

Voting **IN** AUSTRALIA



AEC

Australian Electoral Commission

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Your vote, your say

In Australia, citizens have the right and responsibility to choose their representatives in the federal Parliament by voting at elections.

The representatives elected to federal Parliament make decisions that affect many aspects of Australian life including tax, marriage, the environment, trade and immigration.

This publication explains how Australia's electoral system works. It will help you understand Australia's system of government, and the important role you play in it.

This information is provided by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), an independent statutory authority. The AEC provides Australians with an independent electoral service and educational resources to assist citizens to understand and participate in the electoral process.

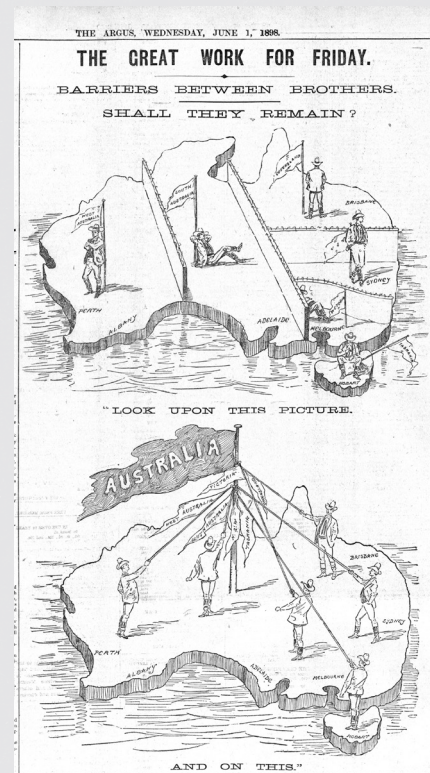


Government in Australia: a brief history

For tens of thousands of years, the heart of governance for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples was in their culture. While traditional systems of laws, customs, rules and codes of conduct have changed over time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continue to share many common cultural values and traditions to organise themselves and connect with each other.

Despite their great diversity, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities value connection to 'Country'. This includes spirituality, ceremony, art and dance, family connections, kin relationships, mutual responsibility, sharing resources, respecting law and the authority of elders, and, in particular, the role of Traditional Owners in making decisions. The connections to traditional governing measures all have their origins in these same deep cultural values.

When the British arrived in Australia in 1788 they brought their own traditions and culture. They established a prison colony run by a military governor with absolute power, appointed by the British Monarch. The colonists, convicts and Indigenous peoples had no say in how the colony was run.



Above: Federation cartoon, June 1898

YES

NO

44652

19636

YES

NO

YES

NO

ALBANY	914	67	N.E.C. GARDIE	2723	143	GREENOUGH	18	411	MURRAY	469	674	ROEBURNE	98	18
ASHURTON	32	17	DE GREY	841	15	IRWIN	34	310	NELSON	402	487	SUSSEX	246	474
BEVERLEY	86	415	DUNDAS	816	30	E. KIMBLEY	57	1	NORTHAM	593	833	SWAN	852	903
BUNBURY	493	802	FREMANTLE	532	277	W. KIMBLEY	97	34	PERTH	2386	1328	TOODYAY	75	578
CANNING	405	509	E. MANTLE	1322	804	MOORE	65	463	E. PERTH	1128	820	W. INGTON	581	695
C. GARDIE	4337	170	N. MANTLE	1289	678	MURCHISON	26	222	N. PERTH	1416	844	WILLIAMS	213	749
E. C. GARDIE	11502	732	S. MANTLE	1544	1382	C. MCHISON	777	65	W. PERTH	2078	1388	YALGOO	155	114
N. C. GARDIE	3727	117	GASCOYNE	53	66	N. MCHISON	597	83	PILBARRA	308	9	YILGARN	460	138
			GERALDTON	254	679	S. MCHISON	910	209	P. TACENET	359	213	YORK	139	670

FEDERAL POLL JULY 31ST 1900

"The West Australian" RECORD BOARD

Voting for a nation

Australia became a nation after people from each colony voted in referendums about whether or not to join the federation. The last colony to vote YES and join the federation was Western Australia.

Above: Record board of the Western Australia results for the referendum on Australian Federation 31 July 1900

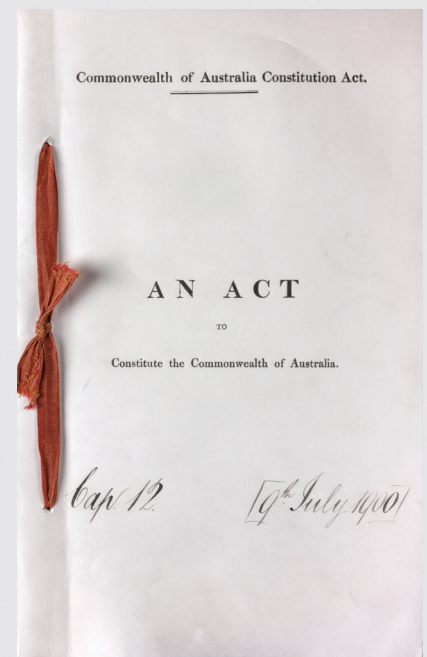
Over the next 50 years more colonies were established and free settlers began to arrive. As their number grew, the free settlers demanded a greater say in how the colonies were governed. By the 1850s Australia was made up of six independent colonies, most with their own parliaments. However, not everyone was able to take part in elections to these parliaments. No women were allowed to vote, and in some colonies only men who owned property over a certain value were allowed to vote. While some Indigenous Australian men were granted voting rights along with other men, most did not know their rights, nor were they encouraged to exercise them.

During the 1880s and 1890s the idea that the colonies should work together and form a national government gained popular support. Leaders from each of the colonies joined together to draft a constitution that would establish a federal (national) system of government. Under the Australian Constitution, states kept their own parliaments and

many of their existing powers, and transferred responsibility for areas that affect the nation as a whole to the federal Parliament. The Australian Constitution outlines the structure and powers of the Australian federal Parliament, and the basis of representation in the House of Representatives and the Senate.

The draft constitution was approved by the people voting in referendums held in each colony between June 1899 and July 1900. Australia became a nation on 1 January 1901 when the six separate colonies formally united to form the Commonwealth of Australia. At federation each colony became a state of Australia (the two territories were established after federation).

Australia is a representative democracy. All citizens aged 18 years and over have the right and responsibility to participate in Australia's democracy by enrolling to vote and voting for people to represent them in parliament. Representatives elected to the parliament make laws and decisions on behalf of the nation.



Above: Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, 1900

Voting rights

Who can vote and have a say in Australian democracy has changed substantially since federation.

In 1901 most male British subjects over 21 and resident in Australia could vote. In 1902 Australia became the second country in the world, after New Zealand, to extend voting rights to women. The *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* meant that women gained the right to vote and stand for election to parliament.

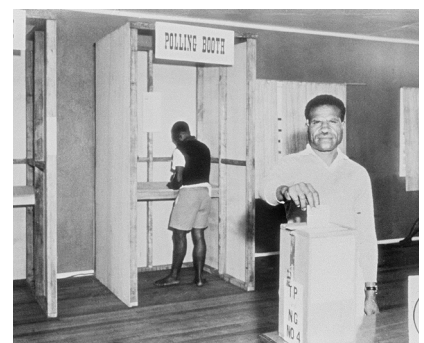
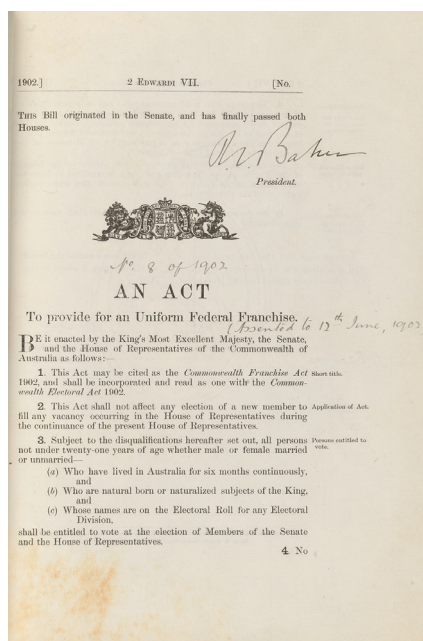
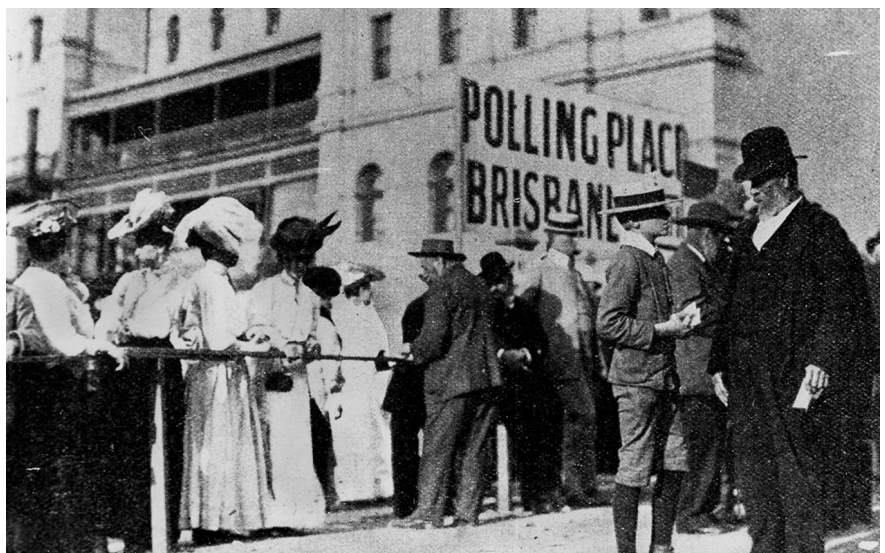
At the same time, however, the *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* deliberately excluded any 'aboriginal native' of Australia, Asia, Africa or the islands of the Pacific (except New Zealand) from voting unless they were on a state electoral roll before 1901. Although some Indigenous Australians could vote in federal elections, most were excluded. After campaigning for many years to have the right to be part of the Australian decision making process, all Indigenous Australians gained the right to vote in 1962.

In 1973 more Australians gained the right to participate in elections when the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 years old.

Who should have the right to vote in Australia's democracy continues to be discussed and can be changed by an Act of Parliament.

Secret ballot

A secret ballot using a government-supplied ballot paper containing candidates' names was first introduced in Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia in 1856. Often referred to as the 'Australian Ballot', this method of voting has been adopted by many countries around the world. Voting in secret means that voters can't be intimidated, punished or discriminated against for how they vote.



Top: Women in Queensland voting in a federal election for the first time. Brisbane, 1907

Above: Indigenous Australians voting in 1962

Left: Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902

The Federal Parliament



The Australian people elect all members of federal Parliament. There are two houses of Parliament: the House of Representatives and the Senate.

People interested in standing for election form groups or 'political parties' with other people who have similar ideas, values and policies.

Government is formed by the party or coalition of parties with the support of the majority of members in the House of Representatives. Sometimes after an election, a party or coalition of parties will need the support of minor parties or Independent members to achieve a majority in the House. The leader of the government is the Prime Minister, who, by convention (tradition), is always a member of the House of Representatives.

The largest party or coalition of parties without the support of the majority of members in the House of Representatives forms the opposition. Its leader is the Leader of the Opposition.

Ministers are members of the government with responsibility for particular areas of government activity. They are chosen by the government from both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

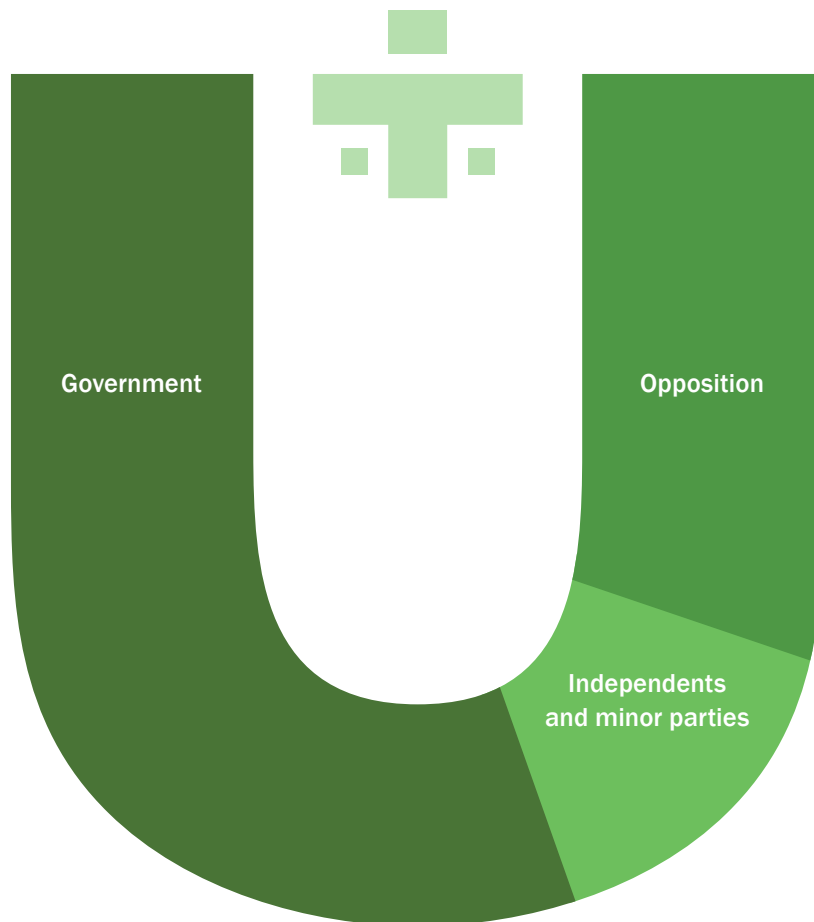


The House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra



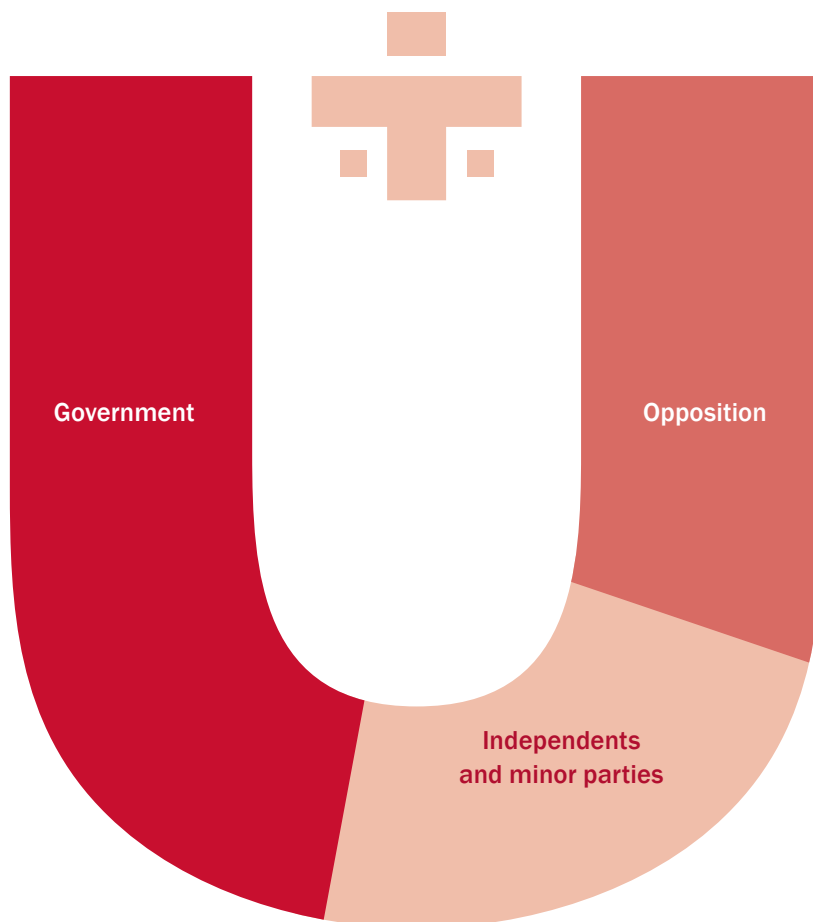
The Senate, Parliament House, Canberra

House of Representatives



The House of Representatives is also called the 'People's House'. Each member represents the people of their electorate. Australia is divided into electorates based on population. Voters in each electorate choose one person to represent them in the House of Representatives.

Senate



The Senate is also called the 'States' House'. Voters from each state, and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and Northern Territory (NT), elect senators to represent them in the Senate. All states are equally represented in the Senate regardless of their size or population. Each state elects 12 senators, and the ACT and NT elect two senators each. State senators are elected for six-year fixed terms, with half their number elected every three years. State senators commence their term in office on the first day of July after their election. Territory senators are elected for the term of the House of Representatives, which is a maximum of three years.

Three levels of government in Australia

There are three levels of government in Australia. Representatives at each level of government are elected by voters.

The role of the federal Parliament is set out in the Australian Constitution.

States have their own constitutions and the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory have self-government Acts which outline the powers of their legislative assemblies.

Local governments (also known as local councils) are established by state parliaments to meet the needs of local communities.

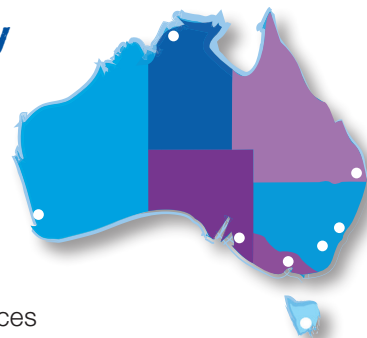
Federal matters:

- Defence
- Income tax
- Immigration
- Social welfare
- External affairs



State and territory matters:

- Schools
- Hospitals
- Public transport
- Electricity
- Police and ambulance services



Local matters:

- Rubbish collection
- Parks
- Libraries and art galleries
- Pet registration
- Local roads



Electoralates

For the House of Representatives your electorate is the area where you live. Electorate size is based on population. A city electorate, where the population is dense, can be as small as several suburbs.

A sparsely populated rural electorate can cover a huge area of several hundred square kilometres. Even though electoralates are different sizes and shapes, within each state

and territory, they will always have approximately the same number of voters. One member is elected to the House of Representatives to represent each electorate.

For the Senate your electorate is the state or territory where you live. Regardless of its geographical size or population, each state or territory elect a group of senators to represent it.

Redistributions

Redistributions occur at least once every seven years for each state and territory. They aim to make the number of voters approximately equal in all the electoralates in that state or territory. Redistributions take into account expected population changes to ensure the electoralates remain equal for at least three-and-a-half years. For example, in high growth areas, the redistributed populations will be set lower to allow for growth.

Communities, geographical features and travel are also considered when deciding electorate boundaries.

Nexus

The Australian Constitution states that the number of members of the House of Representatives must be, as near as possible, 'twice the number of senators'. This is called 'the nexus'. In 1901 there were 76 members of the House of Representatives and 36 senators. At the next federal election there will be 150 members in the House of Representatives and 76 senators in the Senate. The number of members and senators can be changed by an Act of Parliament. If the number of senators increases, this could also increase the number of electoralates in the House of Representatives.

Federal elections

The Australian Constitution sets out some of the rules governing federal elections, but most are contained in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* and can be changed by the federal Parliament.

When are elections held?

A federal election must be held at least once every three years. The Australian Constitution sets the maximum term of the House of Representatives at three years, but the Prime Minister can request an election earlier. Elections are usually held for half of the Senate at the same time as House of Representatives elections, however, they can be held separately.

Double dissolution elections

If there is a deadlock between the House of Representatives and the Senate over one or more proposed laws (bills), the Prime Minister can request a double dissolution election. This means all the seats in both houses of Parliament are up for election. Double dissolution elections have occurred seven times: in 1914, 1951, 1974, 1975, 1983, 1987 and 2016.

Senate casual vacancies

If a senator resigns, dies or is disqualified by the High Court of Australia, the former senator's state or territory parliament, or the relevant Governor, chooses someone to fill the vacancy for the remainder of the term. Where relevant and possible, the new senator is chosen from the same party as the previous senator.

By-elections

If a member of the House of Representatives resigns, dies or is disqualified by the High Court of Australia, their electorate votes to elect a new member for the remainder of the term. This election is called a by-election.

Getting ready to vote

Voting is compulsory. All Australian citizens aged 18 years and older must vote.

How do I enrol?

Before you can vote, you must enrol. You can enrol at any time after you turn 16, but you can only vote in an election when you are 18 or over. You can enrol or update your enrolment online at www.aec.gov.au or complete an enrolment form available from any Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) office. Doing this enrolls you to vote in federal, state and local elections.

All Australian citizens over 18 must be enrolled and keep their enrolment up to date with their current residential address. If you are over 18 and have never enrolled, you can enrol now and you will not be penalised. It is never too late.

Where will I vote?

Find out the name of your federal electorate by visiting aec.gov.au. Closer to election time, the website also has a list of all polling places.

Who are the candidates?

At each election, many different candidates will seek to be elected as your representative. Before an election, candidates campaign to gain support from voters. It is important to find out about the candidates, their political parties and their views on issues that are important to you. You may read advertising, news stories and social media about the candidates, or even meet a candidate in person. This will help you to decide your voting preferences.

What if I can't vote on election day?

Voters who can't attend a polling place on election day might be eligible to vote at an early voting centre or apply for a postal vote. This includes, for example, if you will be travelling or working on election day.

Voters who have an ongoing issue that may prevent them from getting to a polling place may register as General Postal Voters. Ballot papers will then automatically be sent to them through the post.

Mobile polling teams visit hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and

geographically remote places. People who are blind or have low vision, or who are in Antarctica, can vote by phone.

Voters who are overseas or interstate on election day can vote at overseas or interstate voting centres, or by post.

What happens if I don't vote?

After each election, all non-voters will be sent a letter requesting they provide a valid and sufficient reason for failing to vote, or pay a fine.

What if I need help to vote?

If you need assistance to vote at a polling place, you can ask someone to help you. Polling place staff are trained to assist you or you can nominate any person (other than a candidate) to assist. This could be someone like a friend or relative.

The AEC also provides information on our website in lots of different community and First Nations languages, and in different formats like Auslan, Braille and Easy Read.

Election day



Elections are always held on a Saturday. Public buildings, such as local schools and halls, are used as polling places. Polling places are open between 8am and 6pm on election day.

Polling places are run by polling officials employed and trained by the AEC. They are there to assist, but they cannot tell you who to vote for.

When you enter a polling place, a polling official will direct you to an issuing table. You will be asked three questions before being issued with ballot papers:

- 1. What is your full name?**
- 2. What is your address?**
- 3. Have you voted before in this election?**

The official will then check the certified list of eligible voters (also known as the electoral roll) in the electorate, mark off your name, and initial each ballot paper in the top right-hand corner. The ballot papers are then handed to you, and you are directed to a voting screen where you vote in secret. After completing the ballot papers, fold and place them in the sealed ballot boxes. There are separate ballot boxes for House of Representatives and Senate ballot papers.

Compulsory voting

Voting was made compulsory for federal elections in 1924 in response to low voter turnout at previous elections. For example, the lowest turnout for a federal election was in 1903 when only 50.3% of enrolled voters voted. In the 1925 election 91.4% of voters cast a ballot. It is now usual for around 90% of enrolled voters to vote. Australia is one of the few countries in the world with compulsory voting.

Completing a ballot paper

It is important to read and follow the directions on the ballot paper to make sure your vote is valid and counted.

If you are not sure, ask a polling official for help. You will be asked to number the candidates or groups in the order that you prefer. This is called preferential voting and is used in both the House of Representatives and Senate elections.

House of Representatives voting

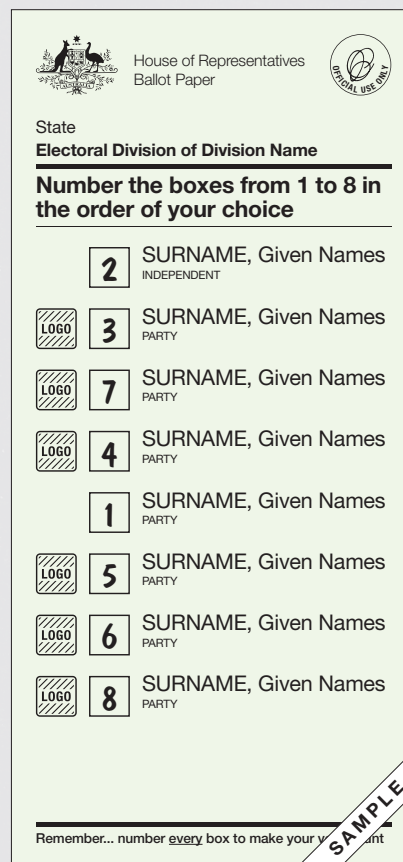
House of Representatives ballot papers are green. One candidate from your electorate will be elected to the House of Representatives.

Senate voting

Senate ballot papers are white and are divided into two sections by a black line across the ballot paper. Multiple candidates from your state or territory will be elected to the Senate. The ballot paper shows how many Senate positions your state or territory is voting for in this election.

You have a choice in the way you vote for the Senate — above the line or below the line.

How to complete the House of Representatives ballot paper



The sample ballot paper is green and features the Australian coat of arms and the text 'House of Representatives Ballot Paper'. It includes a circular logo with 'OFFICIAL USE ONLY'. The ballot is divided into two sections by a horizontal line. The top section is for the House of Representatives, and the bottom section is for the Senate. The top section contains eight numbered boxes (1-8) for candidates, each with a 'LOGO' box and a 'PARTY' box. The bottom section contains two numbered boxes (1-2) for candidates, each with a 'LOGO' box and a 'PARTY' box. A diagonal line with the word 'SAMPLE' is drawn across the bottom right corner. At the bottom, it says 'Remember... number every box to make your vote count'.

House of Representatives Ballot Paper

State
Electoral Division of Division Name

Number the boxes from 1 to 8 in the order of your choice

2	SURNAME, Given Names INDEPENDENT
3	SURNAME, Given Names PARTY
7	SURNAME, Given Names PARTY
4	SURNAME, Given Names PARTY
1	SURNAME, Given Names PARTY
5	SURNAME, Given Names PARTY
6	SURNAME, Given Names PARTY
8	SURNAME, Given Names PARTY

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

SAMPLE

You must number all the boxes on the House of Representatives ballot paper. Write number 1 in the box next to the candidate who is your first choice of representative, then write number 2 in the box next to your second choice and continue numbering until every box is filled.

Don't worry if you make a mistake. You can ask for another ballot paper and start again.

Sample ballot paper


Either above the line

By voting above the line, your preferences will be distributed in the order the candidates appear below the line for the party or group you have chosen. Your preferences will first be distributed to the candidates in the party or group of your first choice, then to candidates in the party or group of your second choice and so on, until all your preferences have been distributed.


Or below the line

In the section below the black line, you vote for individual candidates. Write number 1 in the box next to the candidate who is your first choice of representative, then write number 2 in the box next to your second choice and continue until you have numbered at least 12 boxes below the line. If you want to continue, you can number as many additional boxes as you choose below the line.

How to complete the Senate ballot paper



Senate Ballot Paper
State – Election of 6 Senators



You may vote in one of two ways

Either

Above the line

By numbering at least **6** of these boxes in the order of your choice (with number 1 as your first choice).

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">LOGO</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center; font-size: 24px; margin-bottom: 5px;">5</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">LOGO</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center; font-size: 24px; margin-bottom: 5px;">2</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">LOGO</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">LOGO</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center; font-size: 24px; margin-bottom: 5px;">1</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">LOGO</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center; margin-bottom: 5px;"></div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">LOGO</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center; font-size: 24px; margin-bottom: 5px;">3</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">LOGO</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">LOGO</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center; font-size: 24px; margin-bottom: 5px;">6</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 10px; text-align: center; font-size: 24px; margin-bottom: 5px;">4</div>
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Or

Below the line


By numbering at least **12** of these boxes in the order of your choice (with number 1 as your first choice).

PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	UNGROUPED
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div>	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;">SURNAME Given Names PARTY</div>

SAMPLE



Senate Ballot Paper
State – Election of 6 Senators
















You may vote in one of two ways

Either

Above the line





























By numbering at least **6** of these boxes in the order of your choice (with number 1 as your first choice).

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G
			  	 	 	  	
	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	

Or

Below the line

By numbering at least **12** of these boxes in the order of your choice (with number 1 as your first choice).

	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	PARTY	UNGROUPED
							
							
							
							

SAMPLE

Sample ballot papers

Election results

Counting House of Representatives votes

Counting the votes starts at 6pm when polling places close to the public.

Votes cast at polling places are counted at that polling place on election night. The likely result at each polling place for the House of Representatives is usually known within a few hours of counting. The result for the electorate can take several weeks to formally finalise.

One person from each electorate is elected to the House of Representatives.

To be elected, one candidate must gain support from more than half of all the formal votes in the electoral division – an ‘absolute majority’.

At each polling place, polling officials sort all ballot papers by first preference votes, which are counted for each candidate. Informal votes are identified and removed from the count.

All the ‘1’ votes are counted for each candidate in an electorate. If a candidate gets more than 50% of these formal first preference votes – an absolute majority – they are immediately elected. Even though they are elected, a full preference count is completed to show how the electorate voted.

First-past-the-post

Before 1918, representatives to the federal Parliament were elected on a ‘simple majority’ or ‘first-past-the-post’ basis. This meant that the candidate who had the most votes after one count was elected – even if they did not have more than half of the votes. This system is still used in many countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and India.

If no candidate has an absolute majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is excluded from the count. The votes for this candidate are then transferred to the candidate numbered ‘2’ on each of their ballot papers, the voters’ ‘second preference’. This process continues until only two candidates are left, and one candidate has more than half the total formal votes cast and is then declared elected.

Formal and Informal votes

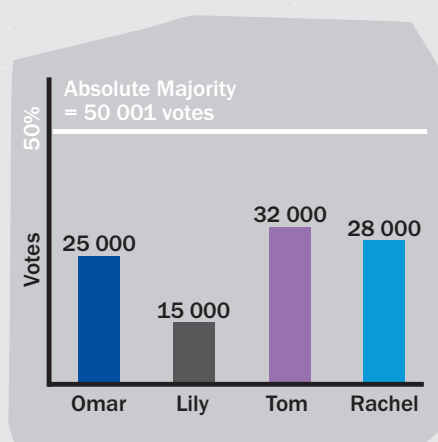
When a ballot paper is marked correctly and completely, it is known as a ‘formal vote’, and will be counted toward the election result.

When a ballot paper has not been fully completed, is completed incorrectly or you can identify the person who voted, it is known as an ‘informal vote’, and will not be counted toward the election result.

When a ballot paper is numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 etc in the same order that the candidates appear, it is known as a ‘donkey vote’. Donkey votes could be a voter not understanding how to vote correctly, or not caring how they vote, or could actually express the voter’s true preferences. If all the boxes are numbered, donkey votes are formal and count toward the election result.

An example of counting House of Representatives votes

Four candidates, Omar, Lily, Tom and Rachel stand for election to the House of Representatives in the electorate of Arcadia. After the election, the ballot papers are counted and there are 100 000 formal votes. The absolute majority needed to win the seat of Arcadia is 50 001 votes — more than 50% of the total number of formal votes.

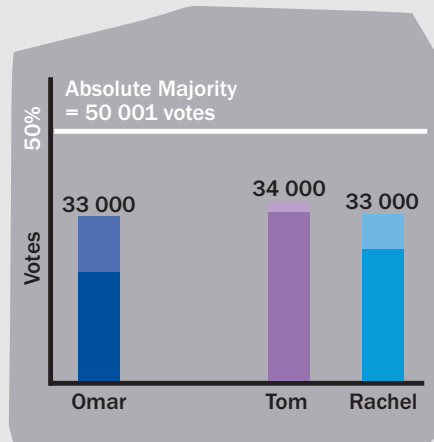


First count

No candidate has an absolute majority:

- Omar has 25 000 first preferences
- Lily has 15 000 first preferences
- Tom has 32 000 first preferences
- Rachel has 28 000 first preferences.

The person with the lowest number of votes is Lily with 15 000 votes.

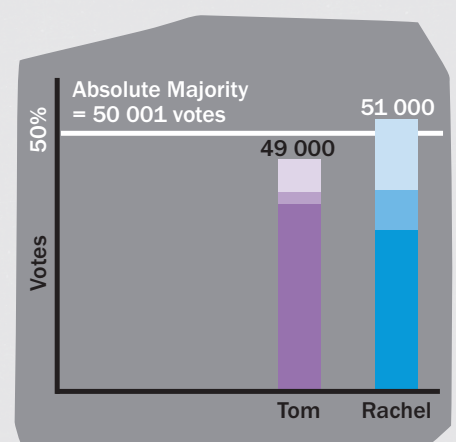


Second count

Lily is excluded and her votes are distributed to the second preferences marked on these ballot papers:

- Omar gains 8 000 second preferences, taking his total to 33 000 votes
- Tom gains 2 000 second preferences, taking his total to 34 000 votes
- Rachel gains 5 000 second preferences, taking her total to 33 000 votes.

No candidate has an absolute majority.



Third count

Another candidate must be excluded. Omar and Rachel both have 33 000 votes. In this situation the candidate with the lowest number of votes in the first count is excluded. Omar is excluded and his votes are distributed by the next preference marked on those ballot papers:

- Tom gains 15 000 votes, taking his total to 49 000
- Rachel gains 18 000 votes, taking her total to 51 000.

Rachel has an absolute majority, and becomes the elected representative for the electorate of Arcadia. Rachel was not the candidate who had the most votes in the first count, however she gained an absolute majority on preferences. In this election, voters' first, second and third choices were needed for a final result.

Election results

Counting Senate votes

Counting Senate votes starts at 6pm when the polling place closes to the public. However, the likely result is not usually known on the night and can take weeks to finalise.

Each state or territory elects multiple senators. To be elected, a candidate needs to win a quota — a set proportion of the electorate's votes. This is known as proportional representation.

$$\text{Quota} = \frac{\text{Number of formal votes}}{\text{Number of vacancies} + 1} + 1$$

The quota is worked out by dividing the total number of formal ballot papers by one more than the number of vacancies to be filled (ignore any remainder) and then adding 1 to the result.

This calculation ensures only the correct number of senators are elected.

An example of counting Senate votes

There are two Senate seats vacant. There are 3 000 formal votes in the 'territory'. The polling officials work out the quota:

$$\text{Quota} = \frac{3\,000}{2 + 1} + 1 = 1\,001$$

Next the first preference votes are counted for each candidate.

Kai	200
Kim	1 250
Jade	350
Amir	950
Alexis	250
Total votes	3 000

Kim has 1 250 first preference votes. She has more than the quota and is elected to the Senate.

The 249 votes she received over the quota are called 'surplus votes'. These are transferred to the remaining candidates by distributing all Kim's votes at less than their full value (the transfer value).

The transfer value is worked out by dividing the number of surplus votes by the total number of ballot papers the elected candidate received.

The second preferences from all of Kim's 1 250 votes are counted.

Kai	400
Jade	150
Amir	500
Alexis	200
Total votes	1 250

The second preferences from Kim's ballot papers are multiplied by their transfer value (decimal remainders are disregarded) and then added to the first preference totals for each candidate.

$$\begin{array}{rcl}
 \text{Number of surplus votes} & & \\
 \hline
 \text{Total number of Kim's 1st preference votes} & = & 1\,250 \\
 \text{Transfer value} & = & 0.1992
 \end{array}$$

	No transferred votes x transfer value		Transfer votes	+	1st Preference votes	=	New Total votes
Kai	400×0.1992	=	79	+	200	=	279
Jade	150×0.1992	=	29	+	350	=	379
Amir	500×0.1992	=	99	+	950	=	1 049
Alexis	200×0.1992	=	39	+	250	=	289

Now Amir also has more than 1 001 votes (a quota) so the two Senate vacancies have been filled.

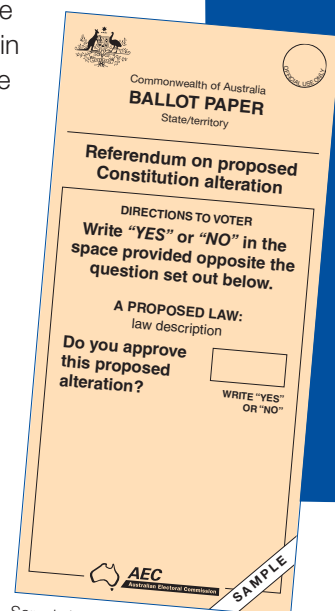
If all the vacancies have not been filled after all the surplus votes have been transferred, the candidate with the lowest number of votes is excluded. The excluded candidate's ballot papers are distributed at full value to their next preference from the remaining candidates. The distribution of preferences from excluded candidates continues until the required number of senators is elected.

Changing the Australian Constitution

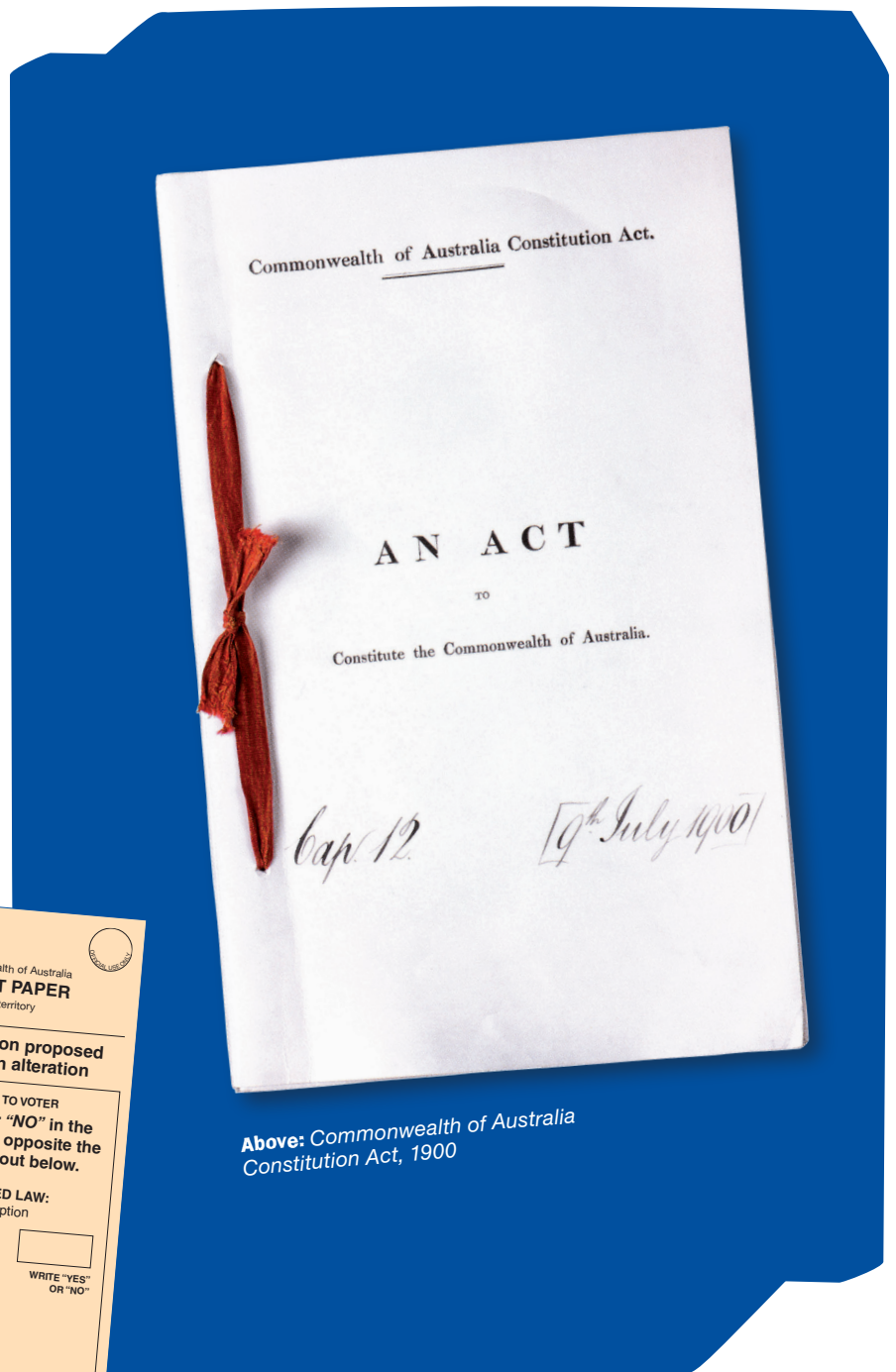
The Australian Constitution is the legal framework for how Australia is governed. It establishes the structure and defines the powers of the federal Parliament, and the basis of representation in the House of Representatives and the Senate. The Constitution was passed as an Act of the British Parliament — the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900* (UK) — and took effect on 1 January 1901.

The Constitution can only be changed by Australian voters in a national vote called a referendum. In a referendum, voters mark YES or NO on their ballot paper to show if they agree or disagree with a proposed change to the Constitution.

The change will only be made if the majority of voters in a majority of states agree AND if a majority of voters across the nation also agree. This is known as a 'double majority'. The rules for changing the Constitution are outlined in the Constitution itself. The government is required to action the result of a referendum.

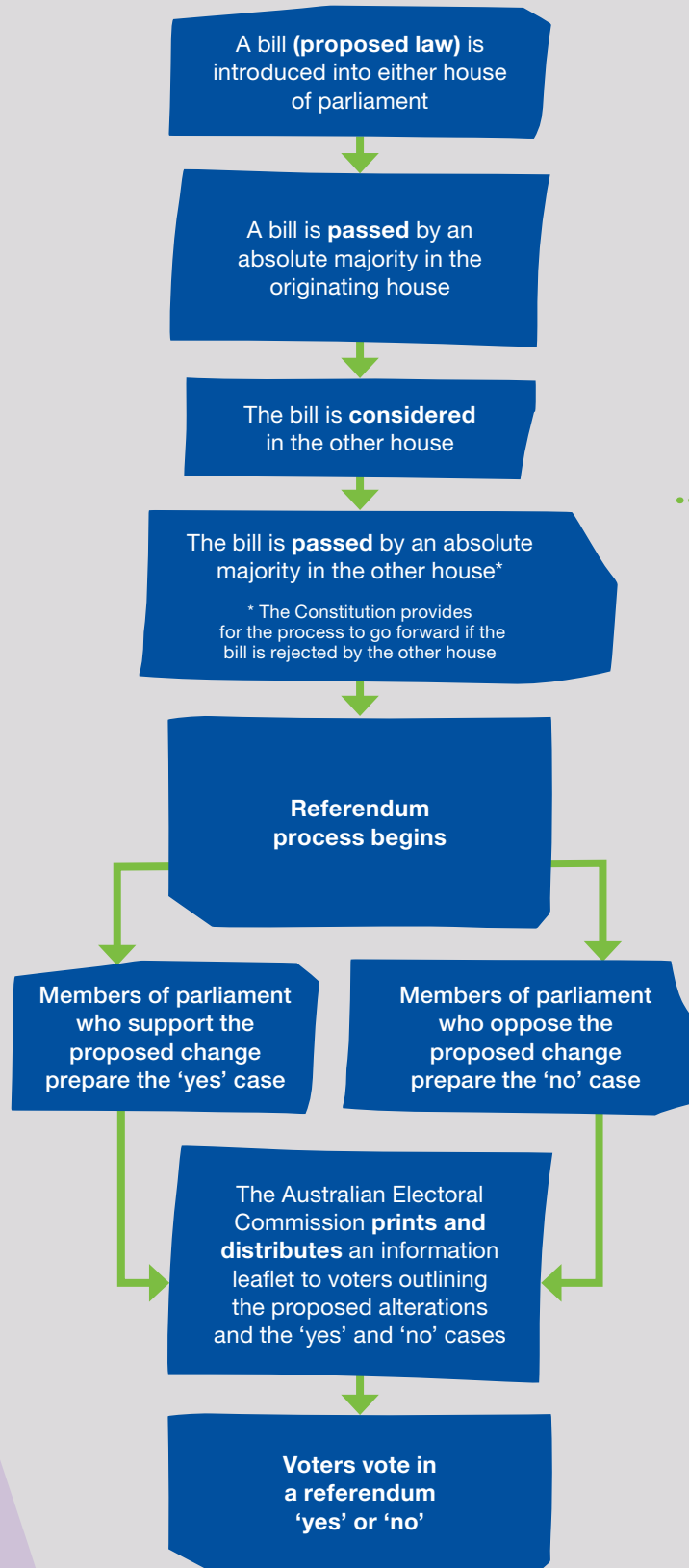


Sample ballot paper



Above: Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, 1900

Alteration process



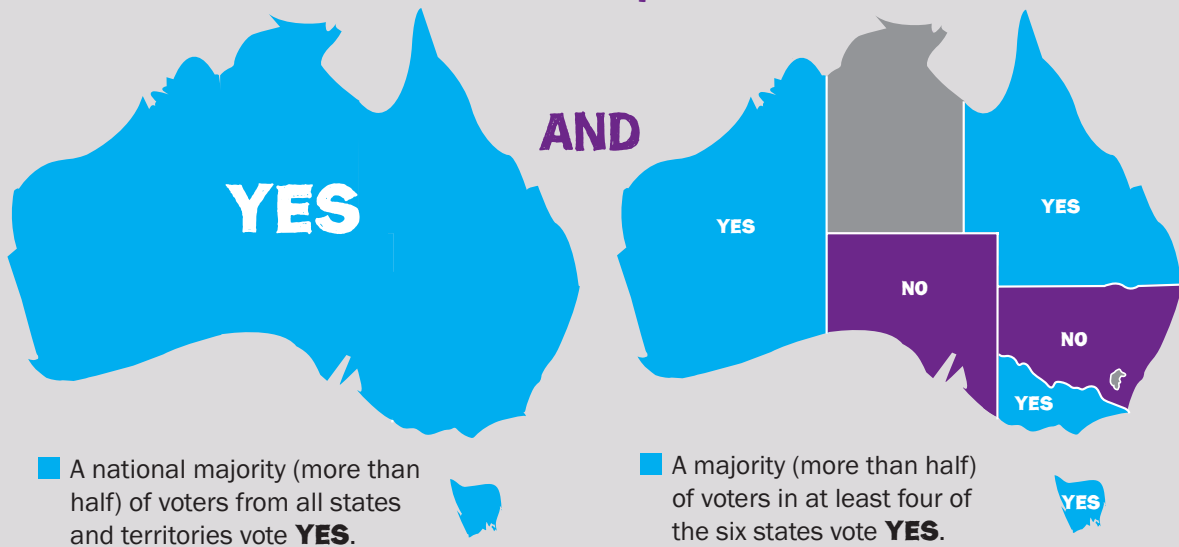
Minimum 2 months, maximum 6 months

Double majority

To become law, the proposed change to the Constitution must be approved by a 'double majority' of electors voting for the changes. That is:

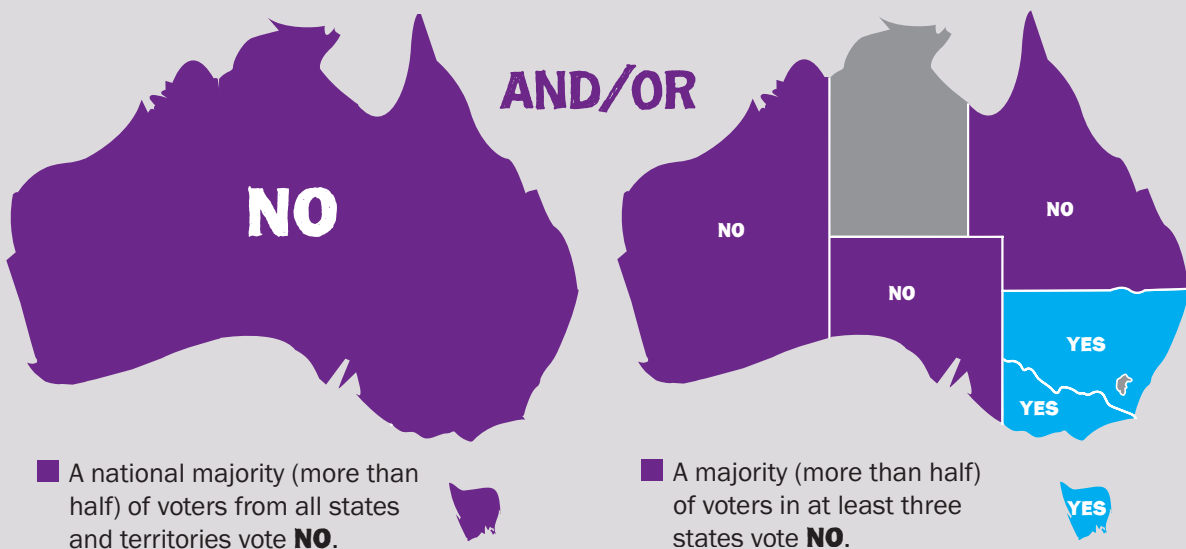
- a national majority of electors from all states and territories, and
- a majority of electors in a majority of the states (i.e. at least four of the six states).

A referendum is passed when:



■ The votes of people living in the ACT, the NT and any of Australia's external territories count towards the national majority only.

A referendum is NOT passed when:



Referendum fast facts

Successful changes to the Australian Constitution

The Australian Constitution has remained largely unchanged since federation. Between 1901 and today, there were 20 referendums, proposing 45 changes to the Constitution.

Highest YES vote: 90.77%

In 1967 Australians voted overwhelmingly to amend the constitution to include Indigenous Australians in the Census and allow the federal Parliament to make laws for them.

Lowest YES vote: 30.79%

In 1988 Australians rejected a proposal to include a statement of rights and freedoms in the Australian Constitution.

Largest number of proposed changes in a referendum: six

In 1913 the Australian people were asked to decide on six proposed changes to the Constitution. The subjects included giving the federal Parliament increased powers to deal with workplace disputes and to nationalise monopolies. None of the proposals achieved a double majority.

Successful changes to the Australian Constitution

Subject	Date	States that voted YES	Percentage of YES votes
Senate elections	12 December 1906	All	82.65
State debts	13 April 1910	All except NSW	54.95
State debts	17 November 1928	All	74.30
Social services	28 September 1946	All	54.39
Indigenous Australians	27 May 1967	All	90.77
Senate casual vacancies	21 May 1977	All	73.32
Territory voting in referendums	21 May 1977	All	77.72
Retirement of judges	21 May 1977	All	80.10

National plebiscites, polls and surveys

The Australian Government can hold a 'plebiscite', poll or survey to assess citizens' views on particular issues not related to constitutional change. Unlike referendums, governments are not required to act on these results. In plebiscites in 1916 and 1917 Australians said NO to military conscription, in a national poll in 1977 Australians indicated their preference for *Advance Australia Fair* as the national anthem, and in 2017, over 61% of eligible Australians responded YES to a marriage equality survey.

Constitutional referendums 1901–2023

Since Federation there have been 45 proposals for constitutional change put to Australian electors. Only 8 have been approved.

SUBJECT	DATE OF REFERENDUMS	STATES IN WHICH A MAJORITY OF ELECTORS VOTED IN FAVOUR	PERCENTAGE OF VOTERS IN FAVOUR
Senate Elections	12.12.1906	All	82.65
Finance	13.4.1910	Qld, WA, Tas	49.04
State Debts	13.4.1910	All but NSW	54.95
Legislative Powers	26.4.1911	WA	39.42
Monopolies	26.4.1911	WA	39.89
Trade and Commerce	31.5.1913	Qld, SA, WA	49.38
Corporations	31.5.1913	Qld, SA, WA	49.33
Industrial Matters	31.5.1913	Qld, SA, WA	49.33
Railway Disputes	31.5.1913	Qld, SA, WA	49.13
Trusts	31.5.1913	Qld, SA, WA	49.78
Nationalisation of Monopolies	31.5.1913	Qld, SA, WA	49.33
Legislative Powers	13.12.1919	Vic, Qld, WA	49.65
Nationalisation of Monopolies	13.12.1919	Vic, Qld, WA	48.64
Industry and Commerce	4.9.1926	NSW, Qld	43.50
Essential Services	4.9.1926	NSW, Qld	42.80
State Debts	17.11.1928	All	74.30
Aviation	6.3.1937	Vic, Qld	53.56
Marketing	6.3.1937	None	36.26
Post-War Reconstruction and Democratic Rights	19.8.1944	SA, WA	45.99
Social Services	28.9.1946	All	54.39
Organised Marketing of Primary Products	28.9.1946	NSW, Vic, WA	50.57
Industrial Employment	28.9.1946	NSW, Vic, WA	50.30
Rent and Prices	29.5.1948	None	40.66
Power to deal with Communists and Communism	22.9.1951	Qld, WA, Tas	49.44
Parliament	27.5.1967	NSW	40.25
Aborigines	27.5.1967	All	90.77
Prices	8.12.1973	None	43.81
Incomes	8.12.1973	None	34.42
Simultaneous Elections	18.5.1974	NSW	48.30
Mode of Altering the Constitution	18.5.1974	NSW	47.99
Democratic Elections	18.5.1974	NSW	47.20
Local Government Bodies	18.5.1974	NSW	46.85
Simultaneous Elections	21.5.1977	NSW, Vic, SA	62.20
Senate Casual Vacancies	21.5.1977	All	73.32
Territory Voting in Referendums	21.5.1977	All	77.72
Retirement of Judges	21.5.1977	All	80.10
Terms of Senators	1.12.1984	NSW, Vic	50.64
Interchange of Powers	1.12.1984	None	47.06
Parliamentary Terms	3.9.1988	None	32.91
Fair Elections	3.9.1988	None	37.59
Local Government	3.9.1988	None	33.61
Rights and Freedoms	3.9.1988	None	30.79
Republic	6.11.1999	None	45.13
Preamble	6.11.1999	None	39.34
Indigenous Voice	14.10.2023	None	39.94

Active citizenship

The laws made in the federal Parliament affect Australians every day. Voting in elections is an important way for citizens to have their say, but there are many other ways to participate in Australia's democracy.

Petition parliament

A petition is a request by a group of citizens for parliament to take action to address a particular issue. It is the oldest and most direct way that citizens can draw attention to an issue and request the parliament's action. The parliament receives many petitions each year on lots of different subjects.

Parliamentary committees

Individuals and organisations can contribute to a parliamentary committee investigating issues they feel strongly about. Public input into committees is important. It is one way parliament can learn about community attitudes and concerns, and work towards addressing issues.

Political art and activism

Australians can express their opinions in many ways including supporting or forming groups to lobby politicians directly, creating political art or gathering publicly in protests or marches.

Contact members of the House of Representatives or senators

Citizens can write a letter, email or make an appointment to let their members of Parliament know their views and concerns.

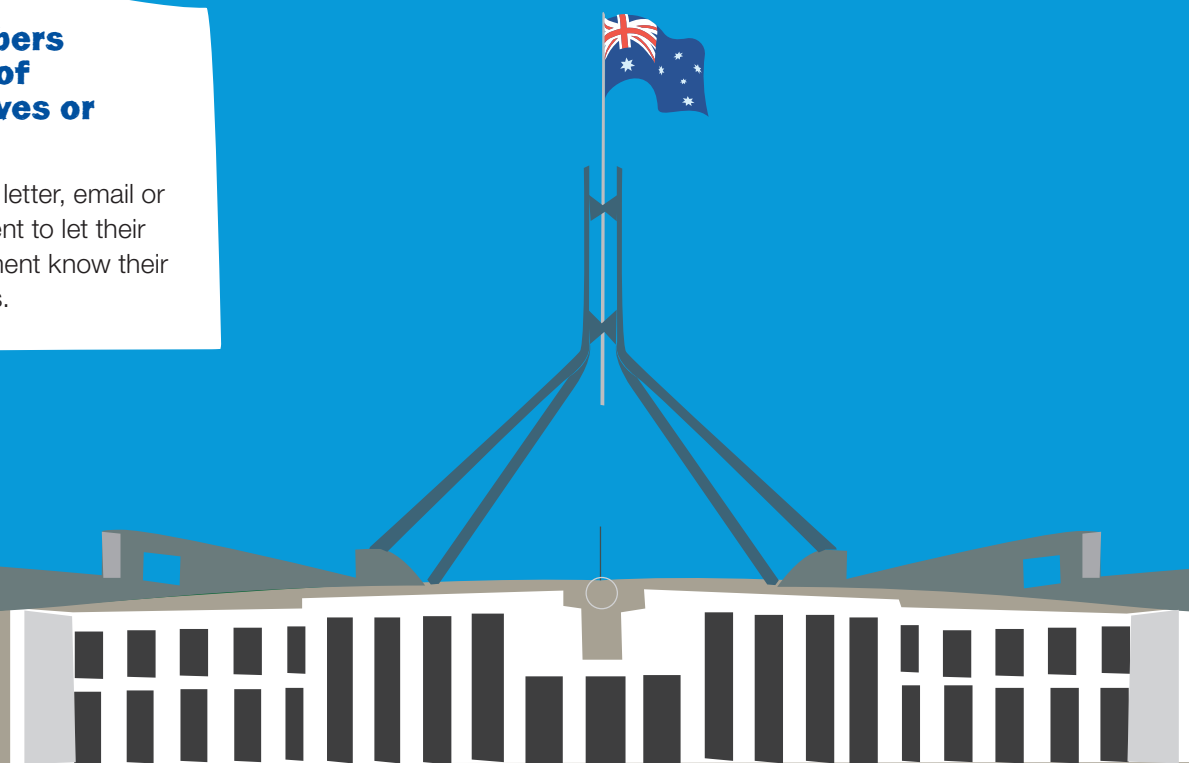


Image credits

Page 2: *The Argus*, 1 June 1898, p5, National Library of Australia, NX11

Page 3: *Record board of the Western Australia results for the referendum on Australian Federation 31 July 1900*, 1900, State Library of Western Australia, 009979 PD
Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, 1900; Original Public Record Copy (1900) Parliament House Art Collection, Art Services Parliament House

Page 4: *Women in Queensland voting in a federal election for the first time 1907, Brisbane, 1907*, State Library of Queensland

Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902, National Archives of Australia: A2863, 1902/8

Indigenous Australians voting in 1962, 1962, National Archives of Australia: A1200, L42369

Page 5: Parliament House, Canberra, DPS AUSPIC

The House of Representatives, Parliament House, Canberra, DPS AUSPIC

The Senate, Parliament House, Canberra, DPS AUSPIC

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