Strategies to Support People with Intellectual Disability to Participate in Voting
Interim Report 2
Summary of results from Focus Groups

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Strategies to Support People with Intellectual Disability to Vote

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Electoral Commission Queensland ECQ
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Introduction

This is the second interim report of a collaborative project between the Living with Disability Research Centre, the Victorian Electoral Commission (VEC) and Inclusion Melbourne that is exploring strategies to support people with intellectual disabilities to vote. The first report provides the background and rationale for the study and interim findings from an online survey of staff of organisations involved in supporting the everyday lives of people with intellectual disabilities and their families (Bigby et al., 2017). This second report summarises the interim findings of the second phase of the research that, through the use of focus groups, aimed to explore the experiences of voting of people with intellectual disabilities in Victoria. The findings of the survey and focus groups will be used to inform the development of an initiative to facilitate the participation of people with intellectual disabilities in elections. La Trobe University Human Research Ethics Committee has provided ethics approval for the research (reference number HEC17-025).

Phase 2 – Method

Eight focus groups, each with between 2-9 people with intellectual disabilities, were conducted in metropolitan Melbourne and regional centres in Victoria. They aimed to explore the participants’ experiences of voting and their perspectives about political participation. Discussion in focus groups was guided by a topic guide that reflected some of the issues identified in the literature about voting and those identified from the phase 1 survey. Topics for discussion with participants were:

- awareness of voting processes and politics;
- experiences of voting;
- perspective on voting related issues and politics.

All focus groups were facilitated by the second author and a research assistant with extensive experience of working with people with intellectual disabilities. In some groups, a support worker who knew members of the group was present to assist with communication. A conversational approach was used to conduct the groups and participants were encouraged to take the discussion in any direction they wished. The groups lasted between 40 minutes and one hour and ten minutes, and were all audio recorded.

Prior to or following each focus group a short interview was conducted with each participant to collect factual data about their individual characteristics and experiences. A structured format was used that included questions about age, gender, living arrangements, and participation in elections or other aspects of civil society.
Participants were recruited through contact with a range of disability service and advocacy organisations that are in contact with people with intellectual disabilities. Most of the focus groups therefore comprised people with intellectual disabilities who were known to each other, and some were pre-existing groups run by organisations. Table 1 shows the location and composition of each of the focus groups.

Table 1. Focus groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Focus Group</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 1</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Inner metro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Outer metro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 3</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Outer metro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Regional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Inner metro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Inner metro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group 8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Inner metro</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>45</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The audio recording of each focus group was transcribed and de-identified. Data were analysed using an inductive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Each transcript was read and re-read and coded line by line, identifying broad topics areas and then the themes that reoccurred across the groups. The interview data were entered into SPSS and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

**Participants**

Table 2 sets out the characteristics of the forty-five people with intellectual disabilities who participated in the eight focus groups. Just over half were male (53%, 24) and just over half were aged under 40 years old (56%, 25). They lived in a range of settings, with the largest group being those who lived with their parents (42%, 19). The vast majority of participants were not in paid employment (78%, 35), and a small number (24%, 11) were studying.
Table 2. Participant characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 20</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
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<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employed</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
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<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Currently studying</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>11</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group home</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent living</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With family</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings

The quantitative data collected through interviews with each participant is described in the first section of the findings, and provides an overall picture of participants’ engagement in voting and other forms of political behaviour. In the second section, an initial analysis of the qualitative data from the focus groups about participants’ experiences and perspectives of voting and political participation is presented. These fell into seven themes that reoccurred across the groups, and each is described and illustrated with extracts from the focus group transcripts.
Quantitative Data on Voting and Other Political Behaviour

Tables 3, 4 and 5 show the voting and other political behaviour of the participants, and compares the characteristics of voters and non-voters. As Table 3 shows, just under half of all participants (47%, 21) had voted and most of those had voted on more than one occasion (67%, 14). As Table 5 shows more voters than non-voters were male (62%, 13), and more lived with family (48%, 10). Of those who did not vote, 50% (11) reported they had no interest in voting and 27% (6) said they had a desire to vote. Five percent (1) who had not voted were unsure if they would like to vote but data on desire to vote were missing for four people (18%).

Table 3. Voting behaviour

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voted</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At least once</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than once</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never voted</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unsure/Missing data</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4. Other political acts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-advocacy group membership</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of other political groups</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of government advisory committees</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of organisational governance committee</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of another type of organisational committee</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance at local community meetings/consultations</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in protests/rally/demonstrations</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contacting politicians or local members</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 4 shows, some participants had taken part in other forms of civil and political participation. More than half (53%, 24) had volunteered their time with local community, charities, NGOs or businesses. Additionally, many were members of self-advocacy groups (47%, 21) or had sat on government advisory committees (20%, 9) or other
sorts of organisational committees (20%, 9). Only one participant (2%) had attempted to contact politicians. Very few participants were members of political groups or organisations other than self-advocacy groups (11%, 5), attended local community meetings or consultations (11%, 5), or attended protests or rallies (16%, 7).

Table 5. *Voter and non-voter characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Voter $\ n=21$ (%)</th>
<th>Non-Voter $\ n=22$ (%)</th>
<th>Total $\ n=45$ (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13 (62)</td>
<td>11 (50)</td>
<td>24 (53)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>8 (38)</td>
<td>11 (50)</td>
<td>21 (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Under 39</td>
<td>13 (62)</td>
<td>12 (55)</td>
<td>25 (56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 40</td>
<td>6 (29)</td>
<td>8 (36)</td>
<td>14 (31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown/Missing data</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
<td>2 (9)</td>
<td>6 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employed</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6 (29)</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
<td>9 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>15 (71)</td>
<td>19 (86)</td>
<td>35 (78)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Living environment</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group home</td>
<td>4 (19)</td>
<td>10 (45)</td>
<td>15 (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent living</td>
<td>7 (33)</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
<td>10 (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With family</td>
<td>10 (48)</td>
<td>9 (41)</td>
<td>19 (42)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing data</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>0 (0)</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other political acts</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-advocacy group membership</td>
<td>13 (62)</td>
<td>8 (36)</td>
<td>21 (47)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Member of other political groups</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
<td>2 (9)</td>
<td>5 (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government advisory committees</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
<td>3 (14)</td>
<td>6 (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other organisational committee</td>
<td>2 (10)</td>
<td>7 (32)</td>
<td>9 (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protests/Rally/Demonstrations</td>
<td>5 (24)</td>
<td>2 (9)</td>
<td>7 (16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteering</td>
<td>12 (57)</td>
<td>12 (55)</td>
<td>24 (53)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square tests showed there were no significant differences in voting behaviour associated with participants’ age (under or over 40), living arrangements (living with family or not) and membership of self-advocacy groups (member or non-member). However,
further exploratory analysis suggested that being both a member of a self-advocacy group and living with family were linked to people having voted; all participants who met these criteria (3) had voted.

**Qualitative Data on Experiences and Perspectives about Voting and Politics**

**Frames of Reference for Voting**

Various experiences in their lives had provided participants with a frame of reference for thinking about voting. These included, having voted themselves, observing others voting by going along with them to the polling station, and voting in processes other than elections such as committees or training sessions. Participants said for example,

Yes, I have voted and I wanted to vote since I was 18. (Focus Group 4)

I have voted three times. (Focus Group 2)

No, I have not voted but I’ve been to places where we have to vote …. I’ve never voted personally. I’ve actually been with family when they’ve voted. (Focus Group 4)

I’ve never voted before but I’ve been to certain places to watch other people vote. I have heard about voting. (Focus group 8)

Oh, this? [Pointing at picture of polling station] Last time I saw one is at a school, primary school… [What were you doing there?] Well, my mum and my sister vote, so my mum wouldn’t let me vote… Yeah, because she figured I was too young for it. (Focus Group 1)

I’ve seen this [ballot] at work. Maybe somebody at work… [What were they voting for?] I don’t know. A committee or something. (Focus Group 1)

They showed us a little video, like the DVD I was talking to you about, and they just explained how to do the voting and then just went in and sat on this little table and then wrote it from one to four and then had to put it in this envelope and then they had to put it into the ballot box… went through [Advocacy Organisation]. (Focus Group 6)

I saw this before online. I did my course about the vote. I did my course about a vote where the teacher showed us the disabled can vote. Yeah vote, that’s this. (Focus Group 3)
Their past direct or indirect experiences of voting meant participants had a degree of familiarity with steps involved at the polling station and how preferences had to be recorded on voting papers. Although the procedural aspects of voting described by participants were fairly consistent, their understanding of why voting occurred was more diverse. They said, for example,

And then they want to make sure that your name is up there. And then, after that, they gave us some information; you know, that long sheet that you vote? (Focus Group 7)

Like, you vote, like one to eight...Yes. But not like [in order], but you have to do that and write that. Like do, four, six, three, one, five, eight, two, seven. (Focus Group 3)

Isn't it so that then the favourite one is number one? And your least favourite is the highest number... And then, from then on - yeah. (Focus Group 8)

[P1] They hand them out to you [how to vote cards] actually before you vote and they tell you what to vote for when you actually get it [Ballot paper] and they do it with a big white piece of paper…Yeah, the top one, you choose one, the bottom one, you can do so many so I do know... [P2] It’s actually quite interesting because you walk in and you’ve got three booths and I think you’ve got 10 minutes to answer the questions and then fold it and put it in the box. (Focus Group 4)

Well, [at the training] they had like numbers from one, two, three, four and then you had to pick the one that you wanted to win. (Focus Group 6)

We are voting for the Labor Party or the Greens or the Liberals. That does make sense. Of who’s going to win and who’s going to win the next election. (Focus Group 7)

[Mum] was voting for the prime minister… Because she liked him. And she was going to vote [for] another one but she said to me the reason she voted [for] him [is] because she likes him better because he’s much funnier. All the other ones are a bit rude and narky. (Focus Group 1)

**A Collective Experience**

Voting was perceived as a collective experience in terms of casting one’s vote on the day, its connection to community places, and the more collective benefits or issues associated with the broader processes of having elections. Participants talked, for example, about voting as
something that was done in the company of others, such as housemates or family members rather than alone, even in the case of postal voting,

Well, I lived in a DHS house and my other housemate votes too, so we both go along and we go and vote down at [Name of] School which is just on the corner of [Street name], just on the corner near a road. We go over and we vote over there. (Focus Group 6)

Yes, I have been voting before. I’ve been voting a lot. And I have voted with my parents. (Focus Group 7)

I was with my mum… But we were in different - separate booths. (Focus Group 5)

Yeah, so a few days before election, I got a letter in the mail with an envelope… mum and I sat down together. She did hers, I did mine. (Focus Group 8)

The comment from one participant who was obliged to do a postal vote because of access issues reinforced the sense that voting was a collective experience. She said,

I just find that I guess it is better doing it from home, but it would be nice to be able to [go] into that area and say so and so is here for voting. (Focus Group 8)

Participants were very familiar with the places that turned into polling stations at election time, and associated voting with those places. This familiarity appeared to reinforce the collective nature of voting and its connection to local communities,

[Mum] used to vote at the town hall, she used to vote there, or at my primary school. (Focus Group 1)

I remember voting in a few places around Melbourne: in the church and in the school; I remember doing that. (Focus Group 7)

Sometimes the RSL hall. And sometimes the footy club. (Focus Group 5)

I reckon that’s easy to do it at the school. (Focus Group 3)

They also alluded to the significance of voting as part of their responsibility to the broader collective society they belonged to. Talking about why they voted or whether they thought voting was important, participants said for example,
[Have] a say into government. (Focus Group 4)

And voting is very important to take part in. So, I mean, we have to vote every year, so we have to vote to see who’s going to win the next campaign at election and win the next election next year… I’m saying it’s always very important to vote every year. (Focus Group 7)

I think it is important because… they want to get the government altogether to make some place like better for everyone. (Focus Group 6)

There were also perceived personal benefits from voting. Those who had voted in the past talking about why they had done so said for example,

Because I like to be a part of it. (Focus Group 1)

But what makes me want to vote is because I find that helpful, so then I know who’s going to become the prime minister and what they’re talking about. That’s why. (Focus Group 7)

*Diverse Political Perspectives*

Participants held views about a range of political issues which ranged across the spectrum of ideological and political perspectives. Some were passionate about particular issues. A common concern was about being safe in the community, something that directly affected many participants. Talking about safety as an issue that affected themselves and others, participants said for example,

And I think to make our city safe… I want this area to be a safer place to stop violence in our CBD, in King Street and other places. (Focus Group 7)

Actually, I'd like them to focus more about bullying. (Focus Group 8)

[P1] The police are there to help, so they probably would be involved, yeah. They’re only trying to protect Melbourne. Not just that; I think they’re only trying to make sure that everything’s safe. [P2] Sorry, but I have to disagree with that... Police never help much. (Focus Group 7)

I think refugees come to Australia. They would be more safe than in another country… I think actually they can be safe. (Focus Group 8)
If they can’t sit there and do nothing really because if you just think of war you just make sure they’re all safe and kind to others. (Focus Group 6)

Participants talked about a wide range of topics that they thought were important and warranted political action to change. These included foreign affairs, equality, homelessness, the economy, infrastructure and health. Their views on these issues often differed, spanning both right and left wing perspectives. They said for example,

To me I’d like to change the world to have peace in the world because in Iraq in the war there’s too much fighting going on, too many people getting killed. (Focus Group 6)

Try to stop bombing other countries. (Focus Group 8)

It's regarding this ISIS thing. Get rid of them. Put them on a boat and put them back - put them back to their own country. (Focus Group 8)

What can [politicians] do? Well, make older people just the same - cost just the same as the young people… Yeah, so everyone - as a human right, we are all equal. All - everyone. (Focus Group 5)

I don't understand why we have to vote for same-sex marriage... We know we all are different. We are actually all different… we can be different - who we are actually with. (Focus Group 8)

I think with the homeless thing, we should go and help to find them a home. And like, we can pay their, I don’t know, bills and gas and all that. (Focus group 2)

Want it to be safe on our city streets and no homelessness. No homeless people to sleep on our streets. (Focus Group 7)

The electricity…Yeah the government changed everything around… Like, they’re putting the prices up and everything and that’s really hard for the people to live when they’re living at home. (Focus Group 2)

Well, to be honest, there really needs to be more bus routes… Yeah, and probably more water fountains too, would be nice. (Focus Group 5)

One thing could be medical things. And Medicare card percentages as well. (Focus Group 5)
Although much of the discussion was about issues that affected the whole community, some were more directly related to participants’ own disability related experiences,

Because you could be voting for people to take a pension away from people for disabilities… So that’s why you need to be sure who to vote for, because you could be voting for someone who wants to take the aged care pensions and hospital pensions and stuff like that away from them. (Focus Group 5)

Some of those men don’t even listen to the women at all and it’s the women who want to say something. Say if I [a female] wanted a job and there was another – say, he wanted the job, we both want a job, he’d be the first one to get chosen. They’ve push us away… You’re just treating us like as though we’re too dumb up here and we’re too stupid when we’re not. And we get treated as though we can’t do those things. (Focus group 4)

Yes. Like jobs for disability peoples… Yeah, I always do my course to try and get a job. (Focus Group 2)

Some participants also had strong views about the political stance of overseas politicians,

[P1] Oh, I hate [name of politician]. [P2] I hate [name of politician], because he’s racist. [P3]. He’s good. Yeah, I reckon [name of politician] is a good man. (Focus Group 3)

Reflecting their broad spectrum of political perspectives participants had differing views on the roles and responsibilities of the state and individuals. Some saw the state as having a benevolent role in ensuring people have their basic needs met in Australia and beyond,

Yeah, but it’s my opinion that the government should come and do this stuff… Yeah. The government should sort the money out so they can tell them and they give the money to the people that live out in the street and give them a house, so we can go and help them. (Focus Group 2)

And same with some people in the world, some people got no water, no food, no nothing. Again, the government maybe should help more, you know what I mean. (Focus Group 6)

Others described more of a law and order role for government and state institutions,
I do understand the government because not enough jails to keep the really, really bad people in jail to punish people... We’ve got a lot of people in Melbourne. They need more jails. (Focus Group 6)

Others still described visions more aligned with charitable models of care by community members or individuals,

I reckon helping people… Yeah… Well you tell them what sort of job you have to do. (Focus Group 3)

Despite having clear political views on various issues, participants had limited knowledge about the mechanics of government or the impact of particular policies on people’s lives. Very few had an affiliation with particular political parties. They said for example,

Too much tax. Too much taxes they bring in all the damn time… [What do they use the tax for?] Wouldn’t have a clue mate. (Focus Group 3)

I watch - sometimes what I do is I go to my grandmother's place… I go like, "What [name of political party] are you going to vote for?" And she goes, "I don’t want to go for that d***h***, [politicians name]." and first of all, [politicians name] is another one. And then - and I go, "Grandma, I might just go for the [name of political party]. They're the best party." (Focus Group 8)

I put [name of political party]… I chose, for me, I chose... [name of political party]… Because I know that [name of political party] always helped to keep Australia alive. (Focus Group 2)

Like many other community members, participants’ political views had been influenced by their families. For example, participants said,

This was funny. When I was doing it [voting] he goes - he grabs my forearm. He goes, “Whatever you do, don't grab anything from the [name of political party] because I don't want you to vote for [leader of political party].”… And I'm like, why? Because he's against - anything he does, he hates [leader of political party], too. [Do you think the same way? Or did you change your mind from your dad?] No. I was just like - I agree with him. Like, the [name of political party] - I'm like - yeah. I don't like [leader of political party]. (Focus Group 8)
Well, I did, yeah, because I always pick the [name of political party], always… Because my brother and he [works] there and he’s the first person who got me inspired by voting for the [name of political party]. (Focus Group 6)

*Perspectives on Political Participation - Interested, Apathetic or Disgruntled*

**Interested**

Participants’ perspectives about politics, democracy and political participation fell into three distinct groups. Those in the first group were interested in political participation, and were engaged or curious about politics and current affairs. They said for example,

She [name of politician] is my favourite because - now she's actually writing a book about herself and about working in the government. Yes, because I find it interesting. (Focus Group 8)

I want to [vote]. I reckon it would be good fun to do it, you have to pick the man. (Focus Group 3)

[P1] I would like to vote… Because I know it’s confusing, but I’d just like to learn. [P2] But what makes me want to vote is because I find that helpful, so then I know who’s going to become the prime minister and what they’re talking about. That’s why. (Focus Group 7)

Some of these interested participants had ideas about the way they thought government policy could be influenced. Talking about how change could occur they suggested various strategies. For example,

You can write a letter to the government. But you wouldn't know who to speak to, so you can just put, "To whom it may concern." (Focus Group 5)

Ask the government online or… If you see them in person, ask them. The person, if they’re in the town. (Focus Group 3)

I reckon the government should make a policy to stop all the violence that’s going on, so have a campaign saying “Stop violence and all the bullying around the place.”… Because I reckon it’s so bad that when people bully people and people violence people it’s just the thing that government will need to stop. (Focus Group 6)
Having meetings. By getting someone in parliament that will do something about it… and getting enough people to vote for the change. Not just having meetings. It's more about, I reckon, having more of a social aspect on the fact that people aren't aware of what goes around you. Like, if someone is doing drugs, what can happen to them? So if they're doing ice or they're doing ecstasy, what can happen to them or their families? (Focus Group 8)

**Apathetic**

The perspectives of the participants in the second group were characterised by feelings of apathy or disengagement from politics and current affairs. They expressed common views that politics did not impact directly on their lives and irrespective they could have little influence on the big issues in society. For example, they said,

[P1] My dad and mum watch the news but I never have watched the news… It’s all about bad news. [P2] It’s all bad news. (Focus Group 7)

I'm not - I know there's a few people that's high in politics, but I'm just in the low interest, really. I'll vote when I need to. But when it comes to other personal tie-ins and going through politics and reading about them in the paper and Facebook and newspaper and radio, all that social media type thing, I don't tend to look at it that much. (Focus Group 5)

I'm not really into certain politics in that. Just things are not related to me… I've got other things to worry about. (Focus Group 8)

[Does politics affect you?] [P1] No, not really. [P2] No, not really. (Focus Group 3)

I just don’t know myself… how would you know if you vote counts? (Focus Group 4)

**Disgruntled**

Those who fell into the third group were disgruntled or unhappy with the current political environment, and raised questions about the inequities of power among different groups in society. They felt excluded from politics and were distrustful of politicians. For example,

The government, they do listen. They don’t listen to poor people. (Focus Group 6)
[P1] Well, I’m not going to be sexist or anything like that but the whole time you’re voting there’s one female in Parliament. Why can’t they get more females to do with female issues like domestic violence, sexual assault, mental harm?... And the men don’t care about raising the issues like domestic violence against women, sexual harassment in the workplace and sexual assault because there’s not many places where people can go for crisis accommodation, people are homeless. Why don’t they open more buildings and make them into shelters for people? [P2] Sometimes I think us people like me and [other participant] who can’t read and that, we get left out. We get left out by the government because we don’t get that much money from the government, do we, [other participant]? [P3] I just wanted to say one thing, I reckon that they should tell the truth. There’s some of them that don’t tell the truth at all. They say what they’re going to say and then they don’t do it. (Focus Group 4)

[P1] They don’t actually listen to me. [P2] They don’t realise the problem because... they don’t understand about the poor people and they don’t understand how to be kind to them. (Focus Group 6)

[P1] I never vote. I never do vote. Probably because I don’t trust the government... I wouldn’t trust them if I could throw them out the door. [P2] I wouldn’t vote anyway... I hate them all. (Focus Group 3)

"It’s Not Easy to Vote"

Although many participants were familiar with the voting process, as discussed earlier, it was also perceived as being something that was difficult and challenging for them - from a procedural point of view but also in terms of the broader expectations they felt were placed on them when they participated in voting. Those who had voted talked about how hard it had been for them, saying for example,

And it’s not easy to vote, it’s very hard. (Focus Group 1)

[P1] It was alright, I think. But it was a little bit hard, though. [P2] I guess, the whole voting system, for me, is a bit advanced and confusing. (Focus group 5)

I get confused. (Focus Group 3)
Participants pointed to many different aspects of the process that they found hard to understand, including the interactions with polling station staff and voting papers in particular those for upper house elections. They said for example,

It’s hard for me to hear what they [polling station staff] are saying… when I went in there and wrote my name on it and did the whole thing and I can’t explain - I can’t hear what they’re talking about. (Focus Group 2)

Like if you confuse the colour, like white or green, you have to get somebody to show them how to do it, and pick the colour side, white or green. (Focus Group 3)

Sometimes some papers are a little bit tricky, voting all the number one, two, three, four, five. (Focus Group 4)

Well the white one [upper house ballot], I was like struggling to read the whole thing, to see what numbers I can put in, in each one. I was reading the whole thing and oh my god, it’s so hard. I did the green one [lower house ballot] instead of the white one. (Focus Group 2)

Some participants who had voted also talked about it being a stressful experience, in terms of the time pressure they felt under and their impression that it constituted some sort of test that they had to get right. Their comments suggested that they felt ill prepared for what the process involved. They said for example,

To be honest, at the time I was just trying to get it over and done with. I was really stressed. I was stressing like anything. (Focus Group 5)

[So how did you feel when you were voting?] [P1] Nervous. [P2] I did [too]. (Focus Group 2)

Very scary and I didn't know what to do, but I had some help from my dad. And the more I voted, the more I felt more comfortable with doing it - with voting. (Focus Group 8)

[P1] You don't want to be in there for too long, otherwise people will get probably agitated because it's such a big, long line behind you... It's kind of hard because we didn't really talk about it beforehand, so I just thought of something on the spot, really. [P2] It was hard that you've got to tick it. You've got to pick who you choose.
[P1] I was confused, apparently. I just had to take a go at things… I just looked at the first pamphlet on top of the pile. I couldn't go through them all. (Focus Group 5)

[P1] Because I thought it would be easy. I didn't really know what voting was. I thought you could just vote for anyone. Then it's done. I didn't realise that there was a lot of work into it. [P2] In your head, you have to make sure the person you vote for is the right person that does certain things. If you vote for the wrong person, rather than - you're left feeling - I don't know. (Focus Group 8)

A lack of preparation and the pressure to get through the voting process in a timely way so as not to hold up other voters meant that some participants felt they had not done it as well as they should have. One participant said for example,

The thing that I found really hard and difficult to understand is how in the hell can I vote for one to eight or one to 60 when I don’t know them from a bar of soap and I’ve never met them so it’s really hard. It makes it difficult to know how you’re going to vote and sometimes, crikey, one, two, five, six, nine, eight, three, two, I’m damn finished but I didn’t know what I was doing. (Focus Group 4)

Some of the participants who had not voted were deterred from doing so by their perception about the difficulty of the process and the pressure to make decisions about candidates. They said for example,

Why I don’t want to vote is it’s a bit hard and it’s all complicated. (Focus Group 5)

I don’t have to vote. My mum and dad vote but I don’t have to… [is that something someone told you or do you just feel that way?] Just feel that it’s a bit hard for what to put down… It’s really complicated. [What do you find complicated about it?] Tick the right box, I guess. (Focus Group 6)

At one stage I thought about voting, but that's when I heard them say it's very hard because you've got to choose very carefully. And once you've chosen, well, you have to agree that the person you chose does a good thing. But if they don't, well then, you wish you hadn't chosen that person. (Focus Group 8)

It was not only the actual process of voting that participants found difficult to engage with and sometimes stressful. They also found the performance of politicians disappointing and sometimes their aggression quite disturbing. Party political campaign materials were not well
adapted to their level of comprehension and failed to explain simply what each party stood for. For example, participants said,

Oh god. I’m like, “I’m going. I can’t handle this.”… No, they argued and the governments going to have a massive headache… Yeah. And they’re talking over each other. Nope… I think that they need to stop. (Focus Group 2)

See, you’ve got to be careful with the governor because he’s a bit violent, because I [have] seen him violent on telly, and some of the language that comes out his mouth. I said to the telly, I wash some soap out in his mouth, but it didn’t work. (Focus Group 1)

[P1] I’d seen a few things on TV… I’ve heard people say this one does that, that one does that. It’s still confusing to me, but I don’t know. [P2] I guess, it would make it easier if they stopped going against each other by, “You should vote for us because we do this and you shouldn’t vote for them because we are better than them.” [P3] I don’t like the - the conflict between each other. Like, putting down one team and saying that they are better than there is. (Focus Group 8)

I usually get a bit spaced out when it comes to the voting, especially going to the booth. You get all this paperwork... I would rather - wish they’d put the key points of the things that they want to achieve, rather than having a big life story about them... Once I know what they want to go for, I find it a lot more easy. Then you can just choose what you want. (Focus Group 5)

I’d love the politicians to be open and honest with us in regards to saying that they’re going to do something and then when they get it, they don’t do it and they don’t even bother coming back and telling you why they can’t do it or why they won’t do it. “I didn’t say that. You misunderstood me.” I don’t understand. (Focus Group 4)

Obstacles to Voting

As well as the more intangible obstacles to voting participants had experienced such as difficulties with the process, confusing material from political parties, the behaviour of politicians and the stress associated with it, participants also talked about some of the more tangible obstacles in their way. Two main obstacles were identified – the failure of polling station staff to take account of their needs and make suitable accommodations, and the
attitudes or direct action of their family members in preventing them from being enrolled to vote.

Some participants had had poor experiences with polling station staff who had not accommodated their preference to have a supporter accompany them during the voting process. They said for example,

[P1] Yeah, I was - it was the first time voting as well. Like, it's the first time. Still, you can't have your parents’ vote. Like, still. Like, you're not going to let me - I got into a full-on argument with him… I was like, so you're not going to let me vote with my parents there with me? And he was like “Nup. It's the government”. So sorry, like I don't give a crap, this is my first time voting. You're not going to let my parents help me vote? I have not ever done this before and yet you're not going to let me do it? So yeah, that was really frustrating for me at the time. [P2] That is why - that is why I've done a postal vote. Because it's like - that's why I've never gone down to one of the schools, because of that same reason. Because the guards there won't let no one - won't let my mum or my dad come help me. That's why I have always done a postal vote. (Focus group 8)

Voting is compulsory if you’re 18 unless you’re in an institution or you’re sick in hospital or whatever and you can prove that you were there at the time of voting. If voting is also a private thing, then… I can’t understand why they can’t be some other form or some other way that would allow them to do that… When we got to the polling booth, I was asking can I support my wife? They said it’s got to be one of the people, like the volunteers that walk around. That person supported her but she wanted me to do it. (Focus group 4)

Poor accommodation by polling station staff was not a universal experience, suggesting there is inconsistency in their approach and attitudes towards supporting people with disabilities. For example, one participant talked about the very responsive support he had received at a polling station,

And first I walked past it and then I walked straight in and I just said, “Now, I’ve got to stand on my own two feet and do this.” And so the bloke came and he asked me, “Can you read?” And I said, “No, I can’t read”. Well, he helped me. (Focus Group 4)
Many of the participants who had not voted had made this decision at the behest of their family members. Some had not been given any choice in the matter and simply told that they could not vote. For example, participants said,

[P1] I wanted to vote but mum said, “You wouldn’t understand it.” So she said, “It’s not worth it.” And she said, “You wouldn’t understand what they’re talking about so we’re not going to be here”… I haven’t voted since. [P2] I turned around and I said to her when we went to the voting place, I said, “What’s all this about, Mum?” And she said, “That’s none of your business. That’s got nothing to do with you. You don’t need to worry about it… You can’t read, you can’t write, you can’t spell, you’re too dumb”… So, in a way, I was told never to vote. (Focus Group 4)

Mum thinks I don't have to vote because she does it for me. (Focus Group 7)

One participant talked about how he had defied the instructions from his sister that he shouldn’t vote,

I voted once… and my sister put a stop to it… She doesn’t like me voting. I could kill her sometimes… When I went to vote, I went against my sister. I went against my sister and she said, “Don’t go into [Town] and don’t you go and vote,” And I went to the town hall and I got to the town hall, I thought my sister might have been there. (Focus Group 4)

**Unproblematic and Potential Sources of Support**

The perspectives of the participants about support for voting were somewhat different from concerns about potential for undue influence expressed by staff in the organisational survey (see Bigby et al., 2017). It is clear from the foregoing analysis that some participants experienced significant pressure not to vote from family. Many who did vote were supported by family members who influenced the way they did so, but few expressed any concern about the influence that was exerted. The strongest themes around support were ones of satisfaction with the support they received, and ideas about other types of support that might make the voting process easier. Participants commented for example,

My mum tells me what to tick with a pencil and what numbers to put down in the right order [Do you get to choose who to vote for?] My mum helps me, tells me which boxes to tick and what is to be ticked and who’s going to become… Prime minister. (Focus Group 7)
I actually get help with mine [From who?] My dad… [How did he help?] To put the numbers in [What did he say?] He just did it for me and then I put it in the slots. [So how did he know who you prefer?] It doesn’t matter. (Focus Group 2)

[P1] Well, I got to choose which ones for this part [Lower house ballot]. But for the big white part [Upper house ballot], my mum has had to help me with [that] part... So I only got help with that. [P2] [Mum] just went through it with me. And then I did it on my own, she didn't see it. (Focus Group 8)

So I'm at the part that my mum reads out. What they're going to do once they get in. So once I know, I will get my pen or my pencil and I'm like, okay, one on that one, two on that one, three on that one, four on that one, and so on and so on. Once I have done that, I can just copy off there, of what numbers I have picked… as soon as I hear some things, I put a number one against one… One of them is if they're going to support the NDIS. That's one thing that I would like them to focus on. If they're going to be good things for the NDIS, that those pretty much at number one for me. Being a good supporter of the NDIS. (Focus Group 8)

Yeah, I got my parents to help me. I did… They pointed the paper and I ticked it. I did. (Focus Group 5)

My mum lets me vote but the way that she lets me vote is she decides for me which government to vote for instead of me deciding. (Focus Group 4)

Participants suggested ways of making electoral processes and campaign materials more useful, accessible and less stressful for people with intellectual disabilities. They said for example,

Well, if they sent those pamphlets to people who are on the list - a few weeks or a month prior, at least, before the actual voting day, people would be able to read from them properly and then make a decision beforehand. So they can go straight in, knowing what they want - who to vote - and that sort of knowledge, that would be very helpful… Instead of on the spot like it usually is… That's why I get stressed about it every time. (Focus Group 5)
Make it clear for people with disabilities… For people to do these, make it clearer. So what they’re supposed to do with these [Points to example of a ballot]. (Focus Group 2)

Maybe for the easy read for the ones that don’t know how to do voting and tick boxes, to make it smaller [numbers of] candidates and make it easy for them to vote. (Focus Group 6)

Others saw a more proactive role for disability support services in supporting people to vote,

I think we should let [Disability support organisation] know that they should just try and learn how to vote, let everyone know that you can vote. (Focus Group 6)

**Discussion and Next Steps**

In summary, the interim findings suggest that people with intellectual disabilities have diverse political persuasions, experiences and motivations, and some are disengaged or discouraged from political participation by various factors. The civil and political participation of participants through voting and other acts was limited, but membership of self-advocacy groups and volunteering was relatively common. Seven themes emerged from focus group data. 1) People with intellectual disabilities had a frame of reference for voting and its purpose that was gained through various experiences. 2) Voting was perceived as a collective responsibility and activity. 3) Participants held diverse values and were concerned about a range of public issues. However, few voiced any political affiliation. 4) There were three distinct perspectives on political participation and social change. Some were interested and hopeful, others were apathetic and another group were disgruntled with political arrangements and felt they couldn’t make a difference. 5) Voting posed challenges for people with intellectual disability. For some people it involved stress and anxiety. 6) Attitudes and behaviour of family and polling staff posed obstacles to voting. 7) In contrast to concerns of staff about exerting undue influence on voting preferences, focus group participants were untroubled by the nature of support they received from family and others with voting procedures and political decision-making. They did however identify a need to simplify voting procedures and for clearer, more accessible information to help with political decision-making. Importantly, these data reflect the perception of people with intellectual disabilities rather than any objective measure of the quality of support they received. Our findings suggest the need to further explore the nature and quality of the individual support people with intellectual disabilities seek and receive for voting.
Some parallels and differences between our findings about the voting behaviour of people with intellectual disabilities and that of other populations were evident, but must be considered with caution given our small and unrepresentative sample. The people with intellectual disabilities in our study had a lower rate of voting compared to the Australian population in general (47% of the participants in the present study compared to 91% in the 2016 federal election) (Australian Electoral Commission, 2016). It is likely that lower rates of voting are partly accounted for by the absence of support to vote, the low expectations of others and the option available for people with intellectual disabilities to be removed from the electoral role at the request of a medical practitioner. While few people with intellectual disabilities engaged in political activities other than voting, comparisons with the general population suggest their rates of participation were relatively high in respect of attending meetings, membership of civil society organisations and volunteerism (Evans & Stoker, 2016). Similar to the general population, people with intellectual disabilities had low levels of knowledge about the workings of government and family, particularly parents, played a significant role in shaping political persuasion (McAllister, 2011).

The next phase of this research project involves facilitating a stakeholder committee to develop and oversee the implementation and evaluation of an initiative to support participation of people with intellectual disabilities in the next Victorian state election. The findings from the survey conducted in phase 1 and the focus groups in phase 2 suggest some potential directions for this initiative. Below are five working recommendations for further development through the stakeholder committee:

1. **Peer outreach by self-advocacy groups.** Self-advocacy groups are a potential resource for efforts to engage people with intellectual disabilities in political activity – particularly voting. Membership of self-advocacy was one of the few forms of civil participation that people with intellectual disabilities engaged with actively. Furthermore, self-advocacy offers connections to a community of peers that lends itself to the collective construction of voting among this group. Supporting and resourcing self-advocacy groups to conduct a voting outreach program or train-the-trainer program with self-advocates are two possible forms an initiative might take. However, self-advocacy groups often have little support and funding. Thus any program of this nature would need to ensure adequate resources and ongoing support is provided to such groups.
2. **Capacity building of disability support services.** It is clear that disability support services have a role to play in supporting this group to vote but their staff need guidance in order to effectively play this role. Findings of the staff survey suggest disability services and staff are unclear about their role as potential supporters and facilitators of political participation for the people with intellectual disabilities they support. Additionally, the potential support role of disability organisations was highlighted in the focus groups. Particular attention is drawn to group home services. While many participants in focus groups lived in group homes, there were few accounts of support staff in these settings aiding with voting activities by people with intellectual disabilities. An initiative targeting disability support organisations, and in particular group homes, to empower, guide and support managers and direct support staff in their role as facilitators of political participation would be valuable.

3. **Family member capacity building.** Focus group data illustrated the role of family as both a major support and major barrier to people with intellectual disabilities exercising their right to political citizenship. An initiative could include an educational program that targets family members about the political rights of people with intellectual disabilities and provides guidance around providing appropriate support. The developing knowledge around support for decision-making is likely to be transferable to supporting decisions around voting and political preferences (see for example, current work by Bigby & Douglas). It should be incorporated into any initiative that aims to resource families or support workers to better support people with intellectual disabilities to vote.

4. **Review of electoral staff training and policy.** The interactions that people with intellectual disabilities had with electoral staff were inconsistent. Some remarked on the positive assistance they received while others felt it had been less so. This suggests a review of electoral staff training in relation to support for people with cognitive disabilities and the policies that guide their practice may be useful to ensure all possible accommodations are made and there is consistency across the state.

5. **Developing more accessible information about political issues.** Finally, information regarding political issues, current affairs and the political platforms of candidates and parties could be made more accessible. Information about issues, campaigning materials and other media could be presented in clearer and
more accessible formats. However, supporters are also key to facilitating understanding and access to appropriate information. Political parties, advocacy groups, the media, disability support staff and families all play a role in this process. An initiative to resource and guide all these groups in better catering to people with intellectual disabilities is recommended. Furthermore, an initiative of this nature would conceivably benefit a much wider population than people with intellectual disabilities.

While immediate recommendations can aid in making political participation accessible to people with intellectual disabilities within present arrangements, findings also point to a need for larger and longer-term changes. Broader social exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities as well as the nature of political discourse and democracy in Australia contribute to the disenfranchisement of people with intellectual disabilities. While these aspects cannot easily be remedied, findings suggest they will continue to play a role in the political exclusion of people with intellectual disabilities until they are addressed. Nevertheless, valuable steps can be taken to ensure that present arrangements are as accessible as possible. These efforts will also contribute to longer term shifts to ensure people with intellectual disabilities are empowered to have their say in shaping the political environment.
References


