - 8 Protsyk, O. (2010). The representation of minorities and indigenous peoples in parliament. Inter-Parliamentary Union.
 - 9 Guan, Q., & Pietsch, J. (2023). Representing diversity in a liberal democracy: a case study of Australia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 50(12), 3069–3090.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2023.2290446>