

# Review of informal voting

## 2022 State election

August 2023



## **Acknowledgement of Country**

The VEC pays respect to Victoria's traditional owners and their elders past, present and emerging who have been custodians of this country for many thousands of years. Their living culture and their role in the life of Victoria is acknowledged by the VEC.

### Version history

The draft version of this report was prepared for internal review in July 2023. It was revised in August 2023 and the final version was prepared for circulation in August 2023.

# Informal voting in the State election

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## Introduction

After each State election, the VEC analyses the rate and distribution of informal votes. The VEC also examines the informal ballot papers to determine the types of mistakes that informal voters made, and in particular whether voters appear to have deliberately spoilt their vote or have attempted to cast a formal vote. The VEC's work on informal votes contributes to public knowledge about Victorian elections and provides information assisting the VEC's voter information and education campaigns. The VEC's analysis of informal votes in the 2022 State election forms part of an Australian Research Council study into Understanding and Addressing Informal Voting in Victoria.

## Legislative Assembly (Lower House)

The informal voting rate in the Lower House election was 5.53% of total votes – a slight decrease from 5.83% in 2018. The informal voting rate for electoral districts varied widely, from 2.59% in Hawthorn to 11.14% in Melton.

There was a clear geographic pattern in the incidence of informal voting. Informal voting was highest in the northern and western suburbs and the outer south-eastern suburbs. The informal vote was lowest in the inner and eastern suburbs. This distribution appears to relate to socio-economic factors, particularly proficiency in English and the number of residents speaking a language other than English, education and income. In regional Victoria there was no such clear pattern, with most districts falling fairly close to the State average.

### Findings – the Legislative Assembly

For the first time since 1996 the informal vote has decreased - a significant achievement.

It was highest in the northern, western, and outer south-eastern suburbs.

It was lowest in the inner and eastern suburbs.

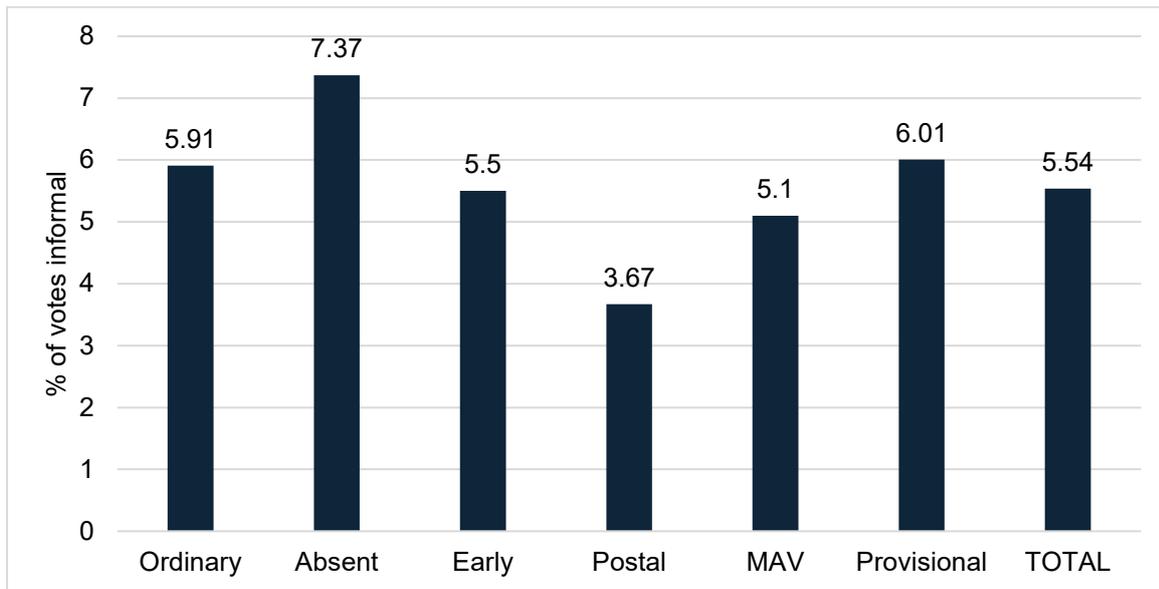
This distribution is linked to socio-economic status, particularly English proficiency, speaking a language other than English, education, and income. This link does not appear to exist in regional Victoria, where most districts were close to the state average.

### Recommendation 1

Continuing to tailor outreach programs based on those socio-economic factors will likely have a higher impact in suburban Melbourne compared to regional Victoria and should therefore be continued where there are higher rates of informality.

As Figure 1 shows, the informal voting rate varied substantially according to the type of vote. For an explanation of these categories of votes and the proportions of the overall vote, refer to the report to parliament.

Figure 1 Lower House informal vote percentage by type of vote



The informal voting rates in the two largest categories, ordinary and early votes, were close to the total State figure, with ordinary votes slightly above the State average. Absent voters were far more likely to vote informal, possibly because they didn't have access to how-to-vote card for their own districts. In contrast, the informal voting rate was much lower for postal voters, who had time to consider their votes. This pattern was consistent for the great majority of districts, regardless of the level of informal votes in each district.<sup>1</sup>

While the informal voting rate for Victoria as a whole barely budged from 2018 to 2022, there was considerable variation by individual districts. The informal voting rate increased in 31 of the 88 districts. The largest increase was 4.85 percentage points, in Point Cook district, while the greatest decrease was 3.77 percentage points, in Thomastown district. The geographic distribution of changes to the informal voting rate was broadly similar to that for the informal voting rate itself, with the greatest increases in the western and parts of the northern suburbs and peri-urban areas, and reductions concentrated in inner Melbourne and the eastern side of the metropolitan area. The changes to the informal vote thus reinforced the existing dichotomy between the high informal vote western and northern suburbs and the low informal vote inner and eastern suburbs.

The 2022 State election saw a record number of candidates for the Legislative Assembly, increasing from 510 in 2018 to 740. The average number of candidates per district consequently increased from 5.8 to 8.4, with 16 districts having 10 or more candidates, and two districts (Point Cook and Werribee) having 15 candidates. Statistics from local government elections indicate that the informal voting rate increases in electorates with 10 or more candidates. There is evidence of this occurring in the 2022 State election. There was a fairly strong positive correlation of .660642346<sup>2</sup> between the number of candidates and the informal voting rate. The informal vote in districts such as Werribee (9.72%, 15 candidates) or Melton (11.14%, 14 candidates) indicate the effect of a high number of candidates.

<sup>1</sup> The minor provisional and marked as voted categories varied more from district to district.

<sup>2</sup> This measure, and all other correlations in this paper, use linear as opposed to a regression analysis which may indicate different relationships.

### Finding – candidate numbers and informality

There is a fairly strong positive correlation of 0.66 between the number of candidates and the informal voting rate.

There is a historical trend of ever-increasing candidate numbers. In 2022 a record 1,194 candidates contested the election, a significant increase on the 887 in 2018. The data below indicate that while there was a strong general trend towards a reduction in the informal vote, aided by VEC outreach activities, this trend was inhibited by the increasing number of candidates.

### Recommendation 2

While the VEC cannot limit legitimate nomination of candidates, knowledge of districts that have high number of candidates after the close of nomination may allow for changing prioritisation of information and education campaigns aimed at reducing informality where feasible.

Comparison of the 2018 and 2022 State elections provides further evidence of the effect of the number of candidates.<sup>3</sup> All but one of the 29 continuing districts where the informal vote increased also had more candidates than in 2018. The stand-out example was Altona/Point Cook, which had 10 more candidates than in 2018 and where the informal vote increased by 4.85 percentage points. Conversely, the informal vote decreased in all of the six districts that had fewer candidates than in 2018, with the most notable example being Thomastown (informal vote down 3.77 percentage points, three fewer candidates). In 40 districts there were more candidates in 2022 than in 2018, yet the informal vote declined, by up to 1.59 percentage points (Forest Hill/Glen Waverley). These figures suggest that there was a strong general trend to reduction in the informal vote, aided by the VEC's community outreach activities, but that this trend was inhibited by the increase in the number of candidates.

## Types of informal votes

Similar to the process at the 2018 election, in 2022 the VEC examined the informal votes from all districts, measuring the incidence of various types of informal votes. However, in 2022 this was conducted in collaboration with academics from the University of Adelaide and Flinders University, as part of an Australian Research Council study into informal voting. The academics suggested the introduction of additional categories of informal vote, to gain more detailed information about the motivations and behaviour of informal voters. The new categories relate mostly to written comments and drawings.

Table 1 shows the detailed categories of informal votes for Victoria as a whole.

Table 1 Categories of Lower House informal votes

Category	Description	Number	%
Blank	Completely unmarked	46,117	21.64
Drawing – ballot paper crossed out	Typically slashes across the whole of the ballot paper	10,653	5

<sup>3</sup> It is not possible to compare the completely new districts of Berwick, Greenvale and Laverton.

Category	Description	Number	%
Drawing - offensive	The usual anatomical drawings	1,502	0.7
Drawing – other	Mostly vague scrawls, but includes ‘smiley faces’ and pictures of donkeys	1,959	0.92
Writing – against compulsory voting	Explicitly opposes compulsory voting	134	0.06
Writing – corruption	Accuses candidates or government of being corrupt or criminal	433	0.2
Writing – makes no difference	States voting is a waste of time or makes no difference	415	0.19
Writing - against the system	Statements denouncing the political system or the electoral system, including claims that the election is rigged	368	0.17
Writing – restricted choice	Complaints of being unable to vote for parties not on the ballot paper	191	0.09
Writing – none of the above	Statements rejecting all of the candidates, and sometimes adding a joke candidate such as ‘Me’ or Mickey Mouse	4,132	1.94
Writing – other protest	A wide variety of complaints, such as poor roads or high taxes, and demands for Free Palestine	1,615	0.76
Writing – other	Writing that does not fit into any of the categories above. Includes best wishes to electoral staff	5,762	2.7
Numbers – 1 only		37,154	17.44
Numbers – 1 and other symbols	Mostly 1 and a tick or cross	862	0.4
Numbers – no 1, but expresses preferences	Often starts with a 2 or other number	1,252	0.59
Numbers – insufficient	The voter has a correct sequence but has failed to number all the boxes (or all but one)	28,464	13.36
Numbers – sequence error	The voter has numbered all the boxes but has skipped or duplicated a number	31,201	14.64
Numbers – one box blank, one number missing	The voter has left one box blank and skipped a number	10,275	4.82
Numbers – Langer vote	The voter has started numbering correctly and then repeated numbers, such as 1, 2, 3, 3, 3. Named after Albert Langer, who advocated this method as a way of subverting preferential voting in the 1990s.	233	0.11

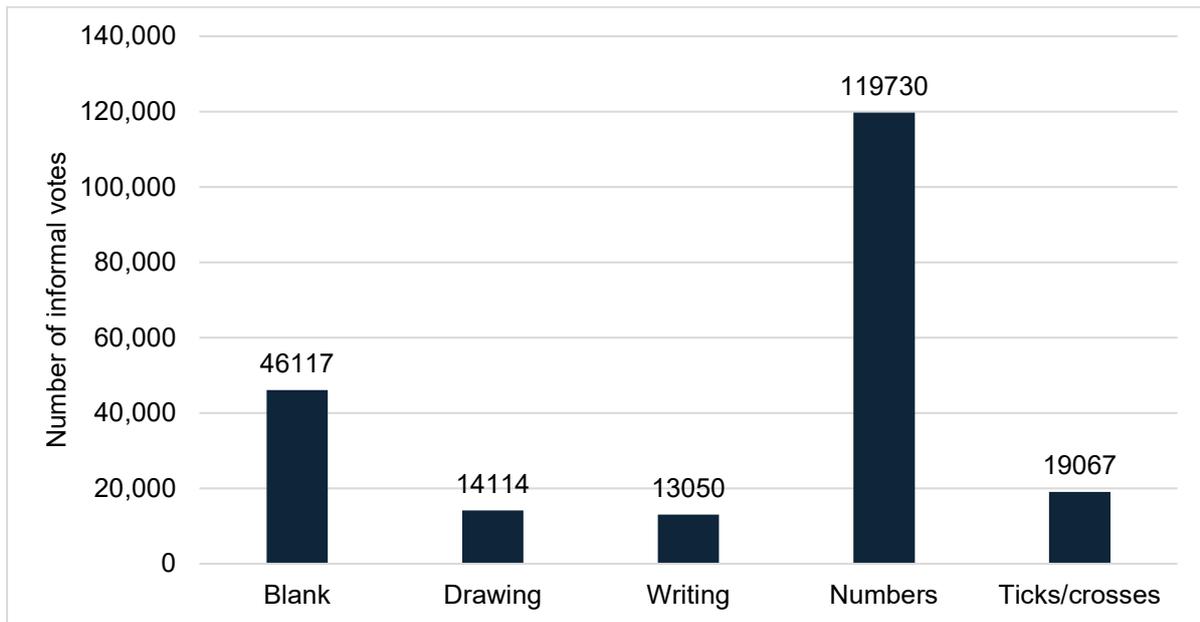
Category	Description	Number	%
Numbers – includes 0	Ballot papers including a 0 in a sequence, plus ballot papers with all zeroes.	3,521	1.65
Numbers – obscured	Ballot papers where the numbers have been obscured	1,203	0.56
Numbers – deliberate	Ballot papers with clearly deliberately informal numbers, such as 1, 2, 25, 300, or 20, 20, 20, 20	4,696	2.2
Numbers – other	Numbers that don't fit into any of the above categories	869	0.41
Ticks/crosses – preference	The ballot paper clearly indicates the desired candidate through a single tick or cross	11,528	5.41
Ticks/crosses - deliberate	Ticks or crosses in all boxes	5,878	2.76
Ticks/crosses - other	Ticks or crosses that don't fit into the above categories, including ones with, say, three ticks or crosses	1,661	0.78
Administrative error – really formal	Votes that on close examination are formal, including ones with the last box blank (which are formal under savings provisions in the Electoral Act). A small number were issued for the wrong district.	984	0.46
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>213,062</b>	

As in previous elections, blank ballot papers were the biggest category of informal votes (21.64% of the total). The second largest was Numbers – 1 only (17.44%), cast by voters who seem to have carried across the instructions for voting above the line for their region. Substantial proportions of informal voters made other accidental numbering errors – Insufficient (13.36%), sequence error (14.64%) and one box blank, one number missing (4.82%). Other large categories were ballot papers that had been crossed out (5%) and ballot papers indicating a preference through a tick or cross (5.41%).

The individual Writing categories were all very small in number, except for 'None of the above' (1.94%) and 'Other' (2.7%). The number of explicit objections to compulsory voting was insignificant (134, 0.06% of the total). The 'None of the above' category included a fair number of statements by sovereign citizens along the lines of 'No candidate suitable to follow my will'. Denunciations of Dan Andrews and COVID lockdowns were frequent. Conspiracy theories were more evident than in past elections, such as 'the election is fraudulent and unconstitutional treason' or 'its pencil so you can erase'.

Figure 2 shows the results for Victoria in broader categories.

Figure 2 Broad categories of Lower House informal votes



Numbers were by far the largest category, comprising 56.19% of all informal votes.

A critical question in this study is how many informal voters deliberately spoiled their votes, and how many tried to vote for a candidate but got it wrong. It's impossible to tell exactly what was in voters' minds, but it's reasonable to make assumptions based on the markings on the ballot paper. This study classes the following categories as deliberately informal:

- Blank
- Drawing
- Writing
- Numbers – includes 0
- Numbers – deliberate
- Ticks and crosses – deliberate.

The following categories are classed as showing a preference:

- Numbers – 1 only
- Numbers – 1 and other symbols
- Numbers – insufficient
- Numbers – sequence error
- Numbers – one box blank, one number missing
- Numbers – Langer vote
- Ticks and crosses – preference.

### Finding - deliberate and non-deliberate informality

Most informal votes, 56%, showed a preference which indicates non-deliberate informality, while a strong minority, 41%, were apparently deliberate.

### Recommendation 3

The VEC is most likely to have a direct impact on non-deliberate informality. In this regard, a future result where non-deliberate informality is a smaller proportion of all informality will be a

marker of the success of VEC outreach programs. Deliberate informality may require more effort to reduce as it involves changing attitudes instead of providing information. The VEC should continue the primary focus on non-deliberate informality.

Figure 3 shows the statistics for these categories. Most informal votes (119,717, or 56.19%) showed a preference, while a strong minority (87,376, or 41.01% were apparently deliberately informal.

Figure 3 Deliberately informal and Preference (unintentional) Lower House informal votes

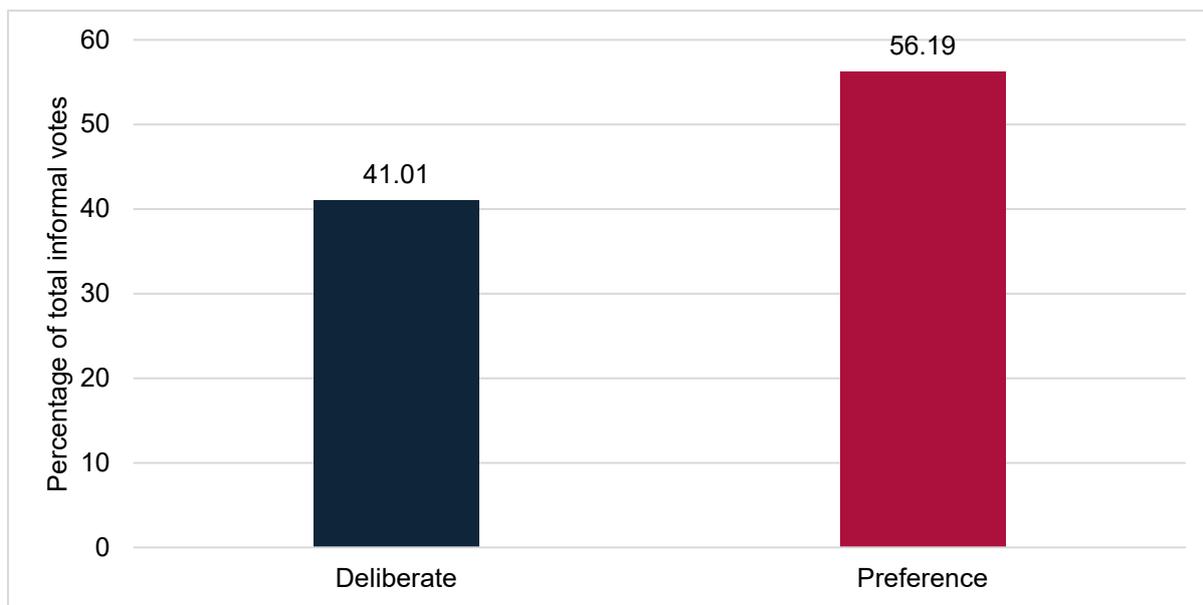
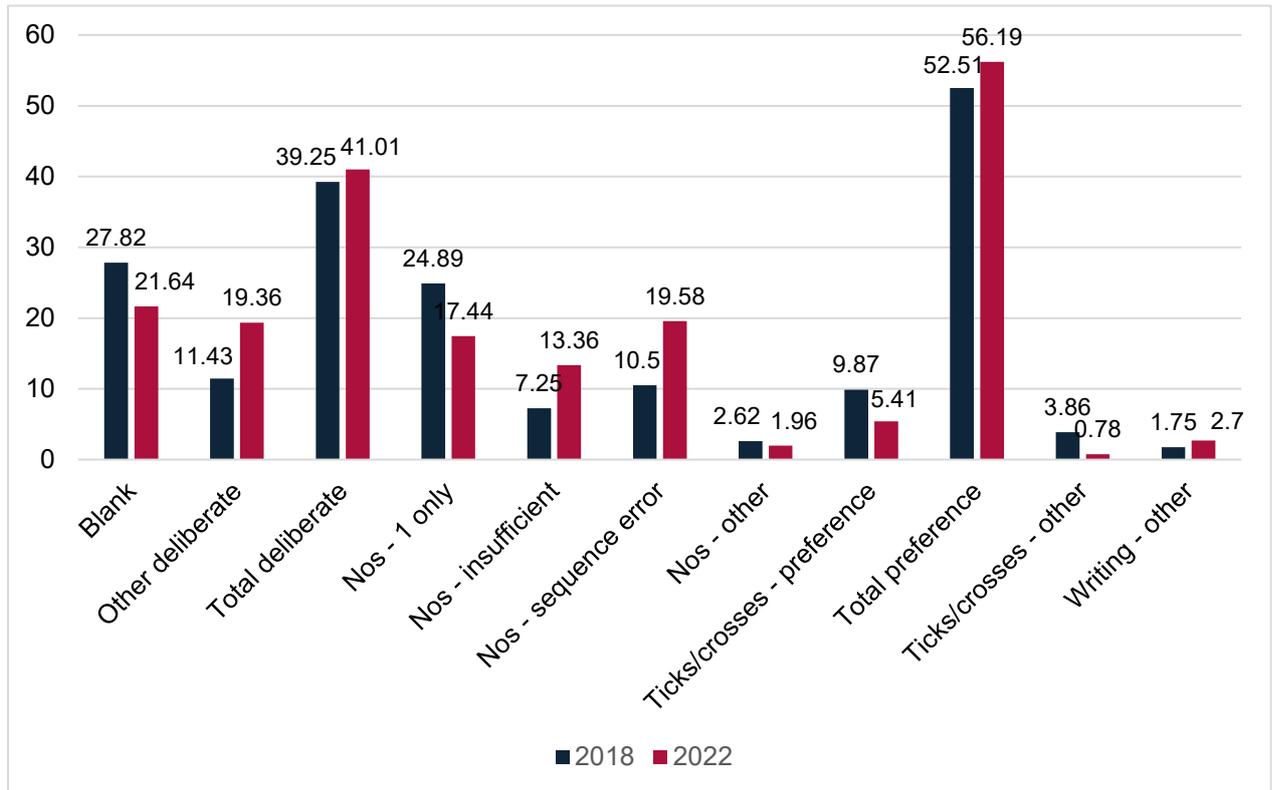


Figure 4 shows how informal voting at the 2022 State election compared with 2018.

Figure 4 Lower House informal voting categories, 2018 and 2022



The proportion of blank votes declined substantially from 2018 to 2022, from 27.82% to 21.64%. However, other deliberately informal votes almost doubled (from 11.43% to 19.36%), so that total deliberately informal votes increased by 1.76 percentage points. Numbers – 1 only and ticks and crosses – preference votes decreased, possibly reflecting the impact of the VEC’s information campaign about numbers. On the other hand, the proportion of other numbering errors increased dramatically – which may have been the result of the large number of candidates in many districts. Overall, the proportion of informal votes indicating a preference increased by 3.68 percentage points.

**Finding - changes in category of informality from 2018 to 2022**

Numbers 1 only and ticks and crosses have decreased. This is an indicator of success of the VEC’s education campaigns about numbers.

This can be contrasted with the dramatic increase in number sequence errors, which approximately doubled. This trend is likely the result of the significantly higher number of candidates in districts.

There was a change in the ways voters deliberately voted informally; blank voting became less frequent while other types increased, resulting in a slight increase in the proportion of deliberately informal voting.

### District variations

In most districts the incidence of blank ballot papers clustered around the State average of 21.64%. South Barwon had the highest proportion of blank ballot papers (32.25%) and Mulgrave had the lowest (12.23%). The districts with the greatest number of candidates

tended to have the lowest proportions of blank votes. Possibly the sight of so many candidates impelled voters to at least put something on their ballot paper.

There was something of the same pattern for crossed out ballot papers. Again, most districts were close to the Statewide figure of 5%, and the districts with the most candidates tended to have lower proportions of crossed out ballot papers. Mulgrave's 2.7% (14 candidates) was the lowest in the State. The Narracan supplementary election had by far the highest proportion (9.09%) – perhaps reflecting some voters' exasperation at having to vote again after only two months.

Ballot papers featuring offensive drawings were few in number across all districts. The highest proportion was in Eltham (1.53%) and the lowest in Glen Waverley (0.2%). Proportions tended to be lower in working class areas such as Dandenong, Mulgrave and St Albans.

Numbers for the various protest writing categories were very low across all districts, and variations between districts appear to be random. A minor exception was the higher than average number of 'restricted choice' ballot papers for the Narracan supplementary election, where there was no ALP candidate. The 'none of the above' group was one of the larger Writing categories; the percentage of ballot papers in this group ranged from 0.29% (Monbulk) to 4.58% (Bendigo East), with no real pattern evident.

There was a wide range in the incidence of '1 only' ballot papers, from 5.8% (Narracan) to 37.98% (Malvern). Narracan's numbers were much lower than any other district's, because it was a stand-alone election, without the presence of region ballot papers to confuse some voters into just voting '1'. Other districts with low percentages in this category had long ballot papers and a high overall informal vote, such as Point Cook and Werribee. Conversely, the districts with the highest proportions in this category, such as Malvern and Prahran, had low overall informal voting rates and relatively few candidates.

#### **Finding - Narracan and categories of informality**

The Narracan election was a noticeable outlier in many regards. It had a moderately high informality rate of 6.58% and by far the highest proportion of crossed out ballot papers at 9.09% of all informal votes ballot papers. This category of informality may reflect voters' exasperation at having to vote twice in such a short period of time.

The type of informality errors was also likely influenced by the Narracan district ballot not being accompanied by a region ballot. Narracan had the lowest number of '1 only' ballot papers, an error that is likely induced by region ballot papers instructing voters to vote 1 above the line.

#### **Finding – correlation between candidate numbers and categories of error**

There were strong positive correlations between the number of candidates and the following categories of informal voting (which are all apparently unintentional informal categories):

Voters indicating a preference (unintentional informality) – 0.631

Insufficient numbering – 0.761

Sequence errors – 0.765

One box blank, one number missing – 0.726

### Combined sequence problems – 0.886

The insufficient numbering category also varied widely, from 1.99% (Eltham) to 21.91% (Point Cook). As might be expected, the districts with the longest lists of candidates were also the ones with the most voters who started numbering their ballot paper but failed to complete it. There was a strong positive correlation of .7606908 between the number of candidates and the percentage of insufficient numbering.

The proportion of ballot papers with sequence errors ranged from 5.94% (Malvern) to 27.5% (Mulgrave). Districts with high proportions of sequence errors were a disparate group, including some of the most affluent areas in the State (Brighton, 22.96%), country districts such as Shepparton (17.89%) and outer suburban areas such as Melton (26.06%). What they had in common was a lot of candidates. As with insufficient numbering, there was a strong positive correlation of .765224 between the number of candidates and the percentage of sequence errors.

The 'one box blank, one number missing' category is effectively a subset of sequence errors. The incidence of this category varied enormously, from 0.45% (Thomastown) to 10.02% (Mornington). There is no apparent pattern in distribution of this category, and part of its randomness may be because the category is easy to miss when examining ballot papers. Despite the apparent randomness, this category also had a strong positive correlation (.726533) with the number of candidates.

Grouping the categories with sequence problems (Insufficient, sequence errors, one blank-one missing, Langer vote) reveals a very strong association between this combined group and the number of candidates. The correlation between this group and the number of candidates was .886447. In contrast, there was practically no association between the incidence of this group and the proportions of residents speaking languages other than English (.138638). There was a wide range in this group, from 9.94% (Malvern, 6 candidates) to 56.55% (Mulgrave, 14 candidates).

'Numbers – deliberate' was a small group, comprising only 2.2% of all informal votes. Its incidence by district ranged from 0.05% (Hastings) to 4.06% (Thomastown), with most districts clustering around the State average. Districts with the highest proportions in this category tended to be safe seats.

'Numbers including 0' is in effect subset of 'Numbers – deliberate' (though a few ballot papers with sequences such as '0, 1, 2, 3, 4, 5' may have been attempts at a formal vote). Only 1.65% of informal votes fell into this category, with proportions ranging from 0.6% (Point Cook) to 2.48% (Mill Park). Most districts were close to the Statewide figure. There was no apparent pattern in the variation between districts.

### Finding - categories of informality and languages other than English or low proficiency

Some categories had noticeably strong and weak correlations with speaking languages other than English or low English proficiency:

Sequence problems – weak at 0.139

Ticks and crosses – stronger at 0.679

This suggests that voters from some migrant backgrounds were not likely to be affected by sequence errors, but, were more likely to vote in a way familiar to them which may be formal in other countries – such as using ticks and crosses.

#### **Recommendation 4**

Identify countries which use ticks and crosses as formal votes that form large groups of the migrant population in Victoria. This will allow for more tailored information campaigns focused on the 'ticks and crosses' type of error.

'Ticks and crosses – preference' was one of the larger categories, comprising 5.41% of informal votes. Its incidence was greatest in districts containing high proportions of residents speaking languages other than English (though it was surprisingly low in the outer western suburban Melton, Point Cook and Werribee districts). Country districts had few votes in this category. There were positive correlations between this category and proportions speaking languages other than English (.679787236) and residents not proficient in English (.59884534). The pattern suggests that some migrants had a clear preference and voted as they did in their country of origin, by placing a tick or cross against their chosen candidate, unaware that this was an informal vote.

Votes indicating a preference made up more than half of Victoria's informal votes. Proportions in districts ranged from 41.84% (South Barwon) to 73.73% (Mulgrave), with most districts close to the statewide figure of 56.19%. As with most of the Number categories, the highest proportions were in districts with the most candidates, and there was a positive correlation (.631474) between the percentage expressing a preference and the number of candidates.

The distribution of deliberate informal voting was more or less a mirror image of informal votes showing preferences. Incidence ranged from 23% (Mulgrave) to 55.96% (South Barwon), with most districts fairly close to the statewide figure of 41.01%. The 12 districts where deliberate informal voting was more than 20% above the average were a disparate group: eight were metropolitan and five regional; eight were won by the ALP and five by the Coalition; a few districts such as Thomastown and Mill Park had high CALD populations, while other such as Eltham and Gippsland South were just the opposite. What these districts had in common was a small number of candidates; all but three districts had seven or fewer candidates. (The exception, the Narracan supplementary election, had 11 candidates and a deliberate informal vote rate of 53.46%. The high deliberate rate there can be explained by the facts that some voters would have resented having to vote again only two months after the State election, that there was no ALP candidate, and that there was no concurrent region ballot paper inducing electors to vote 1 only.) Conversely, the eight districts whose deliberate informal vote rate was more than 20% below the State figure had the common feature of a large number of candidates : two of these districts had 15 candidates, two had 14 and one had 11. Again, the critical factor was the number of candidates. The more candidates there were, the higher the number of accidental numbering errors, and so the lower the proportion of deliberate informal votes.

#### **Finding - intentional informality outlier districts**

##### **High intentional informality**

There was very little in common for the 12 districts with the highest deliberate informal voting (20% above the average). They were a mix of metropolitan and regional, had mixed results

electing ALP and Coalition candidates, some had high CALD populations while others had low CALD populations. The only common factor was the low number of candidates.

### Low intentional informality

Conversely, for the 8 districts with the intentional informality rate 20% below the average there was one common factor – a large number of candidates, with the number of candidates as high as 15 in one instance. This reinforces earlier findings, that the biggest driver of non-intentional informality is the number of candidates.

## Variations within districts

In most districts, ballot papers were amalgamated before the official distribution of preferences, which means that information on informal votes was available on a district-wide basis. However, in 21 districts votes were kept in separate parcels by voting centre and batch of declaration votes. These were the ten districts won by an absolute majority (so a preference distribution was not required to obtain a result), the seven districts where computer counts took place (so the physical ballot papers did not need to be amalgamated), and four other districts where the informal votes were not amalgamated. These 21 districts are not perfectly representative of the State as a whole; the ten districts won by absolute majorities were very safe seats, and National seats were over-represented (six seats) and Liberal seats under-represented (three seats). Nevertheless, the informal votes from these districts provide valuable information about differences within districts.

Table 2 shows the proportions of each category of informal votes for ordinary votes (those cast on election day at voting centres within the elector's own district) and the four main types of declaration votes.

Table 2 Lower House informal vote categories by type of vote

Category	Ordinary (%)	Absent (%)	Early (%)	Postal (%)	Provisional (%)	Total (%)
Blank	19.37	17.64	17.64	44.78	8.63	19.94
Drawing: crossed out	4.83	4.81	4.63	4.13	1.28	4.67
Drawing: offensive	0.76	0.98	0.52	0.03	-	0.61
Drawing: other	0.84	0.73	0.75	0.22	0.96	0.75
Writing: against compulsory voting	0.08	0.11	0.05	0.05	-	0.07
Writing: corruption	0.17	0.22	0.14	0.11	-	0.15
Writing: makes no difference	0.18	0.16	0.13	0.03	-	0.14
Writing: against system	0.2	0.22	0.22	0.05	-	0.2
Writing: restricted choice	0.14	0.27	0.06	-	-	0.1
Writing: none of the above	1.73	1.82	1.53	0.97	-	1.6

Writing: other protest	0.72	0.68	0.61	0.32	0.32	0.63
Writing: other	3.5	2.93	2.06	1.13	1.92	2.6
Numbers: 1 only	15.87	13.56	16.26	15.48	18.21	15.89
Numbers: 1 and other symbols	0.63	0.38	0.43	0.27	0.32	0.5
Numbers: no 1 but expresses preferences	0.52	0.6	0.5	0.19	0.64	0.48
Numbers: insufficient	14.33	21.33	15.21	9.6	22.68	14.93
Numbers: sequence error	15.46	14.81	18.82	13.08	19.17	16.99
Numbers: one box blank, one number missing	5.2	4.73	5.56	2.78	4.79	5.19
Numbers: Langer vote	0.1	0.05	0.11	0.11	-	0.11
Numbers: includes 0	1.54	1.71	1.48	0.73	2.24	1.47
Numbers: obscured	0.56	0.3	0.47	0.51	0.96	0.5
Numbers: deliberate	2.27	2.69	2.31	1.38	1.92	2.25
Numbers: other	0.2	0.11	0.4	0.03	0.32	0.28
Ticks/crosses: preference	6.35	5.43	5.77	2.1	10.86	5.77
Ticks/crosses: deliberate	3.16	2.66	3.06	1.4	2.24	2.96
Ticks/crosses: other	0.71	0.46	0.8	0.24	0.32	0.71
Admin error – really formal	0.57	0.6	0.48	0.27	0.96	0.51
<b>TOTAL (numbers)</b>	<b>22,899</b>	<b>3,680</b>	<b>29,217</b>	<b>3,707</b>	<b>313</b>	<b>59,925</b>

### Finding - modes of voting and links to categories of informality

The most important observation is that the mode of voting does not appear to influence the types of informality that occur. The prevalence of categories of informality by voting modes largely matches the district average. This is a positive sign as it indicates that the trend towards more varied methods of voting does not distort or increase the informality trends.

The only exception to this is **postal voting**. Postal votes accounted for a far larger portion of blank votes, more than double all other methods of voting at 44.78% of all blank votes. As such, other types of informality were much lower among postal votes.

The most striking feature of the table is how little variation there was. Nearly all categories of informal ordinary, absent and early votes were very similar to the proportions for the districts as a whole. The incidence of 'Numbers – 1 only' votes was slightly lower than average for absent votes (13.56% compared to 15.89% for the whole district), and the proportion of absent votes in the 'Numbers – insufficient' category was higher than average (21.33% compared to 14.93% for the district as a whole). Among early votes, the only category worth noting was 'Numbers – sequence error', which was about 2 percentage points higher than the average.

Postal votes stood out from the other types of votes. The proportion of blank votes was more than twice that for all votes (44.78% compared to 19.94%). Conversely, other categories of informal votes were much lower than the average – particularly those relating to sequence errors, and ticks and crosses. The various writing categories and offensive drawings were also much lower than average, perhaps reflecting a concern that a postal vote is not as anonymous as one placed in a ballot box. For whatever reason, almost half of the electors who had gone to the trouble of obtaining a postal vote but who voted informal decided on the path of least resistance, by leaving their ballot paper blank.

The small number of provisional votes showed a contrasting pattern, with very few blank or other deliberate votes and a higher proportion of numbering errors and ticks and crosses indicating a preference.

## Legislative Council (Upper House)

### Finding - comparing the Upper and Lower Houses

The Upper House has much lower informality rates – 3.22% compared to 5.53% in the Lower House. Upper house informality improved significantly from 2018, down from 3.96%.

The biggest driver of the lower informal voting rate for the Upper House is the legislative provisions in the *Electoral Act*. The ability to vote 1 above the line or at least 1 to 5 below the line mean that candidate numbers generally do not drive additional informality as voters do not have to number every box. However, in 2022 all regions had so many parties that there was a need for ‘double-decker’ ballot papers with two rows of parties above the line and two rows of candidates below the line. Some voters appear to have been confused, numbering 1-5 in both rows below the line, or writing 1 in both rows above the line.

The informal vote for the Upper House was much lower than for the Lower House, at 3.22% of all votes compared to 5.53%. The method of voting for the Upper House largely accounts for this difference. While voters have to number every box on a district ballot paper, they have a choice on a region ballot paper of either simply voting ‘1’ above the line for the party or group they favour (as 90% of voters do), or voting at least 1 to 5 below the line. A tick, a cross or another clear mark in a box above the line is accepted as a formal vote. If a voter who opts for below the line makes a mistake beyond ‘5’, by skipping or duplicating a number, it is still a formal vote, and preferences can be counted up to the break in sequence.

These rules meant that the number of candidates (which in any case was very similar in all regions) had minimal effect on the Upper House informal vote. There was little scope for sequence errors, as these could only affect below-the-line voters, who just had to write numbers from 1 to 5. However, the increased number of parties in 2022 meant that all regions had to have ‘double-decker’ ballot papers, with two rows of parties above the line and two rows of candidates below the line. Some voters appear to have been confused by this layout, typically numbering 1 to 5 in both rows below the line, or writing 1 in both rows above the line.

On a district basis, the proportion of Upper House informal votes ranged from 1.28% (Hawthorn) to 6.71% (Dandenong). Its incidence broadly matched that for the Lower House, with higher informal votes in the northern and western suburbs and lower informal votes in the eastern suburbs.

Informal votes were lowest (less than 2%) in the inner urban areas and the inner eastern and south-eastern suburbs. Surrounding this area was a belt of moderately low informal votes (2-3%), including the inner western suburbs and the eastern suburbs extending out to the Dandenong Ranges and Upper Yarra Valley. In regional Victoria, the informal vote was moderately low in Bendigo, most of Geelong, the peri-urban areas east of Melbourne, and much of the North-East.

The informal voting rate was higher (more than 4%) in the northern and western suburbs and in the industrial south-eastern suburbs around Dandenong. The greatest concentrations (more than 6%) were in Dandenong, Thomastown and Broadmeadows. In regional Victoria, the largely working-class Lara, Melton and Morwell districts had moderately high informal voting rates.

There was a positive correlation (.55078519) between the informal voting rate and the proportion of residents who were not proficient in English, and also between the informal vote and the proportion of residents speaking a language other than English (.483618851). On the other hand, there was a strong negative correlation between the informal vote and the proportion of tertiary-educated residents (-.59286966).

The Upper House informal voting rate decreased substantially in 2022, from 3.96% in 2018 to 3.22%. Informal votes also fell in absolute numbers, from 147,313 to 124,726.

Comparison within Victoria is complicated by electoral boundary changes. However, it is possible to make a broad comparison of the regions, as changes to most of the region boundaries were comparatively minor. The decline in informal voting occurred across all regions, ranging from 1.13 percentage points in Northern Metropolitan to 0.32 percentage points in North-Eastern Metropolitan. The smaller decline in North-Eastern Metropolitan may be the result of boundary changes, in which the region incorporated swathes of the northern suburbs. Northern Metropolitan was the only region that had a 'double decker' ballot paper in 2018. The fact that it had the sharpest decline in informal votes in 2022 is no coincidence; it indicates that the change to a 'double decker' ballot paper in the other regions in 2022 tended to handicap the decline in the informal vote in those regions, as some voters were confused by the two rows above and below the line. At district level, comparison of the eight districts whose boundaries were unchanged in 2022 also reveals a general decline in the informal vote, as shown below.

Table 3 Upper house informal votes by districts 2018 and 2022

District	2018	2022	Change 2018-2022
Bendigo East	3.14%	2.54%	-0.6
Bendigo West	3.69%	2.84%	-0.85
Gippsland East	3.25%	3.1%	-0.15
Lara	4.46%	4.14%	-0.32
Mornington	2.87%	2.02%	-0.85
Murray Plains	4.62%	3.5%	-1.12
Northcote	2.99%	2.21%	-0.78
Shepparton	4.55%	3.51%	-1.04

## Types of Upper House informal votes

Table 4 shows the incidence of the categories of informal votes. There are more categories than for the Lower House, because above-the-line and below-the-line votes are treated separately. Some categories do not exist for votes above the line, because a single 1 or tick or cross is a formal vote.

Table 4 Frequency of different categories of upper house informal votes

Category	Description	Number	Percentage
Blank	Completely unmarked	49,378	40.52%
Drawing – ballot paper crossed out	Typically slashes across the whole of the ballot paper	6,831	5.61%
Drawing - offensive	The usual anatomical drawings	1,329	1.09%
Drawing – other	Mostly vague scrawls, but includes ‘smiley faces’ and pictures of donkeys	5,804	4.76%
Writing – against compulsory voting	Explicitly opposes compulsory voting	229	0.19%
Writing – corruption	Accuses candidates or government of being corrupt or criminal	399	0.33%
Writing – makes no difference	States voting is a waste of time or makes no difference	536	0.44%
Writing - against the system	Statements denouncing the political system or the electoral system, including claims that the election is rigged	299	0.25%
Writing – restricted choice	Complaints of being unable to vote for parties not on the ballot paper	41	0.03%
Writing – none of the above	Statements rejecting all of the candidates, and sometimes adding a joke candidate such as ‘Me’ or Mickey Mouse	3,393	2.78%
Writing – other protest	A wide variety of complaints, such as poor roads or high taxes, and demands for Free Palestine	2,629	2.16%
Writing – other	Writing that does not fit into any of the categories above. Includes best wishes to electoral staff	3,161	2.59%
Fragments	Ballot papers that have been torn to pieces	22	0.02%
ATL - Numbers – ALP/DLP and Liberal/LDP	Attempts to vote for both ‘Labor parties’ or both ‘Liberal parties’	1,604	1.32%
ATL - Numbers – no 1, but expresses preferences	Often starts with a 2 or other number	302	0.25%
ATL - Numbers – includes 0	Ballot papers including a 0 in a sequence, plus ballot papers with all zeroes.	717	0.59%
ATL - Numbers – deliberate	Ballot papers with clearly deliberately informal numbers, such as 1, 2, 25, 300, or 20, 20, 20, 20	1,250	1.03%

ATL - Numbers – other	Numbers that don't fit into any of the above categories. Includes ballot paper with a 1 on each row above the line	7,396	6.07%
ATL - Ticks/crosses - deliberate	Ticks or crosses in all boxes	810	0.66%
ATL - Ticks/crosses - other	Ticks or crosses that don't fit into the above category, including ones with, say, three ticks or crosses	4,267	3.5%
BTL - Numbers – 1 only		11,133	9.14%
BTL - Numbers – 1 and other symbols	Mostly 1 and a tick or cross	106	0.09%
BTL - Numbers – no 1, but expresses preferences	Often starts with a 2 or other number	224	0.18%
BTL - Numbers – insufficient	The voter has a correct sequence but has failed to number 1 to 5	1,191	0.98%
BTL - Numbers – sequence error	The voter has numbered 1 to 5 but has skipped or duplicated a number	1,412	1.16%
BTL - Numbers – one box blank, one number missing	The voter has left one box blank and skipped a number	263	0.22%
BTL - Numbers – Langer vote	The voter has started numbering correctly and then repeated numbers, such as 1, 2, 3, 3, 3. Named after Albert Langer, who advocated this method as a way of subverting preferential voting in the 1990s.	1	0.00%
BTL - Numbers – includes 0	Ballot papers including a 0 in a sequence, plus ballot papers with all zeroes.	439	0.36%
BTL - Numbers – obscured	Ballot papers where the numbers have been obscured	201	0.17%
BTL - Numbers – deliberate	Ballot papers with clearly deliberately informal numbers, such as 1, 2, 25, 300, or 20, 20, 20, 20	847	0.7%
BTL - Numbers – other	Numbers that don't fit into any of the above categories, including ones with separate sequences on each of the rows below the line	5,058	4.15%
BTL - Ticks/crosses – preference	The ballot paper clearly indicates the desired candidate through a single tick or cross	1,429	1.17%
BTL - Ticks/crosses - deliberate	Ticks or crosses in all boxes	551	0.45%

BTL - Ticks/crosses - other	Ticks or crosses that don't fit into the above categories, including ones with, say, three ticks or crosses	3,596	2.95%
Administrative error – really formal	Votes that on close examination are formal, including ones with a sequence of numbers above the line, or more than 5 numbers below the line blank (which are formal under savings provisions in the Electoral Act). A number were issued for the wrong region/district.	4,848	3.98%
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>121,853</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Finding - categories of informal votes in the Upper House**

The most significant observations about categories of informal votes are:

Blank ballots are by far the most common type of informality, at 40.52%

Some voters misunderstand the instruction to vote 1 above the line, voting simply 1 below the line at 9.14%

Sequence errors are far less common than for the Lower House due to formality rules being more generous, occurring at 1.16% compared to 14.64%

**Recommendation 5**

Continue to intensify training of region formality rules for election staff conducting recheck counts. While VEC training already focuses intensely on formality rules for counts, there is capacity to improve accuracy even further.

Blank ballot papers were by far the largest category, comprising more than two in five informal votes. Possibly, faced with such a large ballot paper, many voters decide to do as little as possible by leaving it blank.

All other categories were dwarfed by comparison. The second largest category, with 9.14% of the total, were those where voters placed a 1 below the line on the ballot paper, apparently misunderstanding the direction to vote 1 above the line. Significant proportions of informal voters crossed out the entire ballot paper (5.61%) or drew pictures (4.76%), perhaps finding that the size of the ballot paper offered scope to express their feelings or creativity. ‘Numbers – other’, combining above-the-line and below-the-line votes, made up a substantial 10.22% of the informal votes. A sizeable proportion of these were by voters who were apparently confused by the double decker ballot paper, either writing two sequences of numbers above or below the line, or writing 1 in each vertical pair of parties above the line.

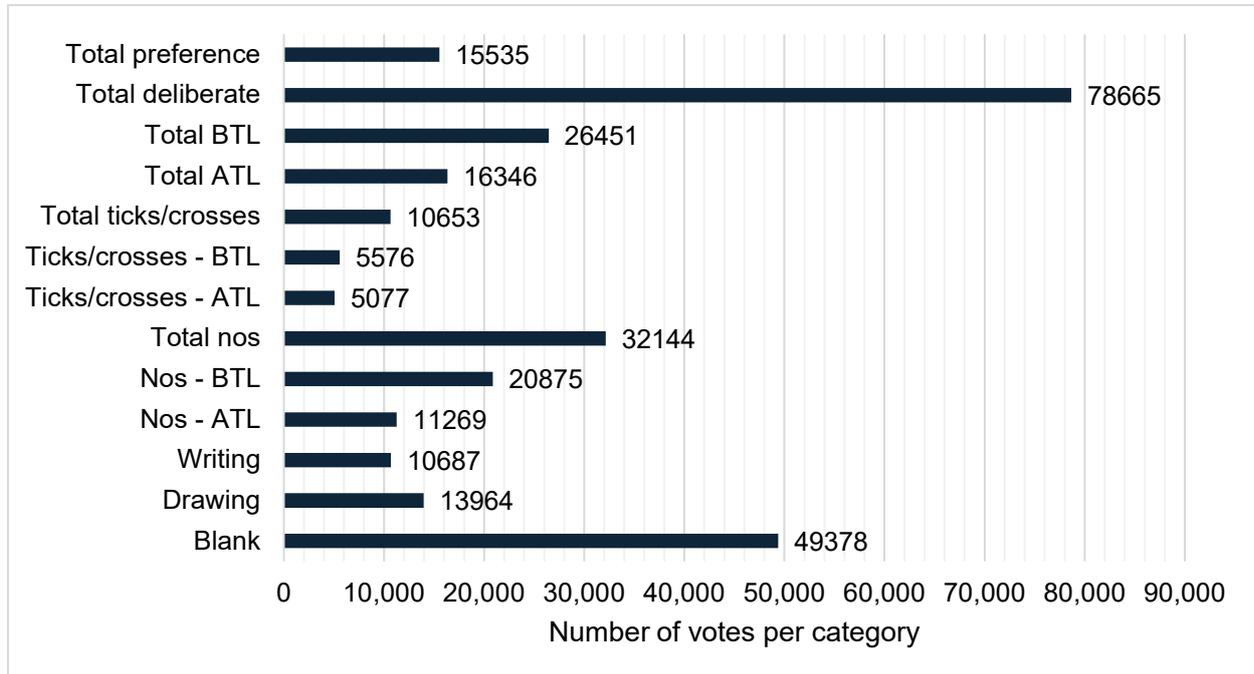
Insufficient numbers and sequence errors – so prominent in the Lower House informal votes – were insignificant for the Upper House. There was far less scope for these sorts of errors in the Upper House election, where sequences only apply for below-the-line votes, and voters simply have to number 1 to 5.

One category unique to the Upper House was ALP/DLP and Liberal/LDP votes. This category comprises votes where the voter wrote a 1 or tick in both the Australian Labor Party and Labour DLP boxes, or in both the Liberal and Liberal Democrats boxes. These appear to have been voters who were confused by the similar names of the parties, and who decided to hedge their bets by voting for both. A total of 1,604 voters (1.32% of all informal votes) voted in this way.

Votes that were actually formal or that were cast for the wrong region or district made up a substantial 3.98% (4,848 votes) of the votes examined. Election officials mistakenly classed these votes as informal, led astray by the size of the region ballot paper and the more complex voting rules. Examples included votes that were informal above or below the line but formal in the other section of the ballot paper, votes that included a sequence above the line, or votes that included a sequence error beyond 5 below the line. It should be noted that this level of errors was very unlikely to have affected any results, as these votes comprised only 0.13% of all votes and were scattered across the various parties and candidates.

Figure 5 shows informal votes grouped into broader categories.

Figure 5 Upper House informal votes – broad categories and subtotals



Blank ballot papers were substantially larger than any of the combined categories. The combined ticks and crosses group were far fewer than the Numbers group. Above-the-line votes comprised some 90% of all Upper House votes, but only 13.54% of informal votes. Conversely, below-the-line votes made up 21.92% of informal votes. The remaining proportion of informal Upper House votes were neither above-the-line or below-the-line. In practice this typically meant that the ballot papers were blank or had other writing on them. The higher incidence of below-the-line votes reflects the fact that voting below the line is more complex and there is more scope for error. Below-the-line votes outnumbered above-the-line in all but one district (Narracan) and were more than twice as numerous as above-the-line votes in 18 districts. The proportions of below-the-line votes ranged from 11.53% (Gippsland East) to 32.83% (Laverton); they tended to be strongest in a scattering of metropolitan districts and weakest in country Victoria. The incidence of above-the-line votes varied from 8.57% (Benambra) to 23.54% (Hastings); they tended to be strongest in parts of the western and south-eastern suburbs and weakest in country districts and the inner suburbs.

It is very easy to vote for the Upper House, by placing 1 above the line. Few voters get it wrong and cast an accidental informal vote. The consequence is that almost two thirds (64.56%) of Upper House informal votes were deliberately informal. Conversely, only a small proportion (12.75%) were cast by voters who had a clear preference but whose vote was informal.

Table 5 compares categories of informal votes for the Upper House and Lower House.

Table 5 Lower House and Upper House informal vote categories, by number and percentage

Category	Lower House		Upper House	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Blank	46,117	21.64%	49,378	40.52%
Drawing – crossed out	10,653	5%	6,831	5.61%
Drawing – offensive	1,502	0.7%	1,329	1.09%
Drawing – other	1,959	0.92%	5,804	4.76%
Writing – against compulsory voting	134	0.06%	229	0.19%
Writing – corruption	433	0.2%	399	0.33%
Writing – no difference	415	0.19%	536	0.44%
Writing – against system	368	0.17%	299	0.25%
Writing – restricted choice	191	0.09%	41	0.03%
Writing – none of the above	4,132	1.94%	3,393	2.78%
Writing – other protest	1,615	0.76%	2,629	2.16%
Writing – other	5,762	2.7%	3,161	2.59%
Numbers – 1 only	37,154	17.44%	11,133	9.14%
Numbers – 1 and other symbols	862	0.4%	106	0.09%
Numbers – no 1, but expresses preferences	1,252	0.59%	526	0.43%
Numbers – insufficient	28,464	13.36%	1,191	0.98%
Numbers – sequence error	31,201	14.64%	1,412	1.16%
Numbers – one box blank, one number missing	10,275	4.82%	263	0.22%
Numbers – Langer vote	233	0.11%	1	0.00%
Numbers – includes 0	3,521	1.65%	1,156	0.95%
Numbers – obscured	1,203	0.56%	201	0.16%
Numbers – deliberate	4,696	2.2%	2,097	1.72%
Numbers – other	869	0.41%	12,454	10.22%
Ticks/crosses – preference	11,528	5.41%	1,429	1.17%
Ticks/crosses – deliberate	5,878	2.76%	1,361	1.12%

Ticks/crosses – other	1,661	0.78%	7,863	6.45%
Admin error – really formal	984	0.46%	4,848	3.98%
Total drawing	14,114	6.62%	13,964	11.46%
Total writing	13,050	6.12%	10,687	8.74%
Total numbers	119,730	56.19%	32,144	26.38%
Total ticks/crosses	19,067	8.95%	10,653	8.74%
<b>Total deliberate</b>	<b>87,376</b>	<b>41.01%</b>	<b>78,665</b>	<b>64.56%</b>
<b>Total preferences</b>	<b>119,717</b>	<b>56.19%</b>	<b>15,535</b>	<b>12.75%</b>

Although blank votes were proportionally much higher in the Upper House election, the absolute number of blank votes was very similar for both Houses. This suggests that the same people tended to leave their votes blank in both elections. Other categories with similar raw numbers were offensive drawing and total drawing and writing. Most of the writing categories were small in number in both elections, but were proportionally higher in the Upper House election. The region ballot paper provided more space for comments, some of which were conspiratorial in nature.

The Number categories were far smaller in the Upper House election, as were the Ticks and crosses categories (except for the 'Other' category for both numbers and ticks and crosses). Consequently, the number of Upper House votes indicating a preference was only one eighth that for the Lower House in raw numbers. Upper House deliberately informal votes were slightly fewer in number than for the Lower House, but were proportionally much higher.

## Region and district variations

Although blank votes were by far the largest category of Upper House informal votes in every district, their incidence varied considerably, ranging from 30.47% (Kororoit) to 53.08% (Benambra). The highest proportions of blank votes were in country districts, especially in Northern Victoria Region. Proportions were lower in metropolitan districts, with seemingly random variations between districts. These variations were within a comparatively narrow band; the percentage blank vote was within 20% of the State figure in 79 of the 88 districts.

### Findings - correlations in both houses

Intentionally informal voting correlated strongly with a high proportion of Australian-born residents at 0.775. The inverse of this – the negative correlation of intentional informality with a higher proportion of non-Australian born residents was not as strong at -0.53.

This indicates that different communities will require different campaigns to reduce informality depending on their country of birth and the other factors discussed in this paper. The VEC currently conducts campaigns on this basis and should continue to do so.

The pattern of deliberately informal votes resembled that for blank votes. The rate ranged from 50.45% (Laverton) to 77.62% (Benambra). The deliberately informal vote rate was higher than average in country districts, and significantly lower than average in metropolitan districts. Regions tended to behave consistently. For example, all the districts in Northern

Victoria region had deliberate informal rates well above the State average. Districts in Southern Metropolitan were slightly below the average, as were those in Northern Metropolitan. Most Western Metropolitan districts were significantly below the average (Point Cook, Sunbury and Werribee were exceptions). A major factor affecting the incidence of deliberately informal votes was the percentage of Australian-born residents, with a strong positive correlation of .77457861 between these two variables.

The distribution of informal votes showing preferences was an imperfect mirror image of the deliberate informal votes. The preferences group was weaker in country districts and regions, and stronger in metropolitan. There was a negative correlation between the percentages of preference informal votes and those of Australian-born residents. However, the picture was more complex than for the deliberate informal votes. The negative correlation with Australian-born residents, at  $-.53875898$ , was weaker than the positive correlation between deliberate informal votes and the Australian-born. The distribution of preference informal votes was more unequal, ranging from 6.87% (South-West Coast) to 23.82% (Prahran). The incidence of preference informal votes was more than 20% outside the State average in almost half of the districts. These districts did not always follow the general pattern. Three of the 20 districts with the lowest proportions of preference informals were metropolitan, and one of those metropolitan districts, Kalkallo, had a high proportion of residents born outside Australia. The 22 districts with the highest proportions of preference informals were all metropolitan, but were otherwise diverse, including mobile, young, inner urban Prahran, affluent districts such as Kew, and districts with high CALD populations such Dandenong and Kororoit.

## Conclusions

### Finding - a positive inflection point and meaningful impact

#### A positive inflection point.

The headline takeaway is that informal voting decreased in 2022. This is a significant inflection point after a long period of informality rising. The rate of accidental informal voting declined by 1.76 percentage points in the Lower House.

#### Meaningful impact

The lesson from the 2022 State Election is that the VEC's community outreach activities can have a positive impact. Despite the rising number of candidates, the VEC has managed to drive down informality and with sustained efforts this positive trend can continue.

For the VEC, the story of informal voting in 2022 is largely positive. Compared with the 2018 State election, the rate of informal voting declined in both Houses. The decline occurred despite a record number of candidates, which led to larger ballot papers that were more difficult to complete. Concerning the Lower House election, 2022 marked a welcome turn around after informal voting rates had increased at every election since 1996. As for the Upper House, a decrease of 0.74 percentage points put the informal voting rate lower than any other election under the current Upper House system, which commenced in 2006. In fact, the informal voting rate was the lowest since the 1999 election.

The nature of the informal vote in 2022 was also encouraging. The key divide in informal voters is between deliberate informal votes, in which the voter decides not to cast a formal vote, and accidental informal votes, in which the voter tries to vote correctly but fails. Deliberate informal votes are about motivation, while accidental ones are about information. While the VEC tries to reduce both types of informal vote, it particularly addresses accidental informal voting, through information campaigns about voting correctly that target both Victorians in general and sectors that have had an information deficit. The good news about 2022 is that the rate of accidental informal voting for the Lower House declined by 1.76 percentage points compared with 2018. In the Upper House election, less than a third of the informal votes were accidental.

Turning to the types of accidental informal vote, there were striking reductions in the proportions of '1 only' votes and ticks and crosses – preference votes in 2022, which may be a result of the VEC's information campaign. The marked increase in the number of sequence errors in 2018 was largely caused by the spurt in the number of candidates. Without these additional candidates, the informal voting rate would have been lower than it was.

The huge difference in the accidental informal voting rate between the Lower House and Upper House in 2022 illustrates how the voting system affects voters' behaviour. The obvious difference is the requirement to number all the boxes on a district ballot paper, contrasting with the ability to just vote 1 on a region ballot paper. Other differences are consequences of the mechanics of voting. '1 only' votes were the second largest Lower House category in 2022, and the great majority of these would have been cast by voters misapplying the instructions on the attached region ballot paper. Similarly, below-the-line '1 only' votes were the second largest Upper House category, and these were cast by the voter misapplying the instructions about how to vote above the line (though these were much

fewer than the Lower House '1 only' votes). The 'double decker' region ballot papers also confused some voters.

Legislative change could reduce the informal vote. If optional preferential voting had applied in 2022, the 119,717 informal preference votes in that election would have been formal, halving the informal voting rate. A change to the Upper House voting system (either to a system like the Commonwealth Senate's or to Hare-Clark as in Tasmania) and tougher party registration rules could lead to a reduction in the number of parties and candidates, thereby reducing sequence errors on Lower House ballot papers and mistakes on Upper House ballot papers. The ability to vote 1 above the line on a region ballot paper has reduced informal voting for the Upper House but has increased informal voting for the Lower House, with more than 17% of informal votes being "1 only". Repeal of voting just 1 above the line for the Upper House should almost eradicate "1 only" votes for the Lower House. Such changes would affect Victoria's electoral system in a variety of ways, and are matters for Parliament to determine.

Without legislative change, the tasks for the VEC are to reinforce the training of temporary staff on the formality of Upper House ballot papers, to clarify ballot papers (within the constraints of the legislation), and above all continue to engage and inform all voters through a variety of channels. The lesson from the 2022 election is that the VEC's work can have a positive effect.