

Tuesday, 10 September 2024

Accurate knowledge is power at the ballot box

As NSW citizens consider their vote in local council elections this week, they are being urged to be aware of tactics aimed at misleading them on polling day.

President of the Law Society of NSW Brett McGrath said misinformation and disinformation campaigns are affecting democracies across the globe, and has called on the NSW Government to ensure local elections are as safe from such interference as possible.

“The NSW Electoral Commission’s [‘Stop and Consider’](#) initiative and its [Disinformation Register](#) represent positive steps in this direction, but the Law Society supports the development of new legislation to regulate truth in political advertising, to safeguard democracy,” Mr McGrath said.

“Disinformation and misinformation undermine the integrity of the democratic process, and risk distorting election outcomes. These campaigns can be amplified by the rapid spread of viral social media posts.”

Mr McGrath noted international developments that have highlighted the pervasiveness, sophistication and effectiveness of campaigns that spread disinformation at an increasingly rapid rate.

“In recent days the United States Department of Justice revealed a major campaign by agents of the Russian Federation which sought to influence the 2024 US Presidential Election. Our governments should also remain vigilant,” Mr McGrath said.

“The worst effects of such election interference here can be reduced by arming our citizenry with the tools to recognise suspect election material. The Law Society is encouraged by the NSW Government’s announcement, in July this year, that civics and citizenship content in NSW primary schools will be required learning for students.”

The Law Society’s [submission](#) to the NSW Parliament’s [Inquiry](#) on *Proposals to increase voter engagement, participation and confidence* commends the work of the NSW Electoral Commission in ensuring high enrolment and turnout rates for elections in this state.

However, Mr McGrath said the robust culture of voter participation in NSW elections should not come at the expense of an enforcement regime that can have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable population groups.

“Unpaid fines can have flow-on consequences that may be unduly punitive, impacting particularly on the vulnerable and marginalised in our communities, including on Indigenous people in rural, regional and remote areas. The NSW Government should consider reviewing penalties for failing to vote, to reduce the hardship experienced by those who receive a fine, without affecting voter turn-out,” Mr McGrath said.

More can and should be done to engage with communities to better address instances of non-voting, to ensure as many citizens as possible are engaging in the democratic process.

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