Running an election in your school

Background information

Running an election for your class, year level or across the whole school provides an opportunity for students to participate in the democratic process of choosing representatives for a range of purposes. These can include Student Representative Council, Junior School Council, sports captains, class captains, or representatives for key meetings. Elections can also be held to decide on whole-school or class excursions, camps, and specific class or year-level interests.

It is important that an election is for real positions with real responsibilities. Students need to develop their understanding of an election being multifaceted – the procedural and outcome components of an election and the concept and role of representation. If the election is not for an ongoing position, authenticity of the representative role can be provided by, for example, representatives being elected to attend a meeting with an environment officer at a local council, a meeting with the school principal or year-level coordinator, or attending a School Council meeting on a specific issue.

To ensure the integrity of the election process, staff and students must be willing to respect the outcome of the election and honour the elected representative fulfilling the agreed-to or specified role.

There are many voting systems that can be used for conducting an election in a school, including the 'first past the post' or 'most votes wins' method. However, it is suggested that the **preferential voting system** with an **absolute majority** be chosen as it is the system that students will be using when they vote in federal elections.

The procedures outlined are also those that students will follow when they vote at federal elections. These procedures and formalities are designed to ensure a free and fair election.

Full preferential voting

In the full preferential voting system, the elector (voter) needs to put a number in each of the squares beside the candidates' names. An explanation of the word 'prefer' will help students understand this concept. The number 1 shows the elector's first choice or preference; 2 indicates the second choice or preference, and so on. All squares must be filled in indicating the full preferences of the elector. This type of voting is called full preferential voting.

Formal voting

For a ballot paper to be considered as a formal vote, and therefore be counted, all squares must be numbered according to the elector's preferences. Other markings such as ticks and crosses render the ballot paper informal. Informal votes will not be counted in the scrutiny (count). This is because the voter's preference intention is not clear. Also because of the importance of the secret ballot, no marks or names that could identify the elector can appear on the ballot paper. For example, if an elector signs or prints their name on the ballot paper it will be an informal ballot paper.

A 'donkey' vote is a term many students will know. It refers to a ballot paper that has been completed by the supposed demonstration of a preference for each candidate in the order that they appear on the ballot paper. For example, '1' is placed against the candidate listed at the top of the ballot paper, '2' against the second candidate, and so on. In some cases the elector has not made an intentional choice in the ordering of their preferred candidates; they have just 'filled out' the ballot paper. For counting votes in the scrutiny process, the 'donkey' vote is considered a formal ballot, so it is counted. The reason behind this lies in the fact that the order of names on the ballot are allotted by random draw so just because an elector has written sequential numbers does not necessarily mean the sequential order of the numbers was not a well-considered choice.

> ## Resources
> - **BLM 1** Ballot paper template
> - **BLM 2** Scrutiny chart – Full preferential voting
> - **Interactive voting tool**
> - AEC, **Get voting**: https://education.aec.gov.au/getvoting/voter-list/

Absolute majority

A candidate must receive over 50% of the formal vote to be elected as a representative. This may be decided at the first count if over 50% of the vote has been gained by a candidate, or as the result of further distributions of votes to second preferences, third preferences and so on until one candidate has received more than 50%.

Scrutiny – counting the vote

The scrutiny continues until a candidate has received over 50% of the vote. This may require a full distribution of preferences to other candidates. The following example explains the process.

A class of 25 students vote and:

- candidate A receives 7 first preference votes
- candidate B receives 8 first preference votes
- candidate C receives 6 first preference votes
- candidate D receives 4 first preference votes.

From the margin

Informal voting

This does not refer to casual clothing.

It's a vote not counted in an election because it has been cast in a way that violates the rules. Using an inappropriate mark, missing a number in a full preferential system or illegibility can make a vote informal. Postal votes that arrive late or without appropriate authentication (such as an envelope signature) may also be considered invalid (informal). In the 2019 federal election, 5.5% of the votes for the House of Representatives were informal.

Figure 39: Receiving ballot papers for student elections

To achieve the majority, electors' second-choice candidates are then considered.

The votes from the lowest-polling candidate, who is least likely to be elected and is 'excluded', are distributed to the other candidates, that is to candidates A, B and C in the preference order that the elector has indicated. This process continues with the lowest-polling candidate, after each redistribution of preferences, having their votes distributed until one candidate has over 50% of the vote.

Candidate D's votes are distributed according to the electors' second preferences to the other three candidates like this:

2 to A, 1 to B and 1 to C.

Still no candidate has received over 50% of the formal vote. Candidate C, who has the lowest number of votes, is excluded and their preferences are redistributed. The six electors whose first preference was candidate C now have their votes moved to their second preference. The second preference votes gained from candidate D in the first distribution are included in this second distribution. This means that on one ballot paper, the elector's third preference is now considered.

	1st count	Transfer vote	2nd count	Transfer vote	3rd count
Candidate A	7	2	9	4	13 (elected)
Candidate B	8	1	9	3	12
Candidate C	6	1	7 (excluded)		
Candidate D*	4 (excluded)				
Total number of votes	25		25		25

Formal votes = 25; Informal votes = 0; Absolute majority = 13 (more than 50%)

* If during the exclusion process after first preferences are distributed, there are two candidates with an equal number of least votes, then a name is drawn from a hat and the name drawn is excluded from the count. If this happens at the second round for exclusion, the candidate with the least number of votes at the first preference stage is excluded.

Thus, 4 votes go to candidate A (including 1 vote of candidate D's third preference) and 3 votes to candidate B.

Candidate A would be elected as they have received over 50% of the formal vote.

Interestingly this candidate would not have been elected under a 'first past the post' system. This highlights the importance of emphasising to students to seriously consider the allocation not only of their first preference but their subsequent ones as well. The allocation of second and third preferences decided the result of this election.

Secret ballot

The secret ballot is an important part of the Australian electoral system. It was first introduced in Australia in 1856, in the colony of Victoria. Other countries have followed this example and it is known as the 'Australian ballot' overseas. The secret ballot allows voters to make their choice in private, without pressure or intimidation.

School elections need to provide screens to ensure that voting can be secret.

Enrolment

Australia has compulsory enrolment for elections. It is important that students are enrolled to vote in the election. Class rolls based on school enrolment may be used as the qualification or students could be provided with an enrolment form to formally enrol for the election.

Candidates

Procedures for the nomination of candidates and qualifications for nomination must be made clear prior to running the election as any attempt to make changes after the vote will compromise the election. Nomination forms could include both student and teacher endorsement if there is concern about the calibre of candidates.

Interestingly, some students given the opportunity to take on roles of responsibility really rise to the occasion, so exclusion should be considered carefully. Often schools are concerned that nominations of candidates are motivated by popularity, or even a wish to mock the election, rather than a consideration of representatives' qualities.

The election of an 'unsuitable' candidate, although not a desired outcome, can actually be instructional for all students, reinforcing the need for careful consideration in the future. At one Student Representative Council election a final-year student assisting with the election was heard to comment:

> The Year 7s vote for the popular kids but they soon learn that they are not necessarily the best students for the job. The older kids vote for who will represent them best, those who take the role seriously.

Criteria and qualifications are ultimately up to the school to decide on, but must be clearly defined prior to the call for nominations for the election.

Students need to be aware of the purpose of the election and have a clear understanding of the expectations of the representative's role. Commitment to the number of meetings, facilitation of class/group discussions prior to representative meetings, and the knowledge that they are representing the whole group rather than their own agenda need to be clearly spelt out to both nominators and potential candidates.

Compulsory voting

Australia has had compulsory voting since 1924 when the Parliament passed an amendment to the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* to make it law. In line with federal elections, it is important that compulsory voting is part of school elections. There are certain groups of the population who have a valid and sufficient reason for failing to vote, for example, on religious grounds (such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Christian Brethren), and these students should also be allowed to be exempt from school elections.

Provision should be made for students who are going to be absent on the day of the election to cast a pre-poll vote prior to election day.

Terminology

It is important to use correct terminology when running an election in your school.

For example, you are *elected*, you do not win an election; absolute majority is over 50% of the formal vote, not 50% + 1.

Other election terminology includes ballot box, ballot box guard, ballot papers, ballot paper distribution, campaign, candidates, certified list of electors, issuing tables, preferential voting, polling officials, queue controllers, scrutineers, and scrutiny. These are elaborated on in the 'Prior to election day' and 'School election day' sections as well as in the 'Glossary'.

Prior to election day

To ensure a free and fair election and to assist with the smooth running of an election, you need to address the following.

The time intervals are suggestions only.

One month prior

Purpose of election

It is important to have a clear purpose for the election and ensure that the 'voters' are also clear about what they are voting for.

Are electors voting for class representatives, year representatives or in a whole-school election? How many representatives are to be elected?

Timeline of events

A timeline for the election will assist in the smooth running of the election and allow the school as a whole to be aware of the upcoming process. The information on these pages is a good start. Provide a copy of the timeline to all staff involved in the election process.

Announcement of the election

This could be announced in class, at year level or at a whole-school assembly, depending on who is to be involved. The purpose of the election, candidate qualifications and the timeline for processes should be outlined. These should include:

•   date for close of nominations
•   dates for campaign period
•   date of election day
•   date election result will be announced.

A request for polling officials could also be announced at this time. Polling officials must not be candidates or members of the campaigning team.

Two weeks prior

Enrolment

There should be an enrolment procedure, which will provide the official electoral roll for the election. Set a suitable deadline by which electors must enrol. This roll will be used to create the 'certified list of voters' used on election day.

Candidate nominations, qualifications and campaigning

The procedure and qualifications for candidate nominations need to be decided prior to the election and need to be discussed at school leadership level.

A nomination form can streamline the nomination process, with accompanying qualifications outlined. If a campaigning period is to be included, it is important to have the support of staff and make necessary changes to timetables or assembly time to enable the campaign to take place.

Ballot paper draw

After the nomination of candidates has been finalised, the order of their names on the ballot paper needs to be decided by a random draw, which should be conducted in public to ensure neutrality.

One week prior

Timetable of election day

A timetable for election day will assist in the smooth running of the election. Designating specific voting times for classes, groups and year levels will assist others to know when students are required to attend the polling place. Provide a copy of the voting timetable to all staff involved in supervising students on election day.

Election material

Print a specific number of ballot papers – at least one for each enrolled voter and some spares to replace 'spoilt' ballot papers. Use 'special' paper and keep the printed ballot papers secure until election day. Go to the Get Voting website and use the **ballot paper generator**.

Multiple certified lists of electors (these could be copies of class rolls or year-level lists) need to be printed.

Go to the AEC's Get Voting website and use the **Voter list generator**.

Polling officials and scrutineers

Polling officials assist with running the election and counting the vote. Ensure that there are enough students to act in these roles. Organise a short training session for polling officials, clearly outlining their roles on election day. Scrutineers add to the credibility of the process.

Allow candidates to nominate scrutineers to oversee the process and the count. Provide students with role-play badges identifying their delegated election day roles and duties, such as polling official or scrutineer.

Election equipment

Ballot boxes, ballot box seals, polling official badges and posters are provided free to schools by the AEC Education Section. To order your election equipment pack, visit the **AEC's Get Voting** website to register. Allow at least two weeks for processing and postage.

Checklist: running an election in your school

	Ballot box seals
	Ballot boxes (labelling will assist in identifying the class or year group)
	Ballot papers
	Candidate name signs
	Certified list of electors
	Chairs
	Pencils
	Polling official badges
	Scrutineer badges
	Tables
	Voting screens

Three days prior

Classroom mock election

Conduct a 'mock election' in the classroom. This will provide students with the opportunity to develop their understanding of the formalities of the voting process, and to practise actually filling out the ballot paper.

The ensuing scrutiny will enable students to understand the importance of their preference allocation and how votes are distributed. Ensure that the mock election reflects the procedures and processes outlined for a real election.

You could choose from the following scenarios.

Scenario 1: Fruit

The class is having a barbeque lunch and a piece of fruit is being included in the lunch pack. To avoid wastage, only one type of fruit will be provided. The teacher wants to know which fruit is preferred by the class: apples, bananas, oranges or pears.

BLM 1 and BLM 2 will assist with this scenario.

Scenario 2: Camp activity

The class is going on camp, and there is time for an extra activity. Members of the class have indicated they would like to go swimming, canoeing, bushwalking and bike riding. There is only time for one of these activities so a choice needs to be made.

One day prior

The polling place

Ensure that the area chosen for the polling place is large enough to enable a good 'traffic flow' in and out of the polling place.

Allow space for electors to vote in secret. Ensure some structure is used to provide privacy.

School election day

Before the polling place opens

Assemble polling officials and review tasks allocated at the training session. Answer any queries regarding roles and responsibilities. Scrutineers should observe that the ballot boxes are empty before the polling official seals them.

Polling official

1 Open the polling place for voting to begin.

2 Distribute the ballot papers.

   There is an official procedure for handing out ballot papers:

   a Ask the voter's name and address, check that they are on the certified list of electors and mark their name off (this could mean giving name, year level and class if school rolls are being used).

   b Ask the voter if they have voted already in today's election. If the voter answers no, the ballot paper is given to the voter.

   c Mark each ballot paper with the polling official's initials.

   d Direct the voter to the voting screens and ask them to place their ballot papers in the ballot box after filling them in.

To assist in distribution, two polling officials at one table can share these duties – one official asking the questions (name, address, previous voting) and the other official initialling ballot papers, handing out ballot papers and directing voters to screens.

From the margin

Closing of the rolls

For federal elections the electoral roll closes at 8 pm, seven days after the writ for an election is issued.

Ballot box guard

This polling place official makes sure that:

1 no one tampers with the ballot box
2 all voters place their ballot paper in the correct ballot box.

Queue controllers

These polling place officials are responsible for keeping queues orderly and directing people to ballot paper distribution points.

The voters

Voters go to the issuing table, answer the three questions asked by the polling official and then move to a voting screen to fill out their ballot papers. They follow instructions to fill out the ballot correctly and deposit their ballots in the ballot box. Remember all polling officials, candidates and scrutineers also have to vote.

Vote counters

When the poll closes, all the polling officials count the votes. This involves emptying the ballot box; checking to see if ballot papers are formal and removing informal ballot papers from the count; and placing ballot papers in first preference piles and counting them. In federal elections, all voters do not witness the count, but in your classroom you may prefer to do it this way as a valuable learning experience.

Scrutineers

Scrutineers are people nominated by the candidates to watch (scrutinise) the voting and counting process to ensure all procedures are followed correctly. They may not touch the ballot papers.

Other roles

Provide a small group of students with a timetable allocating voting timeframes for each class or level to vote. These students can call each group to the polling place at the appropriate time, preventing a backlog of students waiting to vote.

Figure 40: Voters, polling officials and a ballot box guard in a school election

After the close of the polling place

- Assemble polling officials and scrutineers. The scrutineers' role is to observe only.
- Show them where they can stand to see clearly.
- Select as many polling officials as there are candidates on the ballot paper.
- Tell each polling official which candidate's votes they will be counting.
- Set up a large table on which to conduct the scrutiny.
- Place candidate name signs on the table in the order in which they appear on the ballot paper.
- Open the ballot boxes and empty the contents on the table.
- Count the votes and record on Scrutiny chart <u>BLM 2</u>. The scrutiny/count is a public procedure and should be conducted in front of the voters.

Scrutiny (count) procedures

- Check all ballot papers for formality. Put aside informal ballot papers as they are not included in the count.
- Count the total number of formal ballot papers. This total is used to calculate the absolute majority of votes (more than 50% of formal votes).
- Calculate the absolute majority required and record this on a scrutiny chart.
- Sort ballot papers into first preference piles, that is candidates with the number 1 in the square next to their name. (Candidate name signs will assist.)
- Check piles for correct first preference allocation.
- Count each vote one by one and record totals in the first count column on the scrutiny chart (this also provides an opportunity to check that the total number of ballots initially recorded matches the preference piles – a check for misplaced ballot papers).
- If a candidate receives more than 50% of the formal votes on the first count, the candidate is elected and no further counting is necessary. This is a rare occurrence.

If no candidate receives an absolute majority in the first count, the counting process continues.

The next step is to begin the transfer of votes to find the candidate preferred by more than 50% of the voters. The candidate with the least number of votes is identified, 'excluded' and crossed off the scrutiny chart. Explain that this candidate is least likely to be elected but the voters who voted for this candidate are then given their second choice candidate. The votes are transferred according to their second preference marked on each ballot paper.

Each ballot paper from the 'excluded' candidate pile is looked at and one by one they are 'transferred' to the candidate who was the voter's second choice, as indicated by the number 2. Record each vote on the scrutiny chart next to the candidate's name in the transfer vote column. When all ballots have been transferred, add these transferred votes to the original vote totals to see if an absolute majority has been reached. This is the total in the second count column of the scrutiny chart. If a candidate has received more than 50% of the votes they are elected.

If no candidate has more than the majority of votes after this transfer, the next step is a repeat of the last – the candidate with the least number of votes is excluded[*] and their votes transferred according to preferences to the remaining candidates. This means on these ballot papers the voter's second choice needs to be identified – indicated by the number 2. Importantly, if the second candidate has already been excluded, the number 3 choice candidate is used. The vote is moved to the appropriate candidate's pile and votes are recorded on the scrutiny chart in the transfer vote column. Again votes are totalled to see if an absolute majority is achieved. At this stage, one candidate usually achieves an absolute majority. With small numbers of votes and candidates it is rare for the scrutiny to go beyond three transfer rounds.

[*] If there is an 'equal least' candidate at this stage, the candidate who had the least votes in the previous rounds is excluded.

If two candidates receive 'equal least' votes during the first distribution of preferences, for example two candidates with 20 votes each, a draw takes place. Both candidates' names are placed on a piece of paper of equal size and placed in a container. The candidate whose name is drawn becomes the candidate who is excluded from the next count and their votes are distributed to the remaining candidate(s). Explain to the group that the name taken out is 'excluded', the opposite of the usual 'winner drawn from a hat'.

Announcement of the results

This may take place at the classroom level or at school assembly, depending on the type of election. It is important not only to congratulate the elected representatives on their achievement, but also to acknowledge those who were not elected. Effective and robust democracies are dependent on active citizens who are willing to stand as candidates and give electors choice.

Plenary

Provide an opportunity for all staff, polling officials, candidates and interested participants to meet to discuss the running of the election. A simple PMI activity may assist. This enables the successes of the election to be acknowledged and provides an opportunity for any suggestions for the smooth running of further elections to be noted, providing valuable background information for your next election.

Further assistance

Contact the AEC Education Section by emailing education@aec.gov.au or check out the AEC for Schools website and our Get Voting resources at https://education.aec.gov.au/

Information can also be obtained on the AEC website at www.aec.gov.au or by phoning 13 23 26 for more information on topics such as:

- elections
- voting
- enrolment
- electoral roll
- redistributions
- candidates.

Ballot paper template

Sample
House of Representatives
Ballot Paper

National Electoral Education Centre

OFFICIAL USE ONLY

Number the boxes from 1 to 4 in the order of your choice

☐ Orange

☐ Apple

☐ Pear

☐ Banana

Remember... number every box
to make your vote count

AEC EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY

SAMPLE

Sample
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Ballot Paper

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AEC EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY

SAMPLE

Scrutiny chart – Full preferential voting

	First count	Transfer vote	Second count	Transfer vote	Third count
Orange					
Apple					
Pear					
Banana					
Total number of votes					

Absolute majority 50%+

Formal votes

Informal votes