

# Managing Electoral Commission Stakeholders

Stakeholder Management Guidelines

November 2015



## Introduction

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These guidelines emerged from a State and Territory Electoral Commissioners (STEC) sponsored workshop held at the Victorian Electoral Commission in July 2015, involving participants from most Australian electoral commissions.

With the aid of a series of case studies the workshop explored many of the issues surrounding the stakeholder management requirements and circumstances of electoral authorities within Australia, as well as their role in influencing policy development and public debate on electoral matters. The two matters go hand in hand, as in order to effectively influence legislative and policy development, electoral commissions need to in turn foster effective stakeholder relationships and at times manage stakeholder expectations.

These guidelines aim to provide electoral commission employees with some simple strategies, tools and advice to assist with identifying, analysing and managing the stakeholders relevant to a particular project or initiative.

## Background

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Understanding and managing the expectations of stakeholders is a growing and increasingly complex issue for electoral commissions within Australia.

Expanded everyday use of online technologies and social media (especially when transacting with government); the so called 24/7 news cycle; increased consumer activism and customer service demands; changing political practices; and the evident reduction in the level of political literacy and interest by many Australians; are just some of the factors contributing to the changing electoral landscape and the expectations placed on electoral commissions.

To some extent electoral commissions have added fuel to stakeholder expectations by striving (quite rightly) to constantly improve and speed-up service delivery, often through the adoption of new technologies and the implementation of legislative or process reforms. Unfulfilled expectations can also arise where legislative reform enabling the adoption of new technology or process changes in one jurisdiction, are not mirrored in neighbouring jurisdictions. The time-lag period before the neighbouring jurisdictions eventually (and generally inevitably) follow suit can create challenges for those commissions – with internet voting being a case in point.

While electoral commissions in Australia have continued to implement various process efficiencies in operational areas such as voting arrangements, counting procedures and the progressive publication of election results, it would appear there has traditionally been less attention paid to the effectiveness of their relationship building activities in general, and the management of key stakeholder expectations in particular.

The reasons for this neglect are no doubt varied however one can surmise that some of those reasons might include:

- the lack of in-house communications and public relations expertise and resources
- the criticality and inherent political sensitivities of steering a path where the independence, impartiality and transparency of the commission remains beyond reproach
- the understandable view that the 'main game' is efficiently running legally compliant elections, hence focusing on the operational becomes a necessity, but it is also more 'concrete' and easier to do
- the complexity, diversity and at times combative nature of an electoral commission's stakeholder mix
- the somewhat ephemeral nature of relationship building and expectation management in an environment where change is a constant.

For the likely reasons listed above, electoral commissions have traditionally been somewhat reluctant to be at the forefront of public debate on many matters of electoral reform, more typically adopting a 'wait until asked' and reactive stance to policy changes or contentious issues. While it does appear that this is changing, adopting a reactive 'behind the scenes' position can mean that commissions are limiting their capacity to shape and influence public debate and the nature of resultant electoral reforms. The scenario of having to

quickly develop administrative solutions to politically motivated legislative changes immediately prior to an electoral event is an illustration of where a more proactive and broad based stakeholder management stance could potentially at least, result in more measured outcomes.

The need to re-run the 2013 half Senate election in Western Australia and the resultant fall-out across all Australian parliaments (to varying degrees), political parties, main-stream media, social media, academia and the electorate at large, clearly increased the attention of stakeholders on matters electoral. It has also accentuated the need for commissions to be more proactive and effective in managing their stakeholder relationships ... and at times, in bringing a touch of practical reality to some of the aired expectations.

While there are few if any quick fixes in this space, it would seem that the opportunity exists for electoral commissions to more proactively engage in activities designed to educate and influence stakeholder thinking and in so doing, potentially moderate unrealistic expectations. To do so effectively, electoral staff must be proficient in gaining an understanding of the stakeholders to a given issue or project proposal and in choosing the most appropriate engagement strategies.

The range of issues over which an electoral commission might need to undertake some stakeholder analysis work and arrive at an agreed engagement strategy is as wide as it is long. *Appendix 1* provides a list of such issues as identified by workshop participants, under the headings of current, emerging and potential issues.



## Electoral Commission Stakeholders

At its simplest and broadest, the term stakeholder can be defined as any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organisation's objectives.

Given the character of Australia's democratic processes (including compulsory voting) and the broad range of potential elections to be run, electoral commissions are impacted by, required to liaise with or to provide services to an incredibly diverse mix of stakeholders. Naturally the relative importance and influence of particular stakeholders can vary greatly from one election type to the next and over time and the key drivers for different stakeholders will often be quite divergent.

The following diagram illustrates the typical mix of stakeholders confronting Commonwealth public sector agencies, as identified by the Australian National Audit Office.



Source: ANAO, 2013

See *Appendix 2* for a more detailed listing of a typical electoral commission's stakeholder mix.

Determining who the critical stakeholders are and why they are important is a vital exercise at the early planning stages of any project or new initiative. An in-depth examination of 400 strategic decisions by Paul Nutt (2002) found that over half of them 'failed' because of inadequate attention to the interests of and/or information held by stakeholders.

Effective stakeholder analysis and management can help an organisation to act more strategically and rise above a narrow focus on operational processes and legislative compliance.

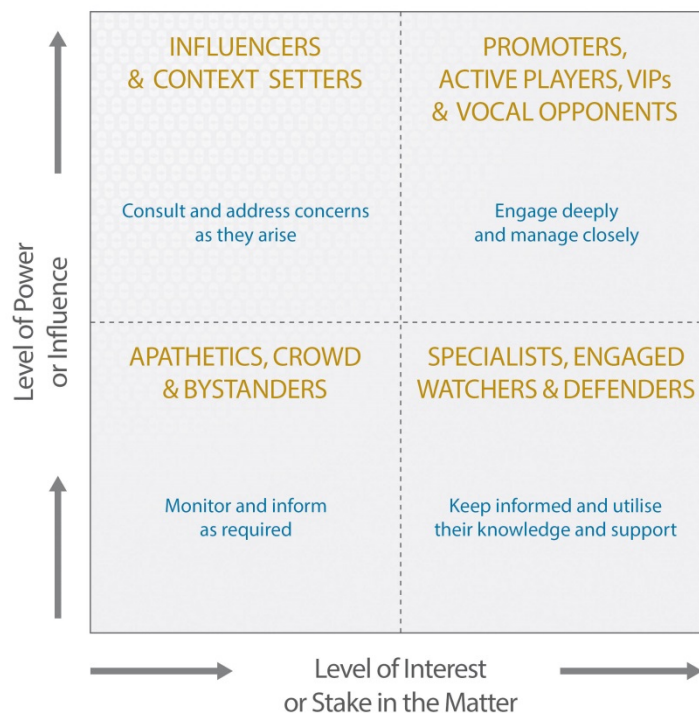
## Stakeholder Identification and Analysis

It is possible for detailed stakeholder analysis to get bogged down in complex models and theoretical constructs, however there are a number of quite simple techniques and tools that can be particularly helpful.

A simple and commonly used tool to help frame a brainstorming session with a project team aimed at identifying who the key stakeholders are and their relative importance is a stakeholder identification matrix or power versus interest grid. There can be many variations to the precise branding and focus of such grids, but they are a useful starting point and provide a structure whereby stakeholders can be compared and their relative characteristics and drivers discussed.

### STAKEHOLDER IDENTIFICATION MATRIX

POWER VS INTEREST GRID

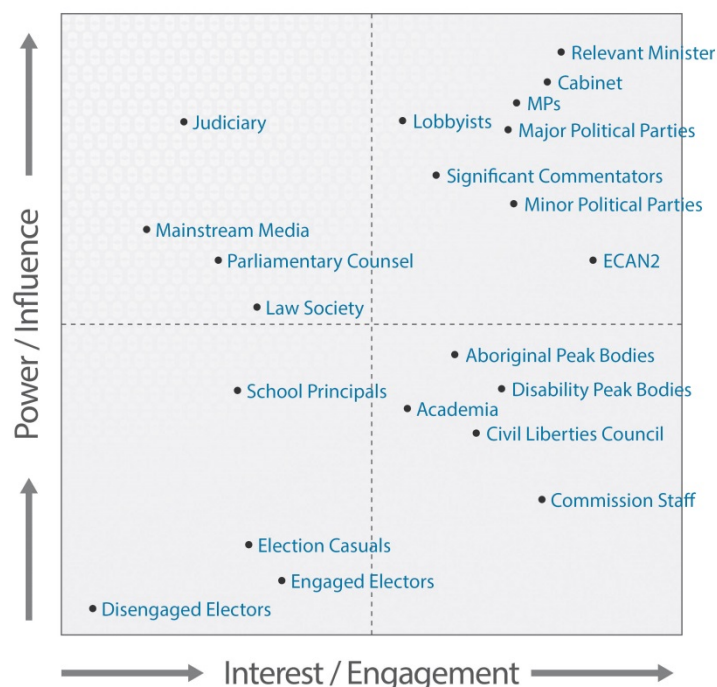


Identified stakeholders are placed at a point on the above grid based on an assessment of their relative level of power or influence versus their relative level of interest or stake in the issue or matter being considered. The diagram allocates broad labels to the nature of the stakeholders likely to be in each grid and also specifies the broad engagement approach that is likely to be applicable.

The diagram below illustrates how such a matrix or grid technique might be used to help classify stakeholders in respect of a proposal to introduce voter identification requirements at polling places. While there may be debate as to the positioning of a particular stakeholder on the grid and what stakeholders have been identified or not, the benefit of the exercise is derived by the responsible project team spending the time having the discussion about who the key stakeholders are likely to be and the nature of their connection to the project at hand.

## SAMPLE POWER vs INTEREST GRID

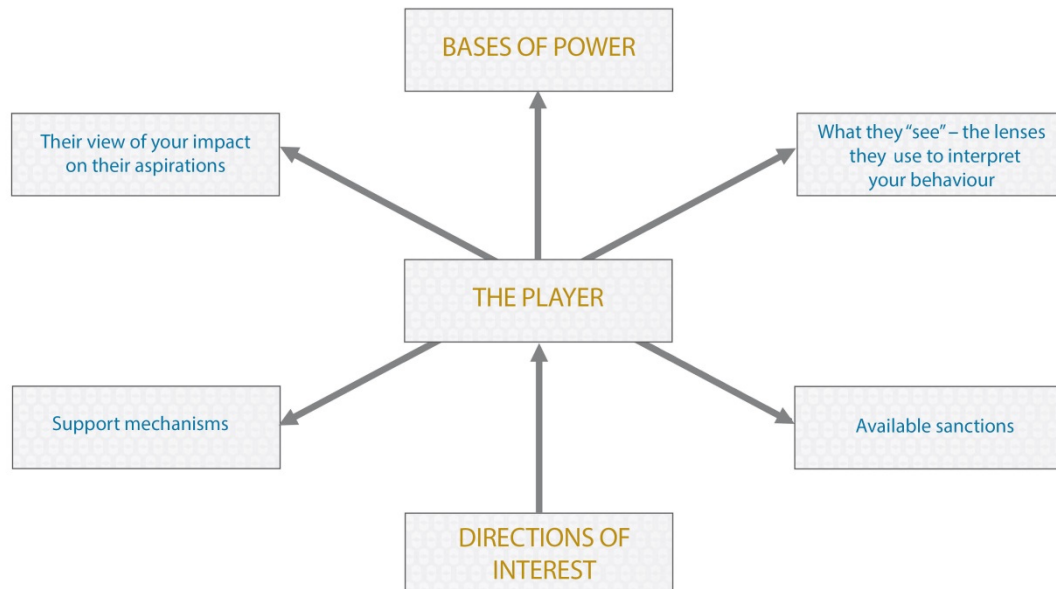
ISSUE: PROPOSED INTRODUCTION OF VOTER ID AT POLLING PLACES



Once the stakeholders relevant to an issue or project have been identified and categorised, it may be appropriate for those adjudged to be the most critical, to delve more deeply into the basis of their power and the direction or nature of their interest. The following diagram provides some guidance as to the questions that might be asked and the matters requiring examination.

## ANALYSING A SINGLE STAKEHOLDER

BASES OF POWER – DIRECTIONS OF INTEREST



Source: Bryson 2004

Clearly the nature and depth of engagement that might be adopted in respect of a particular stakeholder will be greatly influenced by the information collected through conducting this type of analysis.

The following provides some guidance as to the types of questions that might be asked at each point in the above diagram.

1. Bases of power – Is their power derived from legislation, market dominance, influence over other stakeholders, financial control, public recognition, access to media, etc.
2. Directions of interest – What is their primary purpose, other objectives and desired outcomes, their key drivers and influential stakeholders.
3. Who or what they “see” – How does the stakeholder perceive your role. Are you seen as a mere by-stander, a key player, an umpire, a regulator, a partner, a service provider or a necessary facilitator.
4. Their view of your impact on their aspirations – Are you viewed in a positive, negative or ambivalent light; necessary or unnecessary; important or unimportant.



5. Available sanctions – are you or they in a position to impose sanctions; eg. statutory, financial, compliance, audit, reporting, public or media exposure, reputational damage.
6. Support mechanisms – what support mechanisms can they draw upon; eg. access to media; capacity to influence public opinion; impact on financial controls; legislative power or influence; their coalition of supporters.

As a result of reviewing the above simple models, workshop participants derived the following list of criteria or questions that an electoral project team might try to answer when wishing to gain a better understanding of their identified key stakeholders in the context of the project or issue being examined.

1. The stakeholder's level of interest – L, M or H
2. The relative Influence of the stakeholder – L, M or H
3. The stakeholder's current level of support for the issue/project – L,M or H
4. What are the stakeholder's goals and desired outcomes?
5. How knowledgeable is the stakeholder on the issue?
6. How could the stakeholder hinder or block your efforts?
7. How might the stakeholder support the project?
8. What precisely do we want from the stakeholder?
9. What might the stakeholder want from us?
10. Are there other stakeholders aligned with or opposed to this stakeholder?
11. What are the best engagement strategies for interacting with this stakeholder?
12. What are the risks associated with this engagement?

Depending on the circumstances, a single stakeholder template or a stakeholder comparative table can be developed using all or a selection of these criteria/questions.

See *Appendix 3* for a sample single stakeholder analysis template.

## Possible Engagement Strategies

Once a project team has identified their key stakeholders and gained a level of insight into their nature, the next step is to determine what engagement and management strategies appear to be the most appropriate for each.

As illustrated by the following diagram, alternative stakeholder engagement options can be placed on a continuum based on the intensity or depth of the interaction.



Source: ANAO, 2013

Clearly as one moves from the simple provision of information through the different forms of consultation and finally to participatory strategies such as partnering arrangements and consensus conferencing, the complexity of the engagement and the time and resources involved increases accordingly.

The make-up of any engagement strategy will depend on a wide variety of factors, many of which would become apparent if undertaking the type of exercise reflected in the diagram Bases of Power – Directions of Influence, on page 8.

The diagram on the following page marries the information that might be collected from a power versus interest grid analysis with alternative stakeholder engagement strategies and techniques.

## STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Target Group	Engagement Approach	Potential Strategies
<b>High influence/power High interest/stake</b>	Require intense stakeholder management and two-way engagement; encourage shared responsibility, accountability and decision making	Partnerships; service level agreements; ambassadorial programs; employment of stakeholder representatives; board membership; deliberative councils; two-way briefings
<b>High influence/power Low interest/stake</b>	Need to be kept informed through in-depth consultation or participation; encourage to be part of the team; two-way engagement within limits of responsibility	Invitational stakeholder consultative forums; focus groups and think tanks; membership to online forums
<b>Low influence/power High interest/stake</b>	Provide avenues for active input or comment; be seen to be consulting with interested parties; invite public comment	Surveys; online forums and social media; town hall meetings or open consultative forums; blogs; online polling
<b>Low influence/power Low interest/stake</b>	Largely one-way engagement; both push and pull communications using a variety of media channels; may be targeted or open broadcast	Publishing a regular newsletter to a targeted audience; broadcast media releases; written information posted online or through social media; webcasts using vehicles such as YouTube; advertising campaign

With the above table, as one moves from low power/low interest to high power/high interest, the sheer numbers of stakeholders to be engaged will typically decline while the amount of effort and resources involved will typically increase. For example, the amount of time and effort involved in distributing generic electoral information to a large and diverse audience through a media release or emailed newsletter is considerably less than organising an on-going consultative mechanism targeting representatives from a number of different CaLD elector communities.



Selecting the right engagement strategy or mix of strategies for a particular individual or group of stakeholders is critical in determining the effectiveness of the resultant relationship and/or the quality of the input or feedback gathered.

*Appendix 4* outlines some of the more commonly used engagement strategies that an electoral commission might utilise and lists the corresponding stakeholder targets deemed most appropriate for each strategy, as viewed by the workshop participants. Additional comments or qualifications have been added in terms of the use of each strategy.



## Stakeholder Management Principles

While this toolkit has focused on highlighting simple stakeholder identification and analysis techniques and then the possible engagement strategies that might be employed, effective stakeholder management is an on-going process and requires constant review and adjustment based on outcomes achieved and resultant experiences.



Effective stakeholder engagement can result in a raft of benefits, both to the organisation itself and the recipients of its services. By better understanding the goals and drivers of its stakeholders and utilising their knowledge and advice, an electoral commission can achieve significant benefits.

Suggett (2012) suggests the following benefits accrue from effective stakeholder engagement:

- Significantly adds to the quality of policy or service
- Builds community understanding and buy-in
- Improves the department's reputation, including with the Minister
- Reduces vocal opposition and helps keep key stakeholder groups 'in the tent'
- Boosts the profile of an initiative across government (including with Treasury)
- Demonstrates that we value the client or group
- Aids in the identification and management of risk (as well as opportunity).

In concluding, through the presentation and discussion of a number of quite different electoral stakeholder management case studies, workshop participants identified the following as the fundamental principles of effective stakeholder management for electoral commission project teams.

- Know precisely what you want to achieve from the stakeholder engagement. Document a clear set of deliverables or outcomes.
- Ensure you have identified who the key stakeholders are and how they relate to one another. Identify any coalitions of power or interest. Be aware of how one stakeholder group may view your engagement with another.
- Be sensitive to a stakeholder's drivers and don't make assumptions. Learn what is important to them and recognise they will likely see the relationship with you in bilateral terms.
- Quickly learn who the dominant players or leaders within a stakeholder group are and foster those relationships.
- If you make a commitment to do something, you must deliver. It is very hard to recover trust or commitment once lost.
- Be realistic! Don't encourage expectations that can't be fully met. Educate the stakeholders about the issue and context – what's possible and what's not.
- Ensure you commit sufficient and the right resources to an engagement. Staff selection and training is particularly important when engaging with marginalised stakeholder groups.
- Be proactive with your stakeholder engagement. Not engaging is rarely an option.
- Monitor progress and evaluate the effectiveness of an engagement constantly. Patience and persistence are essential, but you may need to change tack if it's not working.
- Be alert to the problem of engagement fatigue experienced by some marginalised stakeholder groups as a result of their interactions with multiple government agencies over time.

## References

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ANAO (2013) *Public Sector Governance – Strengthening performance through good governance*. Chpt. 4; Australian National Audit Office; [www.anao.gov.au](http://www.anao.gov.au)

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BSR (2012) *Back to Basics: How to Make Stakeholder Engagement Meaningful for Your Company*. [www.bsr.org](http://www.bsr.org)

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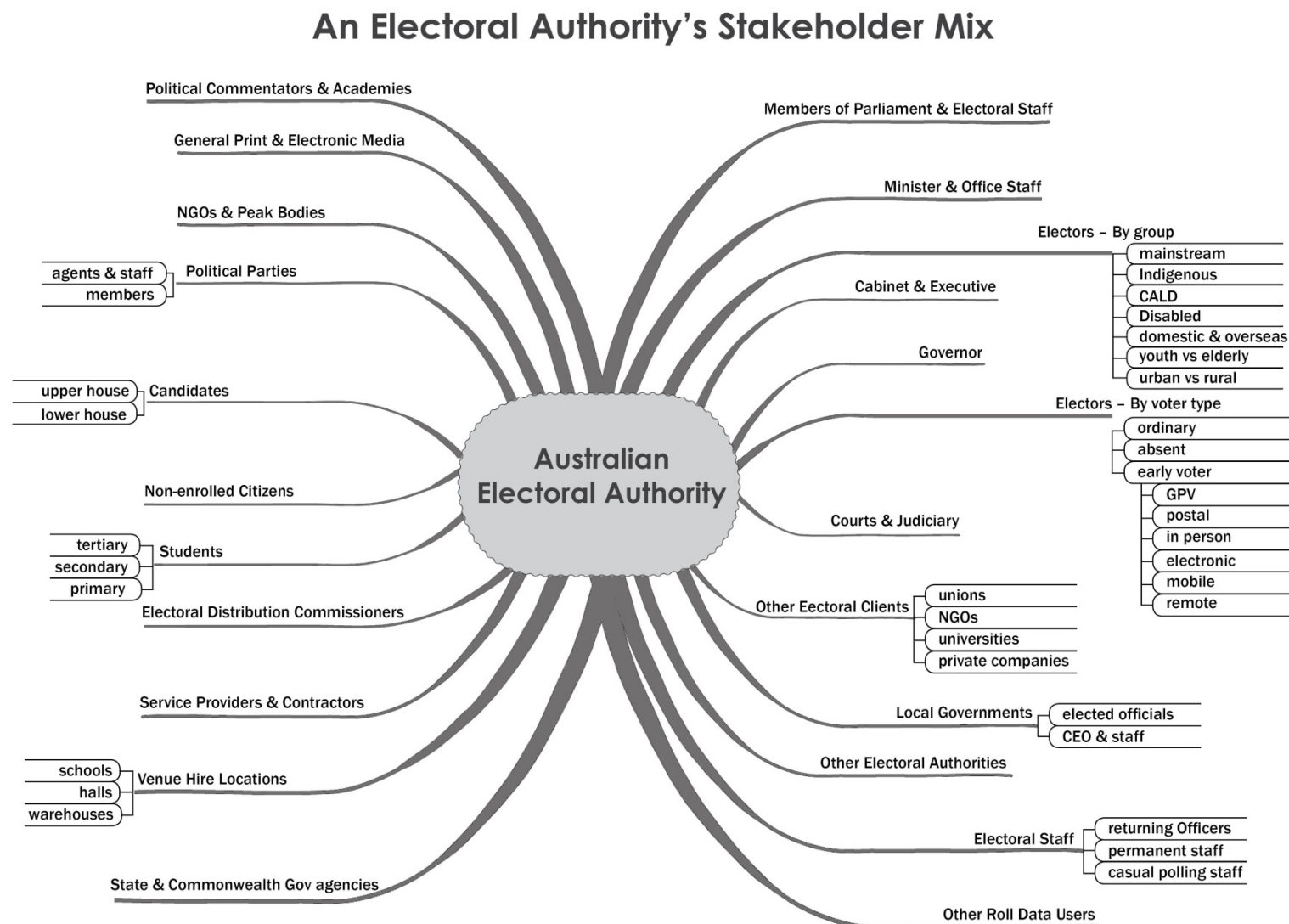
## Appendix 1 – Electoral Commission Issues

ELECTORAL ISSUES REQUIRING STAKEHOLDER MANAGEMENT		
<b>Current</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to internet or electronic voting</li> <li>• Roll divergence between jurisdictions</li> <li>• Australia Post – rising costs coupled with decline in service delivery standards</li> <li>• Rise of early voting as a proportion of total votes</li> <li>• Format and counting arrangements with upper house ballot papers</li> <li>• Voting Accessibility for electors with a disability – human rights claims</li> <li>• Pressure to get a quick result</li> <li>• Ballot paper security issues</li> <li>• Issue of postal vote applications by political parties</li> <li>• Voter ID at polling places</li> <li>• Non-compliance with funding and disclosure laws by political parties</li> <li>• Behaviour of campaign workers at polling places</li> </ul>	<b>Emerging</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Politicisation of the electoral process</li> <li>• Political campaign behaviour online and through social media</li> <li>• Loss of key partners/service providers/ local manufacturers</li> <li>• Increased demands on casual staff – making it harder to employ sufficient staff</li> <li>• Increasingly prescriptive regulations and legislation</li> <li>• Increased willingness to challenge results in the court of disputed returns</li> <li>• Increased use of lawyers by some political parties/candidates</li> <li>• Changing voter expectations</li> <li>• Funding/donations to political parties by foreign entities</li> <li>• Changing media landscape – incl. expansion in range of channels available</li> <li>• More restrictive candidate nomination requirements</li> <li>• Tighter party registration requirements</li> </ul>	<b>Potential</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lowering of the voting age</li> <li>• Compulsory voting vs voluntary voting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Parliamentary elections</li> <li>○ Local government elections</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Increased competition in the conduct of fee for service elections</li> <li>• Likely or possible technology advances</li> <li>• Tightening or loosening of funding and disclosure requirements</li> <li>• Cessation of postal voting as an option.</li> </ul>

\* The issues listed above are not ranked in terms of their importance or complexity and their applicability will vary across jurisdictions



## Appendix 2 – Electoral Commission Stakeholders



## Appendix 3 – Analysing Your Key Stakeholders

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Project/Initiative: \_\_\_\_\_

Stakeholder: \_\_\_\_\_

<b>The stakeholder's level of interest – L, M or H</b>	
<b>Relative influence of the stakeholder – L, M or H</b>	
<b>What are the stakeholder's goals and desired outcomes?</b>	
<b>How knowledgeable is the stakeholder on this issue?</b>	
<b>How could the stakeholder hinder or block the project?</b>	
<b>How might the stakeholder support the project?</b>	
<b>What precisely do we want from the stakeholder?</b>	
<b>What might the stakeholder want from us?</b>	

<b>Are there other stakeholders aligned with or opposed to this stakeholder?</b>	
<b>What are the risks associated with this engagement?</b>	
<b>What are our preferred engagement strategies?</b>	
<b>Possible contacts or persons of influence</b>	
<b>Key dates or time constraints</b>	
<b>Other matters</b>	

## Appendix 4 – Electoral Commission Engagement Strategies

STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES FOR ELECTORAL COMMISSIONS		
Common Engagement Strategies	Most Suitable Stakeholder Targets	Comments
<b>Media releases and postings to your website</b>	Media, electors, potential casual employees/ temporary electoral workers, academics and students, general public, political commentators, candidates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose and primary target audience will determine style and content</li> <li>• Requires a one-size fits all approach as info is available to all</li> <li>• Media release distribution network can extend well beyond the traditional media (eg. to bloggers, academics and peak bodies)</li> </ul>
<b>Regular emailed newsletter to established distribution list</b>	Registered political parties, MPs, local governments and councillors, lobby groups and peak bodies, focus group members, returning officers and past polling officials, community groups/ interest groups, signed up teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Requires collection of email addresses and on-going maintenance of contact lists</li> <li>• Care needs to be taken with contents as can easily be on-sent to other players – assume it will become public information</li> </ul>
<b>Face to face briefings or webinars</b>	Standing committee, MPs (face to face only), registered political parties, media, senior election officials, political donors and associated entities, electorate staff, students, candidates, staff, cabinet and executive, other government agencies, auditors, teachers, some community/ interest/ lobby groups, temporary electoral staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Face to face briefings for more detailed info dissemination and clarification of complexities – eg. briefing re legislation proposal</li> <li>• Webinars more suited to training and audiences where the agenda can be controlled</li> </ul>



Common Engagement Strategies	Most Suitable Stakeholder Targets	Comments
<b>Targeted telephone or online surveys/ polling</b>	Senior election officials, casual staff, candidates, electors, media, parties, electors, non-voters, specific audience/elector segments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Post event surveying re customer satisfaction and performance</li> <li>• To gather data/aggregated input re proposed initiatives or attitudes to electoral issues (eg. internet voting)</li> </ul>
<b>Interactive videos conferences</b>	Academics, electoral staff, returning officers, employees (where dispersed), remote (but equipped) groups; FIFO workers, overseas, other government agency partners (eg. DHS, Education) both commonwealth and State/ Territory level	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not widely used outside of core commission staff &amp; established groups, plus with other EAs</li> <li>• Educational tool – eg. with prospective candidates in rural and remote areas</li> <li>• We don't use this channel enough – may be a medium between email and face to face</li> </ul>
<b>Social media/ Facebook/ twitter/ YouTube/ mobile apps</b>	MPs, media, particularly youth, specific age segments, specific target audiences with common interest, psephologists, political bloggers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A post going viral can dramatically raise the profile of a topic or issue</li> <li>• Peer pressure can potentially be tapped</li> <li>• Can be a very cost effective way of quickly reaching particular target groups</li> </ul>
<b>Open blogs seeking comment/ feedback</b>	Staff, 'in the tent' stakeholders, electors, focus groups, community groups (includes social media), electors - particularly youth, teachers, students, specific audience segments, segments of voter community (FIFO, youth, overseas)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have been used effectively for engaging with internal stakeholders at the Commonwealth level</li> <li>• Forum is not currently supported by some ECs – can carry risk and requires ongoing management</li> <li>• Particularly useful for internal stakeholders (eg. as a closed blog for staff via intranet)</li> <li>• Seen as offering future opportunities via social media</li> </ul>

Common Engagement Strategies	Most Suitable Stakeholder Targets	Comments
<b>Focus groups/ round table (invited members)</b>	Academics, ERRN, peak bodies/lobby groups, CALD, disabled, standing advisory group, indigenous, EAAG, other electoral authorities (STEC), political commentators/electoral 'experts', interest groups	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Most useful for groups with a common interest, link or service need</li> <li>• Can be the starting point for deeper, more interactive engagement</li> <li>• Participatory consultation</li> </ul>
<b>Broad based consultative forums/ consensus conferences</b>	Academics, lobby groups, persons of interest, general public/ electors, commentators, advisory groups, community based interest groups, industry colleagues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maybe this is a channel to stimulate debate on those issues that we feel constrained in raising directly or individually</li> <li>• Useful to stimulate debate on an issue</li> <li>• Can be quite risky for an EA (eg. town hall debates)</li> <li>• Care is required to manage expectations</li> </ul>
<b>Trained ambassador program</b>	Individual CALD groups, other non-mainstream groups, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, school teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Selection of individuals is paramount</li> <li>• Resource intensive and requires ongoing engagement to foster relationships</li> <li>• Identification of and relationship building with community leaders is important</li> </ul>
<b>Partnering agreements for service delivery</b>	NGOs, public sector service providers (local, state, territory, federal), other electoral authorities, aligned industry/ service bodies, academic institutions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Will typically involve a formal SLA or MOU</li> <li>• Various egs. of EAs partnering with NGOs or employing specific stakeholders</li> </ul>