



# Election Toolkit

A Flourishing Society | Your Faith, Your Voice, Your Vote  
Federal Election 2016



**Uniting Church in Australia**  
ASSEMBLY

# Ideas and Resources for Active Citizenship: An Election Toolkit

Once every three years or so, on the day of a federal election, almost every adult in the country is focussed on their participation in the democratic process, even if it is just for a few minutes. In the lead-up to the campaign, we'll be on the receiving end of endless election campaigning and advertising, and 24-hour-a-day media analysis. But contrary to the impression that this gives, election campaigns are not just a time for us to listen. In a healthy democracy it is a time for politicians to be listening to us—to what kind of society we want and what issues we are concerned about.

Imagine if this election year your local community was able to drive the agenda of the campaign in your electorate. Imagine if, come Election Day, you felt confident in your vote as a result of having had honest and substantial discussions with all the candidates about the things that matter most to you. To make it happen we need to be well informed and committed to actively engaging with the political processes in our country—a privilege and a responsibility of our citizenship. This resource has ideas to help make the most of opportunities to participate.

The booklet, [A Flourishing Society](#), which is the core of this suite of resources, and the series of Hot Issues Briefs, identify a range of national social justice and environmental issues that are important for the wellbeing of our society and the world. The information is designed to help you talk about these issues with the candidates in your electorate.

There are a number of ways you can engage with your local candidates during the election campaign.

You can write to them or meet them as they move around your electorate—when they knock on your door, in shopping centres, at arranged meetings and at community events and candidate forums.

## Hot Issues Briefs

These have been especially prepared for use in correspondence to and meetings with the candidates in your electorate. They include information about the issues and suggested questions for candidates.

[Read the Hot Issues Briefs](#)

## Organise a Candidates' Forum

Some Uniting Church congregations have a long history of hosting public forums where local candidates come to talk with people in their electorate. Think about hosting a forum in your church. Use the guide to help you work through what needs to be done to ensure the forum is a success.

[Read the guide](#)

## Meet the Candidates

As an individual or in a group, you can arrange a meeting with your current local member and other candidates standing for office in your electorate. This guide includes information about how to arrange a meeting with your Member of Parliament. It can be used during the election period to help you prepare for meetings with any of your local candidates.

[Read the guide](#)

## Write to the Leaders and Candidates

Write to the leaders of all major parties about the policy issues that are a priority for you and your community and about the future you would like to see for Australia.

Write to the local candidates in your area and the candidates for the Senate in your state to let them know what issues are important for you and how you would like the next government to address them. If you include local issues, make sure that they are ones for which the federal government has some responsibility.

This Guide has useful hints about where to access contact details, how to address your letters and what to include.

### Read the guide

Write an article for your local paper about the things you are looking for in political leadership and the issues you believe need to be addressed.

Write letters to the editor of local, regional and national papers.

## Pray

Pray for the leadership of Australia, for those who make decisions, for those who are affected by those decisions and for our nation. You might like to use the prayers from the *Uniting in Worship People's Book* pages 168, 172 and 182.

In Sunday worship, you could choose a focus issue each week for information and prayer.

### Read the prayers

## People, parties and policies

The easiest way to find out more information about political parties, their origins, agendas and policies, is to visit their websites. The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) has a full list of [registered parties](#).

There are also several current independent members of the Parliament. Profiles of these members and those who represent a political party can be found at the Parliament of Australia website— for current members of the [House of Representatives](#) and current members of the [Senate](#). Each member of Parliament also has their own website.

The AEC can also help you find out which [federal electorate](#) you are in and identify your local Member of Parliament.

The ABC's [Australia Votes 2016](#) website lists all the candidates for each electorate.

The ABC also provides online coverage of elections on its dedicated [website](#).



# A Guide to Organising an Election Forum

An excellent way to engage your church and local community in the electoral process, and to learn more about your local candidates, is to organise an election forum. An election forum is a community event where all candidates in a particular electorate are invited to express their values and vision, articulate their policy positions on a range of issues and answer questions from the audience—their potential constituents.

### What would an election forum look like?

The first thing is to be clear about why you want to hold the event. Are you hoping to provide an opportunity for your congregation and members of the community to be better informed about the candidates, their priorities for office and their policies? Or is there one significant issue in your electorate that deserves a substantial conversation between the candidates and the voters?

If your forum is going to be issue-specific, remember that it must be an issue that comes within the federal jurisdiction e.g. climate change or taxation reform, or one where the federal parliament can have significant influence through the delivery of funding e.g. family violence.

A common way of structuring an election forum, broad ranging or issue-specific, is to invite candidates to address the audience for five minutes each, followed by an open question and answer forum. You'll find more detailed suggestions about how to run the forum below.

### Getting started

It's not easy to try to organise an event like this on your own. Gather a group of people who would like to be involved in planning and holding an election forum to form an organising group or committee—and don't forget to consult with your church council and leaders.

Depending on how large your congregation is, you might like to co-organise the event with another like-minded group in your community. There might also be other congregations within your electorate that are interested in co-hosting an event. Some congregations may find that their members come from more than one Federal electorate, and you might need to organise more than one event.

Start by deciding whether you'll have a general forum or one focused on a single issue. Then it's a good idea to develop a bit of a project plan with a timeline, being clear about individual tasks and deadlines.



## Setting a date and making the invitations

The Federal Government has set 2 July 2016 as the date for the election. You should start planning your event now—candidates often get booked up very quickly around the time of the election. Members of the organising group should call the offices of the sitting MP and other candidates, as early as possible with a few prospective dates, and be a bit flexible. Be prepared to give information about the structure of the event, how many people you hope to attract, and why you have decided to hold the event. It's important to be clear, honest and open about what you have planned. Remember—candidates are more likely to respond positively if they know the event will be well organised and that they will have a good opportunity to interact with the voters in their electorate.

It is very important to invite all candidates in your electorate and ensure that your communication with them is respectful and without a hint of any personal political preferences you and the other organisers might hold.

The [ABC's Australia Votes 2016](#) website lists all the candidates for each electorate.

## Information gathering

Research your local federal electorate and make sure you are aware of the boundaries, as these sometimes change. If you want to be sure which electorate your church is situated in, the [Australian Electoral Commission](#) has this information. Do some research on the candidates before the event. Find out about their policy priorities and the policies of their parties.

Identify issues which are gaining attention in your electorate and which are relevant in the context of a federal election. The organising group might also like to do some thinking about how you would want your local member to contribute to the national and international affairs of Australia.

## Advertising the forum

Think about the opportunities you might have to promote the forum to the community. Local media outlets are always looking for stories about active local people and events. Remember local media comes in many forms—radio, local and community newspapers, websites etc—and that there are usually plenty of places to put up promotional flyers, like public notice boards in supermarkets, community centres and cafes. Once you have a firm commitment from the candidates, you can use all of these avenues to spread the word and raise interest in the community



## Making it work

Elections can be times where feelings run hot as people compete to have their opinions heard. While debate and questions should be encouraged at your event, it's important that election events are inclusive, safe places for everyone to get involved. Your event

should not endorse any one political party, and all candidates must be treated with equal dignity and respect. Similarly, political candidates should treat community members with respect; and while they might bring political material with them, they should only give it out to those who ask. You may need to be very clear about this — that no tables, stalls or banners will be allowed.

Make sure you have a strong moderator for the event — someone who can keep proceedings focused and not become side-tracked by one or two participants or audience members with strong opinions or a tendency to speech-making. It can be tempting to invite a high-profile person to act as forum moderator. While this can help attract people to the forum, it is good chairing, moderating or hosting skills that will be most important for a successful event.

If there is media interest in the event, make sure you arrange a special space for them to sit and observe. Representatives from the media should ask questions either before or after the event.

Each candidate should get equal time to speak and respond to questions. Keep it simple: the whole event should be no more than an hour and a half in length, and tea and coffee at the end are always appreciated.

Participation from the audience should be encouraged, but it's a good idea to prepare two or three questions (the moderator might ask these) to get the discussion started.

The **Hot Issues Briefs** that are part of this suite of election resources are designed for use at election forums. Each one covers a different issue and includes questions to ask your local candidates. Make them available to members of your congregation who are attending and consider having some available for others who come to the forum. You can download and print them or ask for hard copies from your synod office or UnitingJustice Australia. Contact us via email at [unitingjustice@nat.uca.org.au](mailto:unitingjustice@nat.uca.org.au) or call us on (02) 8267 4236.

And don't forget to take photos!

## Follow up

After the event, organise for at least one person to follow up with the candidates. Ask for their feedback on what was and was not helpful for them. Plan to keep in touch on specific issues or questions that were raised with the candidate who is elected. Let us know about the forum too. We'd be very happy to hear about your experiences and see photos. Contact us via email at [unitingjustice@nat.uca.org.au](mailto:unitingjustice@nat.uca.org.au) or call us on (02) 8267 4236.

## Possible questions for candidates

Here are some examples of starter questions for your local candidates to encourage thoughtful discussion on a range of issues. Some of these questions require a more in-depth answer than others; you might pick one or two or write your own.

- What would a flourishing society look like for you?
- When confronted with controversial issues (such as asylum seekers or tax reform) what principles would guide your decision-making?



- How do you intend to consult with us as your constituents on important matters of policy reform?
- What principles or values would guide you in considering legislation to ensure action on climate change?
- What principles or values would guide you in considering legislation and policy ensuring justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples?
- In what ways can Australia contribute internationally to a just and peaceful world?

This paper is a part of the 2016 federal election resource produced by the Uniting Church in Australia Assembly, *A Flourishing Society: Your Faith, Your Voice, Your Vote*. There are many papers in this resource that can help to guide discussion on a range of policy issues. You can find them at [unitingjustice.org.au/election2016](http://unitingjustice.org.au/election2016)



# A Guide to Meeting with Your MP

Visiting a politician is one of the most important things you can do as an active citizen. Your local Member of Parliament (MP), whether you voted for them or not, is there to represent you and all the people in your electorate (their constituents). They have a responsibility to communicate with you about what they are doing on your behalf in parliament. They also have a responsibility to listen to you—about your hopes for the country and our society, particular issues that are important to you, and any concerns you might have about the policies of their party and what they are saying. On contentious policy issues, it is the number and quality of interactions that MPs have with concerned constituents that can make a real difference to decision-making—in Parliament and in the party room.

## Requesting a meeting

Make sure you know the full name of your local MP and the name of your electorate. [The Australian Electoral Commission](#) website has an excellent search facility for finding your electorate and the [Parliament of Australia](#) website has names and contact details of every Senator and MP.

It's always better to go with a small group of people (three or four people at the most) who share your values and concerns.

Request a meeting by phone, email or in writing. Don't be discouraged if you are only able to get an appointment with an advisor, rather than the MP. If your MP is a Minister, they will be quite busy. You should let them know who you are and what issue you would like to talk about in the meeting. Make sure you know how much time you will have for the meeting—30 minutes is common.

## Preparing for the meeting

Before meeting with your MP, you should find out such things as:

- whether they are a Minister or Shadow Minister and which portfolio they hold, or whether they have a special role such as parliamentary secretary;
- the proper form of address to use when you contact the office and meet with them;
- whether their seat is safe or marginal;
- any prior involvement they have had with this issue, for example, events they have attended, speeches made, organisations they are involved in; and
- the policy of their party on the issue

A good way to learn more about your local member is to read their first ('maiden') speech in parliament. You can find it on their page on the [Parliament of Australia](#) website where you can also find all the speeches they have made in the parliament.

Select one person to be the facilitator for the meeting and another to be the note-taker. The facilitator is the person who will thank the MP for making time for the meeting and introduce those in your group; try to keep the meeting on point; and conclude the meeting with another round of thanks.

Make sure that everyone attending the meeting is clear about the issue you will discuss. It's always better to have someone in your group who has a personal story that relates to the issue. Keep the meeting focussed on the one issue. A good idea is to prepare a typed information sheet that you can hand to your MP during the meeting that outlines the main points you want to make. Have your facts clear and up-to-date and a

couple of questions ready and assigned to members of the group. Plan who will say what. Make sure you have reasonable suggestions for solutions to your concerns. Be clear on your objectives and what action you are asking your MP to take.

Here are some suggestions for actions that your MP could take on an issue:

- lobby the relevant Minister and/or Shadow Minister about the issue;
- ask a question in Parliament about your issue;
- give a speech in Parliament about your issue;
- promote a motion for debate in Parliament in support of your issue;
- refer the issue to a Parliamentary committee; and
- mention the issue in their next newsletter

## The meeting

Most MPs usually set 30-minute meetings so it's a good idea to plan the time—introductions and bringing the meeting to a close should take about 5 minutes each, leaving 20 minutes for you to describe your concern and have a conversation.

Dress appropriately, arrive on time and always be polite and respectful to everyone in the office.

Speak clearly about your issue. Give a short overall introduction and then briefly focus on one point at a time. Explain why this issue is of particular concern to your church or local community. Personal stories are always good. Make sure you are clear about what you are asking them to do. Give compelling reasons why the MP should take that action.

Ask the MP if they have any questions, what actions they think they can take and when they will do it. If they disagree with your concerns about the issue, ask them why. Be firm but stay calm. Never get into a heated debate. If they refer you to another MP, gently

remind them that you would like their involvement. It's very important for the note-taker to make clear notes about the responses the MP gives to questions and any commitments to action.

In bringing the meeting to a close, confirm the main points discussed and the commitments made and thank the MP for their time. You might wish to get a photo of your group with the MP for social media. This is often a friendly way to conclude a meeting.

## After the meeting

Debrief with your group about what happened in the meeting. Go over the notes and identify any tasks. Talk about what you would do next time, thinking about things you would change. Make notes to help you remember for the next visit.

It's an excellent idea to send a follow-up email or letter to the MP. Thank them for meeting you, reiterate any actions you thought they committed to, and mention that you look forward to hearing from them. If you have promised to send through further information, do this. Be clear about what would be a reasonable timeframe for the MP to follow through on any commitments made and after that date, call or write to check on progress. If you do not receive a response to your follow-up within a fortnight, try again and keep trying until the response comes. Remember, your MP is your representative and one of the most important tasks of political representatives is communicating with their constituents.

*This Guide has been adapted with permission from a number of sources, including a document produced by Baptist World Aid Australia.*

# A Guide to Writing to Your MP

One of the most effective ways to express your democratic right is to write to your local Member of Parliament. But how do you make your letter or email stand out? Here are a few simple tips for maximising the impact of your correspondence.

### How to address the letter

For letters, put your own address in the top right hand corner and the name and address of the MP or Senator underneath on the left hand. Make sure you include the date.

It's important to use the right title in your email or letter. There are a number of protocols for the proper titles to be used on envelopes and in the salutation. The [Parliament of Australia](#) website has a guide for how to address Senators and MPs, including the Prime Minister, Ministers and other parliamentarians with special roles.

### What to include in your letter

Correspondence to MPs should be short and simple, especially if you are sending an email. For letters, one page is best and two pages is normally the maximum length. Try to limit the letter to just one issue. Make sure you set out your arguments logically and concisely, and make one point per paragraph.

The letter should begin with an explanation of who you are and why you are writing to them. Focus on just one issue. If you are a member of their electorate, make this clear. If you are writing on behalf of your congregation or a small group, or if you have a particular connection to the issue you are writing about, mention this connection.

Make sure you are clear about the facts on the issue you are writing about. If there have been recent changes to legislation or other political developments on the issue, mention this to show that your

information is up to date. State the facts clearly, and then what, in your view, needs to change and why.

If you have detailed information that you would like to share, include it separately, as an attachment or enclosure or refer your MP to a website, article or book where they can get more information.

If you are writing to express your concern about the position your MP or their party has taken on an issue or with something they have said, clearly and respectfully state your concern, disappointment or



disagreement. Being polite and respectful in your letter is far more likely to achieve positive results than being insulting, aggressive or even abusive.

To end your letter, be specific about what you would like them to do about the issue or concern you have raised. This could include any number of actions from voting for or against something in parliament to attending a local event. Finish by writing that you look forward to receiving a reply.

### **After the letter**

Your letter will serve as the first step in a conversation but you may have to be a little patient in waiting for a reply. If you have not received a response to your letter after a month, call the MP's electoral office to remind them about your letter and politely ask when you are likely to receive a response. If you do not receive a response within a fortnight of your call, try again and keep trying until the response comes. Remember, your MP is your representative and one of the most important tasks of political representatives is communicating with their constituents.

