



Central Australian  
**Aboriginal Congress**  
ABORIGINAL CORPORATION | ICN 7823

18 November 2021

**RE: URGING YOU TO VOTE AGAINST THE VOTER ID BILL**

Dear Senator,

I am writing to you to urge you to vote against the *Electoral Amendment (Voter Integrity) Bill 2021*.

For context, the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress ('Congress') is a large Aboriginal community controlled health service based in Alice Springs. Established almost 50 years ago, Congress is one of the most experienced organisations in the country in Aboriginal health, a national leader in primary health care (PHC), and a strong advocate for the health of our people. Congress delivers services to more than 15,000 Aboriginal people living in Alice Springs and remote communities across Central Australia including Ltyentye Apurte (Santa Teresa), Ntaria (Hermannsburg), Wallace Rockhole, Utju (Areyonga), Mutitjulu and Amoonguna.

Congress is urging you to vote against the Voter ID Bill on the basis that:

**1. The Voter ID Bill will disproportionately disenfranchise Aboriginal people, especially those people living in remote Northern Territory communities.**

The NT has the highest proportion of Aboriginal people in Australia, with 30% of our population being Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people, which is ten times greater than the overall proportion of Aboriginal people in Australia (3.3%).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, more than three-quarters (78%) of Aboriginal people in the NT live in remote areas compared with 24% of the non-Aboriginal population.<sup>2</sup>

Aboriginal people are far less likely to have the documentation required to obtain formal identification. This is a result of past and ongoing structural and systemic issues, including that Aboriginal births are less likely to be registered. People whose births are not registered are less likely to have access to identification documents such as their birth certificate, drivers licence etc. For Aboriginal people, there are a range of factors that contribute to this, including: Stolen Generations and child removal policies; remoteness; socioeconomic status; and age of mother.<sup>3 4 5</sup>

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**Aboriginal health  
in Aboriginal hands.**

In addition, many of our people live hundreds of kilometres from the nearest regional centre, creating an additional barrier to obtaining formal identification for people who are already marginalised.

## **2. The Voter ID Bill will create an additional barrier for Aboriginal people to cast their vote, especially in remote areas.**

There are already a number of existing barriers for Aboriginal people to electoral participation, especially in remote areas where Aboriginal people disproportionately live. In the NT context, there are vast distances between urban centres, many small remote communities and outstations, and a high proportion of Aboriginal people who do not have English as a first language.

Aboriginal people have historically been excluded from democratic participation, and it is only since 1984, with the extension of compulsory enrolment and voting rights, that they have been granted the right to fully participate in Australia's political system.<sup>6</sup>

In recent times, there has been a significant reduction in the Australian Electoral Commission resources based in the NT, which has diminished the AEC's capacity to effectively support the electoral participation of Aboriginal Territorians across remote areas of the NT, which in turn impacts on the NT's low levels of voter registration, turn-out and participation.

It is already difficult for remote Aboriginal Territorians to be added to the electoral roll. The Federal Direct Enrolment and Update system is not compatible with the postal delivery address system across remote areas of Australia, where the majority of people collect their post from post offices rather than it being delivered to their home address.

The requirement for voters to produce identification will therefore serve disenfranchise a large cohort of Aboriginal people, especially across remote parts of the NT who may not speak English as their first language, who have historically been excluded from voting because of racist government policies, and who already face significant technical challenges in being able to enrol to vote in the first place.

## **3. Voting at remote polling places is already a challenge**

Remote polling, by nature, is a challenge in logistics—without the added requirement for electoral officials to verify the identity of every voter.

For example, the electorate of Lingiari covers more than 1.3 million square kilometres. For mobile polling teams to cover the whole electorate means that some small polling booths are only open and accessible for one hour; others in larger communities may be open for a day or two.

For a polling booth that already has a very limited period of time available for people to exercise their right to vote, to then have the added time required to verify voter identification documents (even if people know to bring these documents along with them in the first place) is concerning.

The proposed identification requirements will turn people away from polling places due to long wait times, especially in extreme weather conditions that are frequently experienced in the NT. Congress is concerned that people may also feel shamed by the additional questioning by electoral officials, especially if they don't have the necessary ID documents or if there is a discrepancy in spelling, address or date of birth information between documents.

**4. These proposed changes are unnecessary, punitive and seek to solve a problem that does not exist.**

Congress is concerned that this proposed bill seeks to solve a problem that does not exist. The AEC is reported as stating that the rate of voter fraud (through multiple voting) in the 2019 federal election was only 0.03%.<sup>7</sup>

Failure to vote in an election can attract a fine and Congress is concerned that this will unfairly and disproportionately impact Aboriginal people, who are already at greater risk of being criminalised and are over-represented in the justice system.<sup>8</sup>

There is a relationship between participatory democracy and peoples' health and wellbeing as the ability to actively participate in democracy gives people a greater sense of control over their lives and their own destiny.

Congress therefore urges you to consider the evidence we have provided and use this to inform your vote **against the Voter ID Bill**.

Thank you for your urgent consideration of this issue.

Yours sincerely,

Donna Ah Chee  
Chief Executive Officer

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<sup>1</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2018) Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2016. Accessed from:

<https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001>

<sup>2</sup> Australian Bureau of Statistics (2019). Census of Population and Housing: Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2016. Accessed from:

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<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples/census-population-and-housing-characteristics-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-australians/latest-release>

<sup>3</sup> The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (n.d.). *Birth, death and marriage records*. Accessed from: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/family-history/family-history-sources/official-records/birth-death-and-marriage-records>

<sup>4</sup> Xu, F., Sullivan, E.A., Black, D.A. et al. Under-reporting of birth registrations in New South Wales, Australia. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 12, 147 (2012).

<https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2393-12-147>

<sup>5</sup> Gibberd, A.J., Simpson, J.M. and Eades, S.J. (2016), No official identity: a data linkage study of birth registration of Aboriginal children in Western Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health*, 40: 388-394. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1753-6405.12548>

<sup>6</sup> Commonwealth of Australia, 2009, *Report on the conduct of the 2007 federal election and matters related thereto*. Accessed from:

[https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary\\_business/committees/house\\_of\\_representatives\\_committees?url=em/elect07/report2/final.pdf](https://www.aph.gov.au/parliamentary_business/committees/house_of_representatives_committees?url=em/elect07/report2/final.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Richardson, H and Shorey, K (2021). *Warren Entsch adds voice to proposed voter ID law, saying he has evidence of voter fraud*. Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Accessed from: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-11-09/warren-entsch-voter-id-fraud-allegations/100604282>

<sup>8</sup> Department of Attorney-General and Justice (2019). *Pathways to the Northern Territory Aboriginal Justice Agreement*, Northern Territory of Australia.