
Does My Vote Matter? The Electoral Behaviour and Attitudes of People Experiencing Homelessness

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➤ **Abstract** *People experiencing homelessness (PEH) are a highly marginalised group who often experience an intersection of associated social disadvantages, including civic exclusion. Yet there has been little research into their patterns of, and attitudes towards, political participation. To partly address this gap, we conducted fieldwork among PEH in central Adelaide, South Australia during Australia's 2019 Federal Election. We used a mixed-methods approach involving 164 unique participants in order to uncover perceived obstacles to enrolling and voting, and to ascertain what might make voting easier or more appealing. The research also produced higher-level insights into the worth and value of voting for PEH. We were particularly interested in understanding the psycho-social aspects of their voting exclusion and the symbolic significance of electoral participation for PEH. A key finding is that, although the study participants had much lower enrolment and turnout rates than the general population, this was not obviously due to lower levels of political interest. Rather, PEH face barriers to voting that are closely tied to their lived experience of disadvantage and marginalisation. In this context, reform of electoral policy and practice (such as greater flexibility in enrolment practices) is a key element of addressing the civic exclusion of PEH.*

➤ **Keywords** *homelessness; voting; electoral inclusion; political equality; belonging; citizenship*

Note on data: The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

Introduction

People experiencing homelessness (PEH) are among the most marginalised members of society. This marginalisation extends to their electoral participation, with PEH invariably turning out to vote at much lower rates than the average for voting age populations.¹ This is especially so in Australia, where compulsory voting ensures that turnout rates among the general population are very high at around 90% of registered voters (AEC, 2022). However, little is known about the voting behaviour and experiences of PEH. To partly address this gap, we conducted fieldwork among PEH in central Adelaide, South Australia in order to investigate their levels of electoral engagement and their experiences of, and attitudes towards, voting. We were also interested in learning about perceived obstacles to enrolling and voting and in ascertaining what might make voting easier or more appealing. The research represents one of the most extensive investigations of electoral participation among PEH ever conducted and, among other things, it produced higher-level insights into the worth and value of voting for PEH. We pay particular attention to this dimension in the first half of the paper.

We begin by reviewing the limited existing data on the electoral participation of PEH in Australia and elsewhere, after which we reflect on why the electoral participation of PEH is so important. We then report on the findings of our own fieldwork undertaken with PEH in Adelaide before and after Australia's 2019 Federal Election. A key finding of the study confirms that although participation rates of PEH citizens are indeed low, political interest is high. Emphasising that electoral policy is also social policy, we consider the implications of the fieldwork findings for democratic legitimacy, political representation, psycho-social wellbeing, and social cohesion more generally.

¹ Precise figures are elusive but in Adelaide, for example, the turnout rate for people experiencing homelessness has been estimated at around 25% of those eligible to vote (Coram et al., 2019).

What We Know About Homelessness and Voting

Before proceeding, it is important to appreciate that ‘homelessness’ denotes more than street-based sleeping, encompassing insecure and temporary housing, couch surfing, and overcrowding. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) definition is broader than some other formulations and includes living in inadequate dwellings, having limited tenure (housing security), and/or lacking access to or control over ‘space for social relations’ (ABS, 2012). On this definition, more than 116,000 Australians, including over 25,000 children, were identified as experiencing some form of homelessness at the time of the 2016 census (ABS, 2018). While a proportion of PEH would be non-voters (for example, children and new migrants, some of whom may live in overcrowded dwellings), PEH still represent a potentially disenfranchised cohort of significant size.

As in other settings, homelessness in Australia affects some groups more than others; for example, it disproportionately affects the young and we already know that there are important connections between youth disenfranchisement and homelessness (Edwards, 2006). Homelessness also disproportionately affects Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who comprise 3% of the population but 20% of PEH (and as high as 88% in the Northern Territory, where overcrowding is a significant issue) (Louth and Burns, 2018). Veterans of the Australian Defence Force experience homelessness at considerably higher rates than average (DFAT References Committee, 2016; Hilferty et al., 2019). Therefore, the civic exclusion of PEH is especially concerning because it adds to – and exacerbates – their other forms of exclusion

Notably, declining turnout in established democracies tends to be concentrated among the most disadvantaged citizens. Homelessness intersects with a range of other social issues, including poor mental health, disability, poverty, problematic substance use, and family and domestic violence (Flatau et al., 2021; Coram et al., 2022). Accordingly, while PEH are a heterogeneous group, they also represent a bellwether population for the disadvantaged more generally. If PEH are disengaged from electoral participation, this suggests broader and deeper issues with political representation. Homelessness is an artefact of deep structural networks of disadvantage, marginalisation, and vulnerability. Yet, voting is a primary means by which citizens can assert their equality with other citizens while also protecting themselves from government neglect (Dahl, 1998; Hill, 2017). It is therefore vital to understand the links between homelessness and electoral engagement.

There is very little prior research in Australia or elsewhere on how PEH perceive and experience voting, and the factors that encourage or deter their electoral participation. The scant literature that does exist suggests a number of practical barriers to both enrolment and voting by PEH, including: low levels of information and lack of

awareness that elections are taking place (Guerra and Lester, 2004; Lynch and Tsorbaris, 2005, p.20); that they were eligible to enrol; and that options like silent enrolment were available to them. Other practical concerns — such as not having transport to reach a polling booth and being unaware that assistance with voting may be available — have also been identified as obstacles (Thompson, 2004). It is well known that social isolation, which is particularly acute among PEH, erodes the inclination to vote (McAllister and Mughan, 1986; Eagles and Erfle, 1989; Langenkamp, 2021).

Australia is unusual in being one of the few advanced democracies to use compulsory voting. One of the effects of this is that Australian jurisdictions (via electoral commissions)² assume a high degree of responsibility for ensuring that voting is as accessible as possible for all citizens, regardless of social location (Hill, 2017). Australian citizens are required to enrol to vote once they turn 18 (and are then required to vote in all state and federal elections).³ Reviewing available data on the voting participation rates for PEH yields estimates varying from between 10 and 67%, although these data are subject to both imprecision and a number of other limitations due to the nature of the datasets (see Chamberlain and Mackenzie, 2003; Mundell, 2003; Lynch, 2004; AEC, 2005; ABS, 2018; Coram et al., 2019). Even the most optimistic figure for PEH, however, compares badly with the turnout rate of around 90% of the overall voting population. Therefore, in Australia, failure to vote is a truly marginalising event, despite the fact that PEH are both eligible and encouraged to vote, especially by electoral commissions (Coram et al., 2019). A typical example is the Victorian Electoral Commission which has established a Homelessness Advisory Group to develop “a best practice to engaging with people experiencing homelessness” (VEC, 2021, p.35).

The apparent low levels of enrolment and turnout by PEH in Australia therefore indicate high rates of informal exclusion. This is despite a number of measures currently in place to facilitate the voting participation of PEH. Section 96 of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 permits voters of no fixed address to enrol (Orr et al., 2002, p.389), although doing so is relatively unusual: there were just 42 people enrolled under this provision in South Australia at the time of the 2019 Federal Election (AEC, personal communication, 16 August 2019). There are mechanisms for assigning these voters to an electoral division, such as using the address at which they were last living. Enrolment is via a hard copy form and requires identity verification by another elector (amplifying the potential for factors such as social isolation and literacy issues to act as barriers to enrolment). The accuracy of the

² Australian state and federal governments have their own electoral commissions with separate but shared electoral rolls.

³ Voting in local council election is not compulsory in all Australian jurisdictions.

roll in Australia is enhanced by its continuous electoral roll whereby the rolls are assessed and updated on an ongoing basis. Recently, the AEC introduced a process of direct enrolment and update to consolidate the completeness and accuracy of the roll, a capacity that both enhances electoral integrity but also helps to guarantee high levels of electoral inclusion (for a fuller discussion of this and other relevant aspects of Australian electoral history see Hill, 2021).

Unlike the majority of Australians, PEH enrolled under the provisions of s.96 are not fined if they fail to vote, an exemption that is intended to encourage their enrolment. Note, however, that many PEH, to avoid stigmatisation, would not self-identify as such, potentially limiting the efficacy of the exemption (Walter et al., 2015). To facilitate voting accessibility, pre-polling is offered via postal voting and mobile booths at locations such as hospitals, residential aged care facilities, and specialist homelessness service providers and assistance is available for those who need it. These factors *formally* address some of the obstacles to electoral participation. However, while these interventions are vital to facilitating inclusive electoral opportunities, they have not produced turnout results that are significantly closer to mainstream voting populations.

It is possible that parity is unlikely to ever be achieved; nevertheless, this electoral participation gap can be reduced through ensuring that meaningful and proactive engagement practices are deployed alongside any such interventions; approaches that have been central to social and community development work practices for many years. Through our data collection phase, it was clear that there is still considerably more work to be done by electoral commissions wanting to engage with PEH more effectively (Coram et al., 2019).

What's Wrong with Low Turnout Among People Experiencing Homelessness?

The right to vote protects other rights, including welfare and economic rights (Hill, 2017). The formal, universal right to vote is a minimum condition for democracy but not a *sufficient* one if we wish to properly satisfy the procedural values of democratic equality, inclusivity, and therefore, legitimacy. Accordingly, it is important that everyone *actually exercises* their right to vote. High rates of electoral inclusivity and participation are vital to legitimise, not only election processes and outcomes, but also the authority of governments. Elections must be free and fair and obstacles to exercising the right to vote must be minimised where possible. Political equality is undermined if there is asymmetry in electoral influence, or too many citizens are either formally or informally excluded from the franchise or participation itself.

Voting provides the means to hold governments to account and is the mechanism by which substantive representation is achieved. Not surprisingly, governments tend to pay more attention to the interests of groups who vote habitually; in, other words, in the distribution of government attention and resources, the preferences of voters are prioritised over those of non-voters (see Bullock, 1981; Hill and Leighley, 1992; Martin, 2003; Malkopoulou and Hill, 2022). As Walter Dean Burnham once said, “if you don’t vote, you don’t count” (Burnham, 1987, p.99). It is well established that the electoral participation rates of particular groups influence public policy in areas like health, housing, and education (see, for example, Verba et al., 1993; Verba, 2003; Gallego, 2010). We also know that welfare policies tend to be more generous when turnout is higher among the disadvantaged (Fowler, 2013; see also Bennett and Resnick, 1990; Hicks and Swank, 1992; Hill et al., 1995; Mueller and Stratmann, 2003).

These government spending and attention patterns make it particularly important for marginalised people to vote and thereby exert some influence over government policy. People experiencing disadvantage arguably stand to benefit more from voting than the better off because their marginal utility gains from policies that favour their interests are greater. Unfortunately, however, there is a strong positive correlation in democracies everywhere between voting abstention and lower socio-economic status (Lijphart, 1999, p.284; Brennan and Hill, 2014).

Survival and securing a home or shelter is, understandably, likely to be of more pressing concern for PEH than voting. However, these two things are neither opposed nor unrelated because greater electoral participation will increase the likelihood of the material interests of PEH being represented and protected. The voting mobilisation of greater numbers of PEH may also activate latent support for their interests in the broader community. Australian research has found that a substantial majority of citizens would like to see governments do more to address homelessness (Hanover Welfare Services, 2006; Launch Housing, 2016).

When certain groups of people do not vote, the opportunity for their unique experiences and perspectives to have political influence is lost (Demleitner, 2000). The electoral process itself also suffers when diverse and unique perspectives are missing (Estlund, 2007; Misak, 2008). There is evidence that the political preferences of PEH are, in fact, distinctive. For example, one qualitative study carried out across the US found that while PEH had strong political opinions, their policy views were not influenced by ideology in the same way as those of the general public. Rather, the lived experience of lacking secure accommodation had a more significant impact on their policy attitudes (Colin Morrison and Belt, 2014). Elsewhere, a study in the UK revealed a greater focus among PEH on present rather than longer-term goals compared to those who had secure housing (Iveson and Cornish, 2016).

Why voting matters: Creating social meaning

Voting is a key form of social inclusion and in every established democracy the entitlement to vote is the primary marker of full citizenship status. The vote is a form of power, and the act of voting can be empowering. It can also help people feel more connected to their communities (Philips, 1995; Shineman, 2020). Electoral participation has the potential to help PEH (re)engage with mainstream public life; as James Fishkin has noted, the “significance of the vote as a mark of civic inclusion is greatest for those whose inclusion might otherwise be in doubt” (Fishkin, 2011, p.1353). Notably, the UK study cited above found that PEH were more likely than non-PEH to value activities that offered an immediate sense of inclusion and agency (Iveson and Cornish, 2016).

For less privileged social groups, the potential for voting to act as a source of meaning is particularly significant (Shineman, 2020). Therefore, voting is important, not only for obvious political reasons, but because it offers important symbolic and psycho-social benefits. Treating marginalised people as fit to vote and of equal status to all others on polling day counters the damaging perception that they are social and political outsiders and even ‘outcasts’ (Mansbridge, 1999, pp.648-52). The use of the term ‘outcast’ is no exaggeration in this context: in one Australian study, the reported sense of marginalisation among PEH was so acute that only half of the respondents said they thought of themselves as Australian citizens. This was despite the fact that 96% had, in fact, been born in Australia. Furthermore, 38% felt excluded from participating in social life and 58% said they did not enjoy the same rights as everyone else (Walsh and Klease, 2004). Of the respondents in the survey who were eligible to vote, 50% said they had never voted and 65% never discussed political issues with anyone else. PEH are routinely ignored and rendered invisible in ways that make it hard for them to be valued by others; voting offers an avenue for PEH to achieve or enhance social recognition and inclusion.

Another benefit of voting is that it may promote pro-democratic attitudes and behaviours. We already know that people who vote tend to be more satisfied with their democracy than those who abstain (Hill, 2011). Recent work with disenfranchised felons in the US found that the restoration of their voting rights on release from prison was associated with higher levels of trust in government and a greater willingness to cooperate with other members of society and authorities (Shineman, 2020). Voting encourages people to construct themselves as democratic citizens whose voice matters and it helps shift marginalised individuals from “a stigmatized status as outsiders to full democratic participation as stakeholders” (Uggen et al., 2006, p.283). While PEH in Australia are not formally disenfranchised as many prisoners are, they frequently face obstacles to electoral participation that are structural, driven by social attitudes and policy settings outside their control.

PEH, not surprisingly, have lower subjective quality of life (SQoL) than the general population or those who are adequately housed (Hubley et al., 2014). An Australian study of homeless and ‘at risk’ youth found that they reported lower levels of personal meaning than other social groups and this was the strongest predictor of low SQoL (Bearsley and Cummins, 1999). Another Australian study exploring wellbeing among PEH found that health contributed surprisingly little to their overall perception of wellbeing. Instead, feeling safe and having positive social connections and opportunities to participate in ‘normal’ life were the key factors contributing to subjective wellbeing (Thomas et al., 2012). Voting is one of these ‘normal’ activities, especially in Australia where it is a routine part of civic life for almost every adult.

Ensuring that all eligible voters, and particularly those experiencing disadvantage or marginalisation, can exercise their right to vote is vital for democratic legitimacy, political equality, and effective representation, as well as for empowering individuals and enhancing their sense of inclusion. Just as supportive housing contributes to meaningful material outcomes, so encouraging and enhancing the voting rights of electors experiencing homelessness should be viewed as an “optimistic mechanism to directly improve disadvantaged people’s lives” (Parsell and Marston, 2016, p.195). Actively promoting the voting rights of this group is therefore an appropriate and warranted intervention that offers benefits for PEH (Parsell and Marston, 2016; Watts et al., 2018).

Against this background we now turn to our fieldwork which set out to investigate the attitudes of PEH towards voting, the barriers they face to exercising their right to vote, and what can be done to ameliorate these barriers.

Methodology

Our project was funded by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and the research was undertaken in partnership with three providers of specialist homelessness services.

Study design

The research design comprised four components structured around the May 2019 Australian Federal Election as described in Table 1. The target participant population was people accessing specialist homelessness services in the Adelaide CBD, including through outreach activities in the field. It is estimated that the sample of participants was split relatively evenly across people sleeping on the street, people in crisis or transitional accommodation, and people who had progressed to more secure housing such as supported accommodation following recent experience of being insecurely housed.

Table 1: Components of data collection

	<i>1.Voter information sessions</i>	<i>2.Pre-poll survey</i>	<i>3.Exit survey</i>	<i>4.Interviews</i>
<i>Participant n</i>	59	66	53	18
<i>Location</i>	Service centre A.	Service centres A and B and outreach in the field.	Service centres A, B and C.	Service centres A and B.
<i>Timing</i>	4 weeks prior to election.	2 weeks prior to election.	Week of election.	2 weeks after election.
<i>Format</i>	Two 90-minute interactive sessions involving presentations and small group discussion facilitated by researchers.	5-minute surveys administered by researchers (interview style) at four sessions across three locations.	5-minute surveys administered by researchers (interview style) at six sessions across three locations.	15 to 45-minute semi-structured interviews.
<i>Participant recruitment</i>	Posters on site at service centre A, plus active on-site recruitment by researchers immediately before sessions.	Active on-site recruitment by researchers during meal periods at service centres, and via outreach with a field team visiting rough sleeping locations at night.	Active on-site recruitment by researchers during mobile polling booth hours at each service centre.	Recruitment from pre-poll participants expressing interest, plus active on-site recruitment by researchers at service centres.
<i>Content</i>	Participants were given information about enrolling and voting. They were invited to discuss barriers to enrolling and voting and the perceived benefits of voting in small groups. Data on the barriers and benefits identified by each group were collected via researcher notes and participant-completed worksheets.	In addition to demographic questions, survey content covered: whether participants were enrolled; why they were not enrolled if applicable; whether they voted if enrolled; why they did not vote if enrolled; awareness of 'no fixed address' and 'silent elector' enrolment options; intention to vote at the May 2019 election; level of interest in elections; sources of information about elections; and importance attached to voting.	In addition to demographic questions, survey content covered: whether participants had voted in a previous election; whether voting was important to citizenship; whether voting made them feel more accepted; whether voting made them feel more equal; whether voting made a difference to their lives; and importance attached to voting.	Participants were asked whether they were enrolled to vote; about their past experience of voting; whether they had just voted in the election; what their recent experience of voting was like if applicable; why they were not enrolled or didn't vote if applicable; the importance they attached to voting and their views on voting generally.

Source: Authors

Participants

The number of unique participants in the study was 164, making it one of the largest-scale investigations of electoral participation by PEH ever conducted anywhere in the world. Thirty-two of the 164 participants were involved in more than one of the data collection exercises; for example, 10 participants in the voter information sessions also participated in the exit poll survey and five in the interviews, while eight participants in the pre-poll survey also participated in the exit poll survey and four in the interviews. The demographic characteristics of the pre-poll and exit poll survey participants are set out in Table 2.

Table 2: Characteristics of survey participants

Characteristic		Pre-poll survey	Exit poll survey
Age bracket	18-30	4%	6%
	31-40	18%	11%
	41-50	29%	17%
	51-60	24%	21%
	61-75	17%	28%
	Over 75	5%	11%
	No answer	3%	6%
Gender	Male	77%	77%
	Female	23%	23%
Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander		32%	15%
First language English		89%	87%
Identify as having a disability (inc. psychosocial)		53%	66%

Source: Authors' data analysis

Participants received gift vouchers to compensate them for time spent participating in the information sessions, pre-poll survey, and interviews (but not exit polls, to avoid the perception of being financially compensated for voting). While the vouchers incentivised participation, nearly all participants were keenly engaged with the data collection process, gave considered opinions and were happy to participate for as long as was helpful. In fact, queues formed to participate in the information sessions and interviews and some prospective participants had to be turned away. This echoed the experience of a US study which reported that PEH lined up to participate, eager to be asked about their political views instead of the health issues more commonly researched in this population (Colin Morrison and Belt, 2014). Participants in our research reported that it was empowering to find that their views were important enough to be the focus of a study.

Data analysis

Interviews were recorded with participants' permission and transcribed by the researchers. Basic descriptive statistics were used to analyse the survey datasets. Qualitative data from the voting information sessions and interviews were analysed thematically through content analysis. Key themes and sub-themes were identified, and data coded accordingly at progressively granular levels. This process included identifying typical quotes that reflected the key themes.

Limitations

There were limitations associated with the project due to the tight timelines driven by the Federal Election and the challenges of recruiting participants from the PEH population. The participants were not representative of the overall PEH population in suburban, regional, or remote locations, or even within the city centre. Groups such as women and young adults were underrepresented in the participant sample, partly because these groups are less likely to access the homelessness service centres where the research was conducted. PEH who are disengaged from services were also underrepresented, although five of the pre-poll survey participants were recruited via outreach at street-based sleeping locations in central Adelaide. The focus of the data collection was on participants' perceptions and experience of voting. To ensure that participants perceived the study as apolitical, we intentionally refrained from asking them to disclose their political preferences or which parties or candidates they favoured, although some volunteered this information.

Results and Analysis

Key results from the pre-poll survey, exit poll survey, and interviews are outlined in this section. The following section integrates findings from the four data collection methods, discusses the findings in relation to key themes that were identified, and considers the implications of these results for the voting experience and behaviour of PEH.

Pre-poll survey

The pre-poll survey asked participants about their knowledge and experience of voting, and their views towards elections and voting. A summary of the results is set out in Table 3. Notably, 47 respondents (71%) said voting had 'a good deal of importance' and another eight (12%) said it had 'some importance'. Respondents had relatively high levels of interest in elections and most commonly sourced information about elections from television, followed closely by newspaper and radio, with the Internet used much less. Nearly a third of respondents had been encouraged to vote by a friend or family member.

Table 3: Pre-poll survey results

<i>n=66</i>	<i>Yes %</i>	<i>No %</i>	<i>Don't know or no answer %</i>
Enrolled to vote	58	36	6
Of those enrolled, failed to vote in a Federal election at some stage	65	30	5
Of those enrolled to vote, enrolled as no fixed address	32	65	3
Aware of being able to enrol as no fixed address	30	62	8
Of those enrolled to vote, enrolled as silent elector	11	84	5
Aware of being able to enrol as silent elector	18	80	2
A good deal or somewhat more likely to vote with the silent elector option	25	73	2
Previously voted in a Federal election	68	30	2
Voted in the last Federal election	44	54	2
Intends to vote in the 2019 Federal election	59	35	6
Some or a good deal of interest in what is going on with an election	64	36	0
Some or a good deal of attention paid to reports about elections	59	41	0
Some or a good deal of interest in elections overall	60	40	0
Voting has some or a good deal of importance	83	17	0

Source: Authors' data analysis. Note: Where questions were scored on a 1-5 Likert scale, the two positive and two negative responses have been combined for the purposes of reporting in the table.

Exit poll survey

Not surprisingly, the exit poll survey respondents had a stronger voting track record than the pre-poll survey respondents; all had just voted in the 2019 election and 49 of the 53 (92%) said they had previously voted in a federal election. A summary of the exit poll survey results is set out in Table 4. Interestingly, the level of importance the exit poll survey respondents ascribed to voting was similar to that of the pre-poll survey respondents, with 36 (68%) exit poll respondents agreeing voting was a 'very important' part of being a citizen and another eight (15%) describing it as 'somewhat important'. Thirty-nine exit poll survey respondents (73%) agreed it was 'very important' that everybody voted and another eight (13%) agreed it was 'somewhat important'. While caution should be exercised when comparing such small samples, the pre-poll survey respondents appeared to place as much importance on voting as the exit poll survey respondents, despite the pre-poll group being much less likely to actually vote. The exit poll survey results on whether voting had generated psychological benefits were particularly interesting, suggesting that around half of the respondents experienced some positive psycho-social effects as a result of their electoral participation.

Table 4: Exit poll survey results

<i>n</i> =53	<i>Yes</i> %	<i>No</i> %	<i>Don't know or no answer</i> %
Voting is a somewhat or very important part of being a citizen	85	15	0
Voting generates a somewhat or good deal greater feeling of acceptance	47	53	0
Voting generates a somewhat or good deal greater feeling of equality	54	42	4
Voting makes some or a good deal of difference to my life	51	47	2
It is somewhat or very important that everybody votes	89	11	0

Source: Authors' data analysis. Note: Where questions were scored on a 1-5 Likert scale, the two positive and two negative responses have been combined for the purposes of reporting in the table.

Interviews

The 18 interviews were used to explore attitudes towards voting in more detail. Eight of the interviewees had never been enrolled to vote and 10 were enrolled, of whom five were regular voters. Seven interviewees said they had voted at the 2019 Federal Election around two weeks earlier. Of the eight interviewees who had voted in 2019 or in another recent federal election, half reported modest positive psychological benefits: feeling 'satisfied', 'empowered', and like 'they'd had their say'. The other half reported negative psychological effects such as feeling 'sad', 'disillusioned', and that 'voting was pointless'. As one participant reflected:

I felt sad... I looked at those pieces of paper and I folded them up and I put them in the box and I walked away in disgust.

(Participant 84, male, age 50s)

Four interview participants said they had on at least one occasion lodged an intentional informal vote or abstained because of how they felt about voting (and/or how voting made them feel). The interview results were more equivocal on the psycho-social benefits of voting than the exit poll survey results. In both the interviews and exit poll survey, around half of participants with experience of voting reported that it was positive, but in the interviews, it was clear that, for those who did not report positive effects, the experience was quite negative, rather than merely neutral.

Notably, however, 13 of the 18 interviewees, including a number who did not vote, had some positive things to say about voting, including that it was important to 'have a say', 'be represented', 'make a difference', and 'influence policy'. Several interviewees said it was especially important for them to vote as an Aboriginal person or someone experiencing homelessness. More than half of the interviewees thought voting was important in principle, even if they did not vote themselves.

Several interviewees referred to the importance of voting for self-protecting representation and holding governments to account:

That was one of the main things for me, the politicians knowing that okay, we are constituents, members of society, the homeless are actually coming out to vote, that my vote matters.

(Participant 85, male, age 30s)

Logistical and ergonomic issues contributed to many of the interviewees failing to vote regularly. Transience was a common issue, discouraging both enrolment and voting by those who were enrolled. People said they were more likely to vote if they had a connection with a particular place and local issues. The most significant obstacles to participants' voting irrespective of enrolment status were (in order of magnitude):

1. Not having much knowledge of or interest in elections/politics.
2. Believing voting was pointless or that there was no one worth voting for.
3. Seeing politicians as untrustworthy and self-interested.
4. Not knowing where to vote or being unable to access a polling place.
5. Believing that politicians don't listen or care.
6. Not wanting their name on the electoral roll.
7. Finding voting too complicated or burdensome.

For participants who were enrolled to vote, the most significant obstacles to turning out were:

8. Not knowing where to vote or being unable to access a polling place.
9. Not having much knowledge of or interest in elections/politics.
10. Being unaware an election was taking place.
11. Forgetting to vote.
12. Isolation/feeling disconnected from society.

Seven interviewees wanted more information about enrolling, voting, and the candidates they had to choose from; some were worried that they would 'muck it up' because they felt they did not know what they were doing. Notably, the informal vote rate (11%) for these booths was double the national average of 5.5% at the same election (AEC, 2019). Several non-voting interviewees said they had observed

the presence of the mobile polling booth at the specialist homelessness provider but did not see it as being there for them, which is, itself, telling. Notably, becoming homeless and other associated losses (health, work, family, social networks) had caused several of the interview participants who were once regular voters to disengage.

Notwithstanding the impact of logistical issues, by far the most common obstacle to enrolment and voting for the interviewees was disillusionment with the political system. Sixteen of the 18 participants, including some of the regular voters, made comments along these lines. Fourteen said they did not think their voices would be heard through voting, and for most this was specifically related to their circumstance as someone experiencing homelessness. There was a pervasive view that no-one really wanted to hear what people in their position had to say:

It got to a period where oh, I've become interested in voting, and now it's at the stage where nobody's interested in my vote.

(Participant 34, male, age 50s)

Other interviewees said that they would be more likely to vote if issues affecting them were on the political agenda and their views were treated as important. Comments such as the following were typical:

I don't think politicians and politics pay much attention to the homeless

(Participant 161, male, age 40s)

If you ask me, they don't seem to want to help the homeless.

(Participant 158, male, age 50s)

Most interviewees felt their votes would have little effect and expressed some dissatisfaction with the choice of candidates and policies. As one participant said:

Voting's not hard; it's trying to find someone you want to vote for, *that's* what's hard.

(Participant 162, male, age 50s)

Several interviewees expressed an intense sense of social exclusion that discouraged them from voting, such as the following participant:

Why should we vote for someone who doesn't want us? Who doesn't want to look after us?...All of us felt left out, we felt like we're nothing. And we're human beings, not animals to walk on just because we're poor... Some of us Australians don't want to vote because the homeless are on the street, we don't want to live like this.

(Participant 71, female, age 50s)

Discussion

Voting and enrolment rates

The study did not attempt to definitively measure enrolment or turnout among PEH generally, but the findings add to the limited knowledge about voting rates among homeless populations in inner urban settings in Australia and other developed nations. Participants in the pre-poll survey and interviews were asked if they were enrolled to vote and 47 out of 84 participants (around 56%) said they were, with 16 (19%) reporting that they were regular voters. This apparent low enrolment rate suggests a voting turnout rate for PEH in central Adelaide that is much lower than the 90+ rate for the Australian voting age population as a whole (AEC, 2022), providing further evidence that PEH comprise a significant cohort of invisible, unheard citizens. Efforts to engage groups experiencing barriers to electoral participation (such as enrolment with no fixed address and mobile polling booths at homelessness service providers) are likely to be less concerted in voluntary voting jurisdictions. So, although turnout rates for PEH in Australia's compulsory voting setting appear to be very low, the situation in non-compulsory voting jurisdictions is likely to be worse.

Barriers to voting

Taking together the data from the information sessions, pre-poll survey, and interviews, the study found that PEH encounter a range of obstacles to enrolling and voting, many of which are directly related to their housing circumstances. These obstacles are not specific to the Australian setting and are likely to be relevant to people experiencing homelessness in other developed democracies. Some issues were not as problematic as expected: only four participants cited literacy difficulties, three said they had been in prison at previous election times, and one said health issues had made it hard for him to vote. An undoubtedly exacerbating factor here is the high rate of mental illness among PEH (Lawn et al., 2014). This not only makes it unlikely that PEH citizens will vote but is actually a legal disqualification for their voting (see s 93(8)a of the *Commonwealth Election Act 2018* (Cth)).

Enrolment. The most significant reported obstacle to voting was not being enrolled. Apart from the problems associated with not having a stable address and the requirements for updated identification and a witness, privacy concerns were a major issue for PEH. This was especially true for those with a history of family violence. Participants were keen to avoid having their names appear on the electoral roll and many were unaware that they could be silently enrolled.

Interest/Trust/Relevance. The other barriers to electoral participation most commonly cited by participants were: not knowing about or being interested in elections/politics; believing that voting was pointless or that there was no one worth voting for; believing that politicians were untrustworthy or self-interested; and believing that politicians did not listen or care.

Lack of Information. Having insufficient information about voting and elections emerged as a common concern for participants across the data collection exercises. For those who were enrolled, commonly cited obstacles were: not knowing where to vote; being unable to access a polling place; being unaware an election was taking place; forgetting to vote; and isolation or feeling disconnected from the rest of society. There is scope here for electoral commissions, working with specialist homelessness services, to enhance the information and assistance (for example, with completing enrolment forms and ballot papers) they provide to PEH before elections and at mobile polling booths. Most participants who attended an information session appeared to be engaged and provided feedback that it was a useful experience, and nine took the opportunity to enrol to vote. Some exit poll survey respondents and interviewees said they would have liked more information about how to vote (and candidates' policies) at the mobile polling booths.

Informal Voting as a De facto Barrier to Participation. The rate of informal voting at the PEH-specific booths (11%) was double the base rate of informality for the House of Representatives vote across Australia (AEC, 2019). This is concerning because an informal vote is a lost vote and therefore a lost voice. Lacking information about how to lodge a meaningful vote may have contributed to this high rate. It is also possible that some of the informal votes were intentional as a way of registering disillusionment, a well-established strategy for disaffected electors in compulsory voting regimes (Hill and Rutledge-Prior, 2016) and one that some of our interviewees said they had employed.

Transience. Moving around regularly had a multi-faceted effect on participants' electoral engagement. It made it harder for people to access a polling place, especially one in the electoral division in which they were enrolled, but more fundamentally, it made participants less motivated to enrol or vote because they did not feel a strong connection to a particular community and the political issues affecting it. A number of interviewees spoke of feeling some sense of identification with the inner-city area where they spent time, including nights, and accessed services. For clients of specialist homelessness services, a centre's address may therefore be a more appropriate address on which to base an electoral enrolment than one of their previous addresses. Voters of similar circumstance (e.g., age, education, median income) are already unevenly distributed across electoral divisions, so any clustering of PEH in particular electorates would only align with what is already the case

for other voters. Relatively minor changes to electoral policy and practice in areas such as information provision and allocation to electoral districts have the potential to make a significant contribution to the voting inclusion of PEH.

Attitudes towards voting

One of the most significant findings of the research is that participants displayed high levels of political interest and sophistication. Notwithstanding very low enrolment and turnout rates, partly due to barriers to voting arising from their housing circumstances, the majority of participants had considered opinions about politics and voting; most also expressed the view that voting was important and had a range of benefits. Taking together the discussion in the information sessions and the interview data, the reasons for, or benefits of, voting most commonly cited by participants were: 'to give people a voice'; because it was 'important in principle'; to 'influence who formed government and their policies'; and 'because it was a right or civic duty'.

A number of participants who said they lacked knowledge about elections and politics also said they were interested in accessing more information so they could vote in a meaningful way. The most significant disincentive to enrolling and voting was not that voting lacked meaning, but that it lacked meaning *for them* because their interests and the issues affecting them most (such as emergency relief services, social housing, rent support, poverty, welfare benefits, structural unemployment, and mental health) rarely figured on the policy agenda. The information session and interview participants, who were representative of a cohort experiencing chronic homelessness, generally saw themselves as part of a distinct constituency of 'the homeless', with common interests coalescing around the issues identified above.

Participants also tended to view themselves as set apart from the mainstream voting population; voting was important, but it did not, and could not, carry the same meaning for them as it did for others. Participants' sense of both internal and external political efficacy was therefore low. As two of our respondents observed:

They do what they like anyway... you can see that the people don't really matter too much... so there's no point.
(Participant 22, male, age 20s)

I feel that I've had my say but in another way I don't because they're never going to listen to us, the small people.
(Participant 81, male, age 50s)

Further, being stigmatised and shut out of mainstream activities leads some PEH to internalise their exclusion as disqualifying them from voting:



There was a long period of time when I felt like I didn't even deserve to vote, because of my transience.

(Participant 34, male, age 50s)

Nevertheless, the study found evidence that voting is regarded as an important activity by most and can have positive psychological benefits for some PEH. Among the pre-poll survey participants, a sample with quite low levels of electoral engagement, 83% said voting had some or a good deal of importance. Around half of the most electorally engaged sample — the exit poll survey participants — said voting gave them a feeling of equality or acceptance or made a significant difference to their lives. The interviews yielded more equivocal results, with most participants having some positive things to say about voting but remaining sceptical about how much attention policymakers would pay to their voices.

Our findings suggest that while PEH may have a low sense of political efficacy, their levels of political interest are high. When we contextualise the results of this study in light of those of the Australian Election Study, it is clear that PEH are just as interested, if not *more* interested, in elections and the idea of voting than the broader population. In the 2016 Australian Election Study, 30% of Australians said they had ‘a good deal of interest’ in the election that had just taken place, 34% had ‘a good deal of interest’ in politics, and 25% paid ‘a good deal of attention to election reports on television’ (Cameron and McAllister, 2019). By contrast 44% of PEH participants in our study said they had ‘a good deal of interest in what was going on with an election’, 36% ‘a good deal of interest in elections overall’, and 33% paid ‘a good deal of attention to election reports on television’.

Therefore, it should not be assumed that low enrolment and turnout rates mean PEH are apathetic, disengaged, or lacking interest in politics and elections. In fact, experiencing homelessness may catalyse political interest. Low turnout for this group is more likely to be attributable to the range of barriers to voting they encounter because of their housing circumstances and intersecting social and health issues. While logistical and practical issues certainly figure, this study identified low political efficacy and disillusionment with the political system as the greatest obstacles to electoral participation among PEH.

In sum, while some participants were simply not interested in voting, most were, but did not act on that interest. Despite being interested in politics, elections, and democratic inclusion, most saw themselves as democratically excluded due to their homelessness. There was a gap between their level of interest and reported political beliefs and intentions, on the one hand, and their democratic practice, on the other. Although the compulsory nature of voting in Australia is associated with provisions specifically designed to promote the electoral participation of PEH, these were not sufficient to bridge this gap for our participants.

Having the formal right to vote was not enough to make participants in our study feel empowered or included, and some saw no reason to engage until they were actively *engaged with*. Several of the interviewees said they did not vote, or deliberately voted informally, because a formal vote would make them complicit in a system in which they no longer had any faith. Abstaining for these citizens was one of the only forms of resistance available to them and delivered a greater sense of agency than voting. However, abstaining is an ineffective and indecipherable form of ‘participation’ compared to voting formally, which has demonstrable benefits in terms of attracting government attention.

Conclusion

This study has added to the small literature on the electoral attitudes and behaviours of PEH in Australia and elsewhere. Our findings provide insights that are relevant across jurisdictions, including voluntary voting settings. But further research is required, especially in relation to particular cohorts of PEH such as women, youth, and Indigenous citizens.

Political equality and inclusivity are key elements of any robust democracy, but our findings suggest that those who experience homelessness do not feel they count as much as others and that no one is listening to their voices; therefore, many believe that, for them, voting is pointless. These perceptions did not arise from a lack of interest in politics or voting but were specifically related to feelings of marginalisation and exclusion from civic life as a result of their housing circumstances and associated experience of disadvantage. Some of the practical obstacles to electoral participation by PEH could be addressed relatively easily by electoral commissions who could expand their outreach and information provision programmes and enhance polling accessibility. Some regulatory reforms would also help. For example, flexibility around allocating voters of no fixed address to electoral divisions would contribute to promoting the electoral participation of PEH. However, the greatest barriers to the electoral engagement of PEH — disillusionment with the political system and a low sense of political efficacy — are more serious and harder to tackle because they are informal and cultural.

It is desirable to stimulate higher turnout rates among society’s most marginalised and disadvantaged citizens, not only to promote democratic legitimacy and subjective well-being, but also because of the potential to hasten structural and policy reforms that serve the objective interests of such groups. Higher levels of electoral participation by people experiencing homelessness would make it harder for mainstream political parties to ignore their needs, concerns, and priorities.

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