Collaborative ventures, changing technology and an increasing acknowledgement of the role played by analysts in their commentary on the electoral processes has led to renewed debate on the need for dialogue with the electoral jurisdictions and investigation of the basis on which such interaction can occur.

The papers contained in this volume explore some of the issues relating to an agenda for electoral research in Australia from the perspective of both administrators and analysts, questions such as:

- What is the core for research - past, present and future?
- What are the boundaries between electoral and political inquiry?
- What are the benefits and opportunities for cooperation between electoral administrators and analysts?
- Where is technology taking the industry and can it be used to further electoral research?

Foreword: Elizabeth Ho
Keynote Address: Colin A Hughes
Papers: Nicholas Economou and Brian Costar, Antony Green, Phillip Green, Andrew Hawkey and Michelle Davy, Dean Jaensch, Michael Maley, Alan McRobie, Rod Medew, Gerard Newman, Jenni Newton, Campbell Sharman, John Wanna, George Williams

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South Australians have been interested in electoral matters for a long time.

South Australia introduced the secret ballot in 1856 – a month after Victoria and only the second colony to do so. By the time that the various colonies voted to federate in 1899 and 1900, women in South Australia as well as in New Zealand and Western Australia could have their own votes recorded.

More recently, after the South Australian State election of 1989, in which the Liberal Party received 52% of the two party preferred vote but failed to win a majority of the seats, the Constitution Act was changed to require a review of the electoral boundaries after each State election, and - perhaps more importantly - the changes required the South Australian Electoral Districts Boundaries Commission to take votes into account when making any boundary changes.

The South Australian Electoral Districts Boundaries Commission is required to draw State electoral boundaries, as far as practicable, in such a way that they are:

...fair to prospective candidates and groups of candidates so that, if candidates of a particular group attract more than 50 per cent of the popular vote (determined by aggregating votes cast throughout the State and allocating preferences to the necessary extent), they will be elected in sufficient numbers to enable a government to be formed.

Constitution Act (SA) s.83 (1)

Once the Electoral Districts Boundaries Commission (EDBC) was required to check the electoral effect of its redistribution two things happened: electoral data became available in more useful form, and debate about the whole process of redistribution encouraged research.

Three redistributions have been undertaken since the change to the Act (1991, 1994 and 1997-1998) and each of the Commission Reports has included very detailed comments on the Commission’s assumptions and conclusions. The relatively short time-frame between redistributions, and the Commission’s willingness to publish detailed explanations have meant that there is now a continuing dialogue about how best to fulfill the requirements of the Act. An idea expressed in one Report can be followed up and explored in time for the next hearings.

Although it may be felt that the EDBC sits a bit outside play as far as electoral research for the jurisdictions is concerned, it would be wrong to underestimate its impact on electoral research in South Australia during the 1990's.

With regard to collaboration between the electoral authorities and researchers or commentators, that collaboration implies working together on a project, aiming to achieve some common objectives - and perhaps some individual ones as well. This author has collaborated on at least two ventures with the State Electoral Office (SEO) here in South Australia. The first was a study of donkey and reverse donkey voting at State elections, and the second was compilation of a complete
set of all candidates who have ever stood for election to either House of the South Australian Parliament. Opportunities to work on collaborative projects have not presented themselves very often, although this may not be the case in other states or systems.

There has been a lot of co-operation. From the author’s point of view this has been fairly one-way in that a lot more has been asked of the SEO than it has asked of the Parliamentary Library. Some of this work has been of use to the SEO too – for example a summary of electoral legislation since the 1850’s, which was conducted by the Library for a select committee some years ago.

Finally, both analysts and SEO staff have worked together quite separately to assist another body – the EDBC, in particular at their 1991, 1994 and 1997-1998 enquiries. The reason why this work is seen as a kind of collaborative effort is that although quite different roles were adopted, the same aim was shared, namely to provide information that might help the Commission to achieve that very difficult requirement of drawing boundaries which could produce a fair result at a subsequent election.

The SEO may outline the benefits they believe they receive from working with analysts, but the benefits received by the author can be noted.

First and probably of most value is the access to data that is not available to people working outside the electoral administration. An example is the examination of actual ballot papers after an election to look at donkey voting. This enabled a fairly common assumption held by State MPs to be tested, namely that being higher on the ballot paper than one's major-party rival confers an advantage of up to 2%. The SEO interest may have been in whether there was a consistent level of interference by the electoral law (which requires a full statement of preferences) on voters’ actual preferences. What was found was a highly inconsistent level of donkey voting across the seats investigated.

A second advantage of working closely with the SEO comes from free and open communication. This has worked in the author’s favour many times. Knowing that data exist can often be a great springboard. Ten or fifteen years ago when the final two candidates in a seat were not representatives of the ALP or the Liberal Party there was no recount to determine an ALP: LIB two party preferred vote in that seat. Later, recounts were done but not published; now recounts are done and published (that applied to 11 of our 47 seats at the most recent election). In the meantime, just knowing that recounts were done, and being able to have access to unpublished data, was a tremendous help later when it came to accurately representing the effects of a boundary change on affected electorates.

So far only work that has been done in conjunction with the SEO has been mentioned. This is partly because members of a state parliament are more interested in research which uses state data. But the experience of requesting and working with Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) data has been most interesting. First of all the Divisional Returning Officers (DROs) have been fantastic. At the 1993 federal election the AEC required a two party preferred vote to be counted out for each booth. This was exciting because the intention was to show how the voters in the proposed State seats had voted at that federal election of 1993 (specifically because it had already been calculated how these same voters had voted at the State election of 1989 on the proposed boundaries, but it was not felt that the 1989 election was any guide as to how South Australians might vote at a State election due later in 1993). Two party preferred results for each booth, rather than for each enormous federal division could potentially make the estimates much more accurate when chunks of one state electorate needed to be moved into another. The other reason why these figures were
enticing, was that for the very first time it would be possible to assess an assumption that preferences would have been allocated in the same pattern at each booth as they were across an entire electorate. These figures could show how far out the estimates had been in the past.

Each Divisional Returning Officer was telephoned before and after the federal election, and every one of them sent unpublished two party preferred counts, by booth, for their divisions, a gesture which was much appreciated. It may be that the interest in the two party preferred booth figures was also of interest to the DROs. The AEC would have explained the importance of counting out a two party preferred figure for each booth, but it must have involved a considerable increase in work for the staff out at the booths on election night. To have an outsider showing interest in the figures may have helped to reassure staff that the extra effort was important.

A less rewarding episode occurred when it was indicated that the AEC had data showing voters' suburbs of residence with the booth at which they lodged a vote. This data could throw light on another assumption that had been used, namely that electors use their local booth (and therefore moving the booths in an electorate would be a good proxy for moving electors). The AEC in Adelaide was contacted and the request passed to their media liaison office, but the media people did not understand what was wanted and there was no access to the research or technical people who could have helped. No response was received to a written request which was frustrating. South Australia was placing enormous emphasis on the fairness of electoral redistributions, even ordering new boundaries after every State election, but no access to data was available which could throw light on one of the key assumptions of the estimation process. Some time later it transpired that the SEO had the data and could run off a copy. The data showed that about 80% of electors voted at their local booth - more in country areas.

The main conclusion to be drawn from this experience is that the more contact analysts have with electoral administrators and research staff, the more we will be able to help each other. We are not in competition with each other, nor are state results and research irrelevant to the federal situation (and vice versa). On the contrary, the work that has been done for the EDBC here could be helpful to people in the federal arena or in other states. Conferences are one of a number of ways that can increase communication between research and administration people. Individuals need to speak to each other; if we go through intermediaries it can be expected that the message will be distorted or have someone else's priorities imposed on it.

What about the future? There is so much exciting work waiting to be done. Wafting in the wind here in South Australia is a collaborative project reviewing our electoral history, but it seems that the change to counting votes by data input processes may open up a whole new range of possibilities. Will analysts (perhaps in collaboration with SEO staff) be able to ask for stored data files from say the 1997 State election? It may be possible to look at the results at one election according to different methods of counting the votes. For example, what if South Australia did adopt a West-German style Mixed Member Proportional (MMP) top-up system? What if a New Zealand style MMP count was tried? What if an optional preferential vote was used instead of full preferential voting?

This work is relevant because South Australian members may not be content to have their electorates changed radically every three or four years. It is too disruptive and downright dangerous for some of them. There may be a move towards multi-member electorates before too long, and that will generate some very interesting work.
It may be that the process of gaining access to actual voting data will take a while, although this should not be a difficulty. The difficulty will lie in the fact that two sorts of queries are received from members. The first kind of request relates to electorates throughout the State, and usually the member would be happy to waive the rule that the work is kept confidential and would allow distribution of the results to other members or to a pool of electoral research. Anticipatory work is included in this category, questions such as: What's it worth to be a sitting member? What’s the donkey vote worth? How did the voters in the proposed State electorates vote at the recent federal election?

The second kind of query is more political, in that it relates more to an individual member’s own interests or agenda, and the member is not likely to want the results widely distributed. The confidentiality of this work would not allow the results to be contributed to a pool of electoral research, although it must be said that this work is generally so restricted in scope that it would not be of great interest to other researchers. (Queries could include: What percentage increase would my party need in order to get an extra member elected to the Upper House? What have been the results for a given geographical area at the last few State and federal elections? If the current public opinion poll is correct, which seats would my party be likely to lose at an election?)

Returning to the possibility of having access to voting data on disc or CD-ROM. Perhaps the SEO will see the data just as information, on a more detailed basis but comparable with the figures currently published after each election. On this reasoning, if data could be accessed, it could be used for any query at all, and on this basis the SEO would probably be willing to release the data to political parties as well.

On the other hand, the SEO could be happier not to release the data but to allow analysts to use it in collaboration with office staff. Estimating the result for a given election if a different method of counting had been used might be one area where this collaboration would work well. But collaboration would limit the use of the data to those requests from MPs (or anticipatory work) where the question relates to electorates throughout the State. It is doubtful if collaboration could be requested on a more political query which related to a single member or a single party: eg a query such as how optional preferential voting might advantage independents. Collaboration on a query of this sort could be difficult.

If analysts could have access to voting data, for some queries but not for others, would that place the SEO in a difficult position in relation to the Parliament and the parties? And if given the data but only for a price, would the cost be prohibitive? Who would pay?

All of these questions will more easily be resolved in a climate of goodwill, and if results are shared as much as possible. In South Australia, we are certainly off to a good start.

There is an ancient Chinese curse: ‘May you live in interesting times’. We have been blessed to live in electorally interesting times.