

Local council elections 2024



Counting arrangements information booklet

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Introduction

Victoria has 79 local councils. This year, 78 councils will have elections that will be held on Saturday 26 October 2024. The Moira Shire Council election has been postponed until 2028.

All 78 elections will be held by postal voting, as determined by the Minister for Local Government.

Once nominations have closed (12 noon, Tuesday 17 September 2024) and the number of candidates is known, the VEC prepares a count plan for each council.

How we count the votes in local council elections depends on whether your council has wards (subdivided) or no wards (unsubdivided), and on the number of councillors to be elected in each ward or unsubdivided council.

There are two different systems of counting:

- preferential counting in single-councillor wards, as well as the Melbourne City Council leadership team election
- proportional counting in multi-councillor wards and unsubdivided councils.

Most preferential counting is done manually by hand, but sometimes, if deemed appropriate, it can be done by computer. Preferential counting by computer means we enter each voter's preferences into our computer count application that are then used to calculate the results. An example of where a computer count would be deemed appropriate for single-councillor elections is where there are many candidates in the election or ballot papers to be counted. Proportional counting is always done as a computer count given this a complex counting system and it is difficult to do accurately by hand.

Counting in local council elections

How we count the votes in manual counts, computer counts, and for Melbourne City Council is detailed in this booklet. Counting processes occur for up to 3 weeks following the close of voting. For the 2024 local council elections, this means that counting activities will take place from 26 October until 15 November.

While activity timelines will differ for each council, in accordance with the count plan that has been established for them, all counting activities across all councils will be completed during this period.

We have mailed ballot packs to all voters so they can complete their vote and post it back before the voting deadline. For your vote to be admitted to the count, you must sign the declaration on the ballot pack and post or deliver your completed postal vote by 6 pm on Friday 25 October.

To protect the secrecy of your vote, the declaration is removed before we take your vote out of the envelope for counting.

Victoria's local council structures

The following table shows the electoral structure of each of Victoria's local councils and outlines the counting systems and methods that will be used for each in the 2024 local council elections.

Local council	Number of councillors	Electoral structure	Count system	Count method
Alpine Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Ararat Rural City Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Ballarat City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Banyule City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Bass Coast Shire Council	9	3-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
Baw Baw Shire Council	9	3-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
Bayside City Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Benalla Rural City Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer

Local council	Number of councillors	Electoral structure	Count system	Count method
Boroondara City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Brimbank City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Buloke Shire Council	6	2-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
Campaspe Shire Council	9	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Cardinia Shire Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Casey City Council	12	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Central Goldfields Shire Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Colac Otway Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Corangamite Shire Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Darebin City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
East Gippsland Shire Council	9	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Frankston City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Gannawarra Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Glen Eira City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Glenelg Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Golden Plains Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer

Local council	Number of councillors	Electoral structure	Count system	Count method
Greater Bendigo City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Greater Dandenong City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Greater Geelong City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Greater Shepparton City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Hepburn Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Hindmarsh Shire Council	6	2-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
Hobsons Bay City Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Horsham Rural City Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Hume City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Indigo Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Kingston City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Knox City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Latrobe City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Loddon Shire Council	5	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Macedon Ranges Shire Council	9	3-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer

Local council	Number of councillors	Electoral structure	Count system	Count method
Manningham City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Mansfield Shire Council	5	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Maribyrnong City Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Maroondah City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Melbourne City Council – leadership team election	1	Single vacancy election for Lord Mayor/ Deputy Lord Mayor leadership team	Preferential	Computer
Melbourne City Council – councillor election	9	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Melton City Council	10	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Merri-bek City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Mildura Rural City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Mitchell Shire Council	9	3-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
Moira Shire Council	No election			
Monash City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Moonee Valley City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Moorabool Shire Council	9	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer

Local council	Number of councillors	Electoral structure	Count system	Count method
Mornington Peninsula Shire Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Mount Alexander Shire Council	8	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Moyne Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Murrindindi Shire Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Nillumbik Shire Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Northern Grampians Shire Council	6	2-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
Port Phillip City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Pyrenees Shire Council	5	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Borough of Queenscliffe	5	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
South Gippsland Shire Council	9	3-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
Southern Grampians Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Stonnington City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Strathbogie Shire Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Surf Coast Shire Council	9	3-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
Swan Hill Rural City Council	7	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Towong Shire Council	5	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer

Local council	Number of councillors	Electoral structure	Count system	Count method
Wangaratta Rural City Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Warrnambool City Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Wellington Shire Council	9	3-councillor wards	Proportional representation	Computer
West Wimmera Shire Council	5	Unsubdivided	Proportional representation	Computer
Whitehorse City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Whittlesea City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Wodonga City Council	7	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Wyndham City Council	11	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Computer
Yarra City Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Yarra Ranges Shire Council	9	Single-councillor wards	Preferential	Manual
Yarriambiack Shire Council	Fully uncontested			

Counting processes

Processing envelopes and removing ballot papers

Ballot paper envelope processing and the removal of ballot papers from the envelopes are key activities that take place before counting can commence.

Processing ballot paper envelopes

This activity takes place daily during the voting and postal vote receipt period of the election, which ends on Friday 1 November 2024. This includes checking if votes can be admitted to the next stage or should be rejected and processing them in our election management system.

Getting ballot papers ready for counting

Removing ballot papers from admitted envelopes usually takes place in 2 groups. These groups are known as group A and group B.

Group A is made up of ballot paper envelopes returned before the close of voting where the voter does not have a replacement ballot pack issued.

Group B is made up of the remaining ballot paper envelopes returned before the close of the postal vote receipt period.

Group A removal of ballot papers, known as the extraction, will begin during the week following the close of voting. Group B removal of ballot papers cannot start until after the close of the postal vote receipt period.

During group A and B removal of ballot papers, the identifying declaration flaps are separated and set aside, envelopes are then opened, and ballot papers are taken out. The number of ballot papers that will proceed to the count is determined during this process.

When election officials have removed all ballot papers from the envelopes, they will announce the total number of ballot papers proceeding to the count. This may vary from the total number of envelopes as some envelopes may have been rejected.

If the ballot papers are proceeding to a computer count, election officials will sort the ballot papers further to identify obviously informal votes before batching formal votes into sets of 50 with a short batch of the remainder (less than 50) and bundling and tallying obviously informal votes.

Manual counting

Manual counting in single-councillor wards moves through a series of steps to ensure an accurate and clear result.

First preferences

To manually obtain first preference results for single-councillor ward elections, election officials:

1. sort ballot papers to first preference for each candidate and set informal votes aside
2. count the number of ballot papers for each candidate and informal ballot papers and record the result.

This occurs for both group A and group B ballot papers. Following completion of both counts, if a candidate has received an absolute majority, which is more than half (more than 50%) of all first preference votes, a preference distribution is not required, and the candidate is successful.

Preference distribution

If no candidate has received an absolute majority of first preference votes, a preference distribution will be conducted. To manually distribute preferences for single-councillor ward elections, election officials:

1. combine the group A and group B ballot papers before beginning the preference distribution
2. exclude the candidate with the fewest votes
3. transfer the excluded candidate's ballot papers to the remaining candidates based on the next highest preference (e.g. number 2 for second preference)
4. count the redistributed ballot papers for each eligible candidate and add the total to their previous result.

If a candidate has received an absolute majority of votes (50% + 1) from this preference distribution, the candidate is successful. If not, this process is repeated until one of the remaining candidates reaches an absolute majority of votes and is successful.

Once a candidate is successful, the ballot papers are placed in security boxes and sealed.

Formality checking and challenged ballot papers

Formality checking occurs regularly throughout the group A and group B first preference counts, as well as the preference distribution (if required).

The election manager or assigned election official checks the informal ballot papers to determine formality:

1. ballot papers deemed formal are returned to the count
2. informal ballot papers are set aside and tallied.

Scrutineers may challenge the formality of a ballot paper and the election manager will inspect these and decide on formality. Formality rules are outlined in the *Scrutineer handbook*, which is available on the VEC website.

When a ballot paper is challenged, the election manager will write 'admitted' or 'rejected' on the back of each challenged paper with their initials and the date. A dot sticker may be affixed to the ballot paper to indicate the preference decision made by the election manager.

Availability of manual count results

Printed copies of a 'Provisional' preference distribution report, or a first preference report if the candidate achieved an absolute majority of first preference votes, are shared once the results have been validated. The election manager will write 'Provisional' on all copies.

Computer counting

Computer counting moves through a series of steps to ensure an accurate and clear result. These steps are the same whether the computer count is being conducted in a multi-councillor election or in a single-councillor election.

Data entry of ballot papers

To obtain the results for an election by computer count:

1. computer count team leaders allocate batches of formal ballot papers to a team of data entry operators
2. data entry operators enter the preferences on each ballot paper into the computer count application
3. the computer count application is configured to check each ballot paper for formality during data entry.

Data entry occurs for both group A and group B ballot papers.

Formality checking and challenged ballot papers

Formality checking occurs regularly throughout both the group A and group B data entry process. Ballot papers deemed obviously informal during the extraction process, or those marked as informal in the computer count application, are reviewed by the election manager.

The election manager or assigned election official checks the informal ballot papers to determine formality:

1. ballot papers deemed formal are returned to data entry
2. informal ballot papers are set aside and the total number of informal votes is then entered into the computer count application at the end of group A and B.

Scrutineers may challenge the formality of a ballot paper and the election manager will inspect these and decide on formality. Formality rules are outlined in the *Scrutineer handbook*, which is available on the VEC website.

When a ballot paper is challenged, the election manager will write 'admitted' or 'rejected' on the back of each challenged paper with their initials and the date. A dot sticker may be affixed to the ballot paper to indicate the preference decision made by the election manager.

Batch audits

Batch audits will be conducted regularly throughout the count. Randomly selected batches from each data entry operator will be checked for accuracy against their *Ballot paper details report*. Scrutineers can also query the data entry of a specific ballot paper or batch with a count team leader, who will follow the same process to check for accuracy.

Information on the VEC's validation procedures can be found in the *Availability of results guide*, which is available on the VEC website.

Reconciliation and results calculation

When the data entry operators have entered all ballot papers for group A and B, and the count team leader has completed ballot paper reconciliation, the results are calculated using the computer count application.

This is a public event that candidates and other interested parties can attend.

Printed copies of a 'Provisional' preference distribution report are shared once the results have been validated. The election manager will write 'Provisional' on all copies.

Availability of computer count results

Several reports are available to scrutineers during a computer count. Details on these can be found in the *Availability of results guide*, which is available on the VEC website.

Melbourne City Council elections

Two elections are conducted for Melbourne City Council general elections. The leadership team election is treated as a single vacancy election, and candidates for the lord mayor and deputy lord mayor nominate as a team. The councillor election for Melbourne City Council is a multi-councillor election to elect 9 councillors.

We use computer counting for both the leadership team and councillor elections.

Ballot paper envelopes are processed following the same process as any other council election, and extraction and counting activities are also completed in two phases: group A and group B.

However, there are some differences in the process to prepare for and conduct a computer count for the leadership team and the councillor election. When ballot papers are removed from the envelopes, the ballot papers are separated into two piles: one for the leadership team and one for the councillor election.

Leadership team election initial sort

Election officials will sort the leadership team election ballot papers to identify obviously informal votes before batching formal votes into sets of 50 with a short batch of the remainder (less than 50) and bundling and tallying informal votes.

All leadership team election ballot papers sorted as 'obviously informal' during the initial sort will be reviewed again by the election manager during the computer count before they can be counted as informal.

On completion, all leadership team election ballot papers proceed to computer count. Refer to *Computer counting* (above) to learn more about each stage.

Councillor ballot paper initial sort

Election officials initially sort councillor election ballot papers into 3 categories:

- ballot papers marked above the line
- ballot papers marked below the line
- obviously informal ballot papers.

During the initial sort, councillor election ballot papers marked below the line are batched into sets of 50 with a short batch of the remainder (less than 50). Obviously informal ballot papers are bundled and tallied. These ballot papers are then packed into security boxes and stored until the computer count starts.

Above-the-line ballot paper further sort and manual count

All councillor election ballot papers marked above the line undergo a further sort to first preference and the number of ballot papers for each group are manually counted.

Scrutineers may challenge the formality of an above-the-line ballot paper during counting of above-the-line votes for the councillor election.

These above-the-line ballot papers are then packed into security boxes and stored. Above-the-line ballot papers will not be reviewed again unless deemed necessary by the election manager.

Below-the-line ballot paper computer count

To data enter the below-the-line ballot papers for the councillor election, the computer count process largely follows the same steps as other computer counts. Refer to *Computer counting* (above) to learn more about each stage.

There are two main differences in the process of conducting a computer count for the councillor election.

1. During formality checking, there are different formality rules that are unique to the councillor election that allow for certain votes with non-consecutive numbers

to be formal. These rules are outlined in the *Melbourne City Council Scrutineer handbook*, which is available on the VEC website.

2. The computer count team leader enters the tally of above-the-line ballot papers for each group into the computer count application. This includes any ballot papers found to be informal below-the-line during data entry but formal above-the-line following formality checking by the election manager.

Once the total above-the-line votes for each group have been entered into the computer count application, the computer count team leader will load the preferences according to the group voting ticket(s) lodged by each group. Where a group has registered two group voting tickets, the total number of above-the-line votes will be evenly split between the tickets, with any remainder (in the event of an odd number) allocated randomly to one of the group voting tickets by lot.

Reconciliation and results calculation

When the data entry operators have entered all ballot papers for group A and B, including above-the-line votes in the councillor election, and the computer count team leader has completed ballot paper reconciliation, the results are calculated using the computer count application.

This is a public event that candidates and other interested parties can attend.

Printed copies of the 'Provisional' preference distribution report for each election are shared once the results have been validated. The election manager will write 'Provisional' on all copies.

Declaring the results

The election manager will advise candidates of the time and location of the declaration of results, which is a public event that anyone can attend including candidates, families and friends, community members, council staff, local media and other interested parties. The election manager will announce the result of each election and declare the successful candidates elected. The declaration will occur at least 4 hours after provisional results have been released. Once the declaration has occurred, the results are final.

When a recount of the votes can happen

A recount is a re-examination of ballot papers for an election. It can only happen during the period after the provisional results are available and before the declaration of the result.

A recount usually occurs when the result is very close and the VEC believes it is necessary to confirm the result, or if a candidate submits a request in writing to the election manager and the VEC is satisfied that the reasons provided could have affected the election result.

The result of a recount replaces the original count.

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