



Multilingual Ballots

Australia • New Zealand • United Kingdom

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MULTILINGUAL BALLOTS
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AUSTRALIA

MULTILINGUAL BALLOTS

I. Official Language or Languages

The national language of Australia is English.

II. Electoral Law

Australian federal elections are governed primarily by the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (Cth). The Commonwealth Electoral Act prescribes the form for ballot papers.¹ Currently electoral ballots are in English.²

The Electoral Act provides for assistance to “illiterate” voters who are unable to vote without help.³ This assistance includes permitting a nominee of the voter or the presiding officer to accompany the voter into the voting cubicle and assist the voter in marking their ballot paper.⁴

The Commonwealth Electoral Commission, whose functions include conducting federal elections and referendums, states that assistance may be provided to “people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds” who are unable to vote without assistance.⁵

III. Electoral Practice

In practice the Australian Electoral Commission publishes materials (including information on how to vote) in the following languages (in addition to English); Arabic; Bosnian; Chinese; Croatian; Farsi; German; Greek; Indonesian; Italian; Khmer; Korean; Macedonian; Polish; Portuguese; Russian; Serbian; Spanish; Turkish; and Vietnamese.⁶

¹ Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (Cth) § 209.

² Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (Cth) Schedule 1, Forms E & F

³ Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (Cth) § 234.

⁴ Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (Cth) § 234.

⁵ See Australian Electoral Commission, http://www.aec.gov.au/content/what/voting/faq_general.htm#assistance.

⁶ See Australian Electoral Commission, <http://www.aec.gov.au/content/What/translated/index.htm>.

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NEW ZEALAND

MULTILINGUAL BALLOTS

I. Official Language or Languages

The national language of New Zealand is English, although Maori¹ and New Zealand Sign Language² have been designated as official languages.

II. Electoral Law

New Zealand elections are governed primarily by the Electoral Act 1993 (NZ). The Electoral Act and the Electoral Regulations 1996 (NZ), made under that Act, prescribe the form for ballot papers.³ Currently ballot papers are in English but may include the registered logo of the relevant political parties.⁴

The Electoral Act provides for assistance to voters who are insufficiently familiar with English to vote. This assistance includes:

- providing a nominee or the issuing officer to accompany the voter into the voting cubicle and assist the voter in marking their ballot paper;⁵
- displaying, where available, material in a convenient place in languages other than English explaining the voting processes in each polling place, so as to draw the attention of any person who appears to be unfamiliar with English;⁶ and
- ensuring the Returning Officer of a polling place directs a polling official to act as an interpreter.⁷

III. Electoral Practice

In practice, Elections New Zealand, the joint Web site of the Electoral Enrolment Centre, Chief Electoral Office, and Electoral Commission, publishes materials (including information on how to vote) in the following languages (including English): Arabic; Chinese; Cook Island Maori; Farsi; Fijian; Japanese; Khmer; Korean; Maori; NZ sign language; Niuean; Punjabi; Samoan; Somali; Thai; Tokelauan; Tongan; and Vietnamese.⁸

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¹ Maori Language Act 1987 (NZ) § 3.

² New Zealand Sign Language Act 2006 (NZ) § 3.

³ Electoral Act 1993 (NZ) § 150, Electoral Regulations 1996 r 17.

⁴ Electoral Act 1993 (NZ) Form 11. For a sample ballot paper, see http://www.elections.org.nz/voting/sample_ballot_paper.html.

⁵ Electoral Act 1993 (NZ) § 170.

⁶ Electoral Regulations 1996 (NZ) r66.

⁷ Electoral Regulations 1996 (NZ) r66.

⁸ See Elections New Zealand, <http://www.elections.org.nz>.

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UNITED KINGDOM

MULTILINGUAL BALLOTS

The form of ballots for elections in the United Kingdom is prescribed for in the Representation of the People Act 1983.¹ The two languages currently used are English and Welsh. Regulations have been passed that prescribe the form of Welsh language that can be used on ballots in Wales for Parliamentary, European Parliamentary, and local government elections.² The use of other languages on the ballot form was considered in 2003. At that point, the Electoral Commission considered that ballots in languages other than English and Welsh would:

[A]llow greater access to the electoral process and enable voters to make informed choices and would also minimise the scope for undue influence being exerted over voters whose first language is not English. However, any obligation to produce ballot papers or other materials in multiple languages would need to be both carefully targeted and adequately resourced. Even with the necessary funds, the tight statutory election timetable that operates in the UK would give rise to a number of practical difficulties. Beyond the issues of logistics, there are also issues of principle about whether it is appropriate to provide ballot papers in many different languages, and how to determine which languages would need to be provided for. The Commission has concluded that an obligation on Returning Officers would, until technology is further integrated into the electoral process, create too many difficulties in operation (these issues are considered in greater detail in our separate report on ballot paper design). We believe that the more appropriate approach for the immediate future is to create a permissive power for Returning Officers to provide sample ballot papers in ethnic community languages where they believe that this would be usefulHowever, the ballot paper that voters complete should continue to be available only in English or Welsh.³

These recommendations were incorporated into the Electoral Administration Bill 2006,⁴ but have not yet been passed into law.

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¹ Representation of the People Act 1983, c. 2, Sch. 1, app..

² The Parliamentary Elections (Welsh Forms) Order 2005, SI 2005/1105.

³ The Electoral Commission, Equal Access to Democracy: Report and Recommendations, 2003, ¶ 3.6.

⁴ Electoral Administration Bill 2006, 2005/2006 HL Bill 107, cl. 35.