

16 March 2016

Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Procedure
Parliament House
Canberra ACT

Submission from the OpenAustralia Foundation to the *Inquiry into procedures for counting and reporting the vote in a division*

Dear Committee Secretary,

The [OpenAustralia Foundation](http://oaf.org.au) (<http://oaf.org.au>) welcomes the opportunity to make submissions to the Inquiry into procedures for counting and reporting the vote in a division. We congratulate you for taking the time to review this aspect of operations as it has the potential to deepen our Parliament's ability to fulfil its legislative, oversight and representational responsibilities.

Who are we?

We are a pioneering charity whose vision is to transform democracy in Australia by giving all Australians the tools they need to effect the change they want. We create technologies that encourage and enable people to participate directly in the political process on a local and national level.

One of our projects is a website, [They Vote For You](https://theyvoteforyou.org.au) (<https://theyvoteforyou.org.au>), that helps Australians keep track of how their federal representatives vote on issues they care about. The website tracks how politicians vote and draws on currently available voting data from the Parliament's official records.

What is the problem with current procedures?

Under current procedures, Australians cannot look at the official records of Parliament and easily see how their Members of Parliament (MPs) have voted on a given matter. That is a giant transparency and accountability problem.

Only divisions are recorded in the official record and yet most votes take place ‘on the voices’. This means that many bills pass through the House of Representatives without any written record of how each MP voted. Without this information, Australians cannot hold their MPs accountable. For a good overview on how voting data is currently recorded in Parliament, and the impacts of this system, see our blog post [They Vote For You - Finding the real facts about voting](http://oaf.org.au/2016/02/04/they-vote-for-you-finding-the-real-facts-about-voting/) (<http://oaf.org.au/2016/02/04/they-vote-for-you-finding-the-real-facts-about-voting/>).

Solutions

The problem of accountability could be solved if all or most votes were taken by division rather than ‘on the voices’. This is impractical under current procedures as divisions take up considerable time. However, electronic voting can change that.

Electronic voting would allow MPs to vote by simply pressing buttons on a screen which cuts out the time spent moving across the chamber, counting and recording, and then everyone returning to their seats. This time saving could allow many more votes to be officially recorded. We believe that all votes that are crucial to the passage of bills (for example, second reading and third reading votes) should be recorded so that everyone has access to a more accurate record of how their representatives vote on their behalf.

The [2012 Declaration on Parliamentary Openness](http://www.openingparliament.org/declaration)

(<http://www.openingparliament.org/declaration>) supports electronic voting for this reason. Article 20 calls for the use of roll call or electronic voting in most cases and calls for “maintaining and making available to the public a record of the voting behavior of individual members in plenary and in committees”. Our Foundation has endorsed the Declaration alongside many of the world’s leading parliamentary

monitoring organisations. Over [170 organisations](#) have now registered their support (<http://www.openingparliament.org/organizations>).

We believe that the arguments against electronic voting that were raised in the Committee's June 2013 inquiry [Electronic voting in the House of Representatives](#) (http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=proc/e_voting/index.htm) can be readily overcome. One concern was that electronic voting would lessen the visibility of other MPs' decision-making in the House ([section 3.6, 2013 inquiry report](#) http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=proc/e_voting/report/chapter3.htm). This can be resolved by using, for example, coloured lights to give a clear visual representation of the MP's vote to the rest of the chamber.

This particular solution is used in the Irish Dáil Éireann (Ireland's lower house), where a large display panel, that reflects the horseshoe layout of the chamber, lights up in green or red to show how each Member is voting. The display panel is positioned above the seat of the Ceann Comhairle (the Chairperson or Speaker). You can learn more about this system in the [press release announcing its introduction in 2002](#) (<http://www.oireachtas.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=121>) at or in the [Dáil Éireann Standing Orders](#) (http://www.oireachtas.ie/documents/proceduraldocuments/Standorders2011_revised.pdf). Once voting records are captured as digital data in real time we can create all kinds of new, helpful ways to see how how MPs vote – for those inside and outside the House.

Further, the concern that electronic voting would take away an important opportunity for MPs to “move away from their allocated seats and speak informally to their colleagues and Ministers” ([section 3.40, 2013 inquiry report](#) http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees?url=proc/e_voting/report/chapter3.htm) can be overcome by introducing more informal discussion opportunities during breaks. Time saved through the introduction of electronic voting could be allocated for this for example.

Summary

Electronic voting can improve transparency and efficiency in the House of Representatives. It will resolve a major gap in the current counting and reporting procedures by allowing the House to produce a fuller voting record. This record will be used by Australians to hold their MPs accountable, and will become an important historical record of MPs' contribution to our democracy. Without this level of accountability, our democracy remains open to abuse by politicians who say one thing to their electorate but vote quite differently within Parliament.

The OpenAustralia Foundation supports the introduction of electronic voting into the House of Representatives and looks forward to the opportunity to discuss this further.

Yours Sincerely,

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