

## ELECTIONS in AUSTRALIA:

Australian elections differ in some ways from those in other countries, so it is important that all students understand our system. With a Queensland state election coming up, now is an appropriate time to question them about their knowledge of elections and perhaps run a small election within your classroom. Ask your students what they understand about elections.

Depending on the year level, you can vary the level of the input, but at any level it is possible to focus on understanding of the main concepts such as democracy, franchise, compulsory voting, ballot, polling booth, preferential and first-past-the post voting, scrutineer. Definitions can be found on <https://www.aec.gov.au/footer/glossary.htm#division>. Have students take part in a voting activity.

The Australian Electoral Commission ( <https://education.aec.gov.au/getvoting/content/step-one.html>) and the Electoral Commission of Queensland (<https://guidetodemocracy.ecq.qld.gov.au/vote/> ) have activities that ask students to form parties, prepare campaigns, vote, and scrutinise the vote-counting, but teachers may wish to do only part of this. See the ballot paper generator at <https://getvoting.aec.gov.au/ballotpaper>.

### Australian elections have many features unique to our country:

- Australia is divided into electorates, so every Australian person lives in an electorate. **An electorate** is a geographical area of Australia where the citizens vote to elect a person (Member of Parliament, or local Councillor) to represent them and their wishes in government. Electorates for a federal election are large in size, and there are different borders for state and local elections, the local area being smaller in size. (Ask: What is the name of your state electorate?)
- A democratic government governs with the consent of the people when they choose which policies they would like the government to enact on their behalf, or which particular person they would like to **represent their wishes** in parliament.
- Usually, the representative who is elected is a member of a political party. **A political party is** an organisation representing a group of people with similar ideas or aims (e.g. the Labour Party or the Liberal Party). Citizens vote for the party that best represents their own ideas or aims. However, candidates for election can also be Independents, who do not belong to a registered political party, and who might select ideas from any other party to support.
- Our Prime Minister or Premier is **not elected by all the voters in the country** or in a state, but only by the citizens in the electorate they represent. When the election is over they are then chosen or affirmed as leader by the other elected representatives belonging to the same political party. (This is very different from a presidential election such as in the United States, where the president is the person who gains the most votes over the whole country. He/she does not represent an electorate).
- Not all countries are democracies, and the **right to vote** is a precious thing that we have inherited from people who fought for it in the past. It is not something to be treated lightly. Australia was one of the first countries to grant universal suffrage to women (1902) and the first in which women had the right to stand for the national Parliament. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians gained the universal right to vote in federal elections only in 1962.

- Australian citizens (and dual citizens) over the age of 18 are expected to **enrol to vote** (for special conditions, see <https://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/enrol-to-vote/enrol-or-update-your-enrolment>);
- If you are on the electoral roll, **voting is compulsory**, and you will be fined if you do not vote (see <https://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/how-to-vote/is-voting-compulsory>); Only nineteen countries in the world have compulsory voting, but turnout here has never been lower than 90%. Australians seem to accept that the right to vote also gives them the responsibility to vote, and expect that everyone should have a say. Political parties in other countries may have to spend more money trying to convince people to go out and vote.
- **Voting occurs regularly** (every three years for federal elections and every four years to elect state and local governments). Elections are held on Saturdays in Australia and New Zealand, unlike most countries. Sundays are very common around the world, but elections are held on weekdays in the United States, United Kingdom, and Canada.
- Voting has long been **a community affair** for Australians, made possible by having elections on a Saturday. Most polling places are schools, community halls or churches. Supporters of these places very commonly take advantage of the large number of visitors by undertaking fund raising activity, often including raffles, cake stalls and sales of “democracy sausages”.
- **Voting takes place** by a person either attending in person at any polling place on the election day or in early voting locations, or by applying for and mailing in a postal vote. Absentee voting is also available if an elector is out of their electorate. (During the COVID pandemic, there have been more postal votes than usual).
- **How-to-vote cards** are usually handed out at polling places by party volunteers (though this is unlikely during COVID). They suggest how a party supporter might vote for their candidate, other candidates or parties. (Electorates now routinely receive how-to-vote materials through the mail or electronically).
- There are **different types of votes**: For most elections Australia uses a preferential voting system. In a state election we use full preferential voting, which means numbering every box on the ballot paper in your preferred order. The following website shows how to fill in the ballot paper and then how the votes are counted. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaE6MigXYdY>.
- **Counting the votes**: In this system, unless one candidate receives over 50% of the vote, the votes are allocated to the voter’s second preference and so on. Also see an explanation of optional preferential voting (used in Council elections), and what is meant by formal and informal votes: <https://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/how-to-vote/voting-systems>.
- **Also, find the lesson 3 Activity sheet on** <https://guidetodemocracy.ecq.qld.gov.au/teachers/lessons/vote/>
- **There are two other methods of voting for federal elections**. To elect representatives to the Senate, the whole of each state or territory is regarded as one electorate, and a certain number of representatives will be elected. Winning candidates must receive a predetermined quota of votes. This is called proportional voting, and it increases the chances of minor parties and independents winning seats. The other type of vote is a referendum, where a question is posed and electors answer Yes or No. This is used for changes to our Constitution.
- **Other countries use other systems of voting**: The United States, Canada and the United Kingdom all use First Past the Post voting. When votes are counted, the person with the most votes wins. This sounds fair, but that person may have only 30% of the votes, whereas the Australian preferential system requires that the winner receives 50 % after distribution of preferences.
- **Counting the votes**: See the process at <https://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/how-are-the-votes-counted>. Candidates are not allowed to enter polling places, except in order to vote. They

are also not permitted to observe the counting of votes (the scrutiny) for elections in which they are candidates. They have the right, however, to appoint scrutineers to represent them during the polling and throughout the various stages of counting ballot papers.

- **What makes a good election?** <https://education.aec.gov.au/getvoting/content/step-one.html>
  - A good election encourages democratic decision making and a respected outcome. A good election is based on principles that ensure it is free and fair. For a school election .....
  - **Openness** – from calling the election to declaring the results, keep the school community informed and involved. Decide on clear rules and processes for your election so that everyone knows the election is fair.
  - **Full participation** – encourage participation and provide plenty of opportunity for everyone to be involved.
  - **Secret ballot** – voting in secret means voters can make their choice without influence or intimidation. Secret ballot is a key aspect of Australian democracy.
  - **One vote, one value** – everyone only votes once in each election. Every vote has the same value and the result of the election is honoured.

Finally, from a blog on the website of the **Museum of Australian Democracy** are some thoughts on International Democracy Day, 15 September 2020, from the Museum's Director:

<https://www.moadoph.gov.au/blog/international-democracy-day/>. Possibly the most distinctive Australian democratic value is compulsory voting.

### 1. Australia has a world-leading democracy

I often say that if democracy were a sport, Australia would be Olympic champions. We are one of only a handful of democracies around the world who can claim:

- seamless, peaceful transition between governments since Federation.
- the first constitution written by and voted on by the people.
- we were the first to give women universal suffrage - the right to vote and stand for parliament;
- the introduction of the secret ballot and one of the highest voter turnouts in the world. (Helped by it being compulsory)
- an independent AEC setting electoral boundaries, as well as an independent judiciary.

We should be really proud of this.

### 2. We're in good hands with our future generations

Late in 2019 we interviewed 900 young people on their views on democracy, and our findings challenge the idea that young people are apathetic. In fact, they show that future voters are themselves champions of democracy, with 67% supporting democracy as the best option for Australia, and only 2 percent saying otherwise. Two thirds have an expressed interest in politics.

### 3. We can't take democracy for granted.

History shows us that democracies can fail. Growing up in apartheid South Africa, in a family that escaped pogroms and persecution in Europe, I've seen media used for both bad and good, as a tool of control and to hold those in power to account. So it falls to all of us to be vigilant, to recognise manipulation, to uphold an independent judiciary and a free press, and to stand up for our democratic values.

The word 'democracy' has its origins in the Greek language. It combines two shorter words: 'demos' meaning whole citizen living within a particular city-state and 'kratos' meaning power or rule.

It is generally agreed that liberal democracies are based on [four main principles](#):

- A belief in the individual: since the individual is believed to be both moral and rational;
- A belief in reason and progress: based on the belief that growth and development is the natural condition of mankind and politics the art of compromise;
- A belief in a society that is consensual: based on a desire for order and co-operation not disorder and conflict;
- A belief in shared power: based on a suspicion of concentrated power (whether by individuals, groups or governments).