

Elections and voting in Australia

Australia is one of the world's oldest continuous democracies. Since 1901, when the six Australian colonies formed the Commonwealth, there have been 46 federal elections.

How often are federal elections held in Australia?

Federal elections are generally held every three years. The Constitution specifies that the term of a Parliament is three years, and there is only a short period after the expiry of the parliamentary term before elections must be held. The exact timing of elections is usually up to the Prime Minister, who formally requests the dissolution of Parliament from the Governor-General. A Governor-General may refuse a request for an early dissolution of Parliament. Elections in Australia are always held on a Saturday. The lengths of parliamentary terms in the states vary.

Is it compulsory to vote?

Australia has compulsory voting, in which all citizens over the age of eighteen are required to vote at elections. Only nineteen countries in the world have compulsory voting. Australia introduced compulsory voting in 1924 – at the election held two years previously, only 59.39% of eligible voters had voted. At subsequent elections, the turnout has never been lower than 90%.

What are the qualifications needed to vote in Australia?

In order to vote in Australia, you must be at least eighteen years old on the day of the election and an Australian citizen. A voter must be registered on the Electoral Roll in order to vote – it is an offence for an eligible voter not to register.

How does Australia's voting system work?

Australia uses a voting system called *preferential voting*. Under this system, voters rank each candidate in order of their preference. When votes are tallied, if no candidate has a majority of votes, the candidate with the fewest first preferences is eliminated from the count, and his or her votes are re-allocated according to the preferences on the ballot papers. After this has occurred, the process is repeated until one candidate receives a majority of all votes cast, at which point they are declared elected.

For the Senate, a form of **proportional representation** is used. Under this system, the percentage of Senators elected from a particular party is roughly proportional to the percentage of votes that party received. To be elected, each Senator must receive a **quota** of votes, determined by the preferences marked on each individual ballot paper. Normally, about 14% of votes represents a quota, but this can vary. This system is known as the *single transferable vote* system.

When did women win the right to vote in Australia?

At the colony or state level, women won voting rights over a period of two decades. The first colony to grant women the vote was South Australia in 1893, while the last was Victoria in 1908. Women have been able to vote in federal elections since 1903, due to the Franchise Act of 1902. Australia was one of the first countries to grant universal suffrage to women and the first in which women had the right to stand for the national Parliament.



National Archives of Australia



When did Indigenous Australians receive the right to vote?

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians gained the universal right to vote in federal elections in 1962. Though the 1967 referendum on indigenous affairs granted Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders the right to be counted in the census and for the Commonwealth Parliament to make laws regarding Indigenous people, it did not of itself grant suffrage to Australia's indigenous population – contrary to much popular mythology.

Because they were considered as subjects of the British Empire after 1843, in the last half of the nineteenth century Indigenous Australians who otherwise were qualified to vote could do so, though the qualifications often involved property and excluded many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Only Queensland and Western Australia deliberately barred Indigenous people from voting. In 1893, South Australia extended this franchise to Indigenous women. Some Indigenous people voted in the first Commonwealth election in 1901. However, very few Indigenous people at the time were aware of their right to vote.

In 1902, the Franchise Act confirmed that women had the right to vote, but did not confirm that right for Aboriginal people. As a result, those Indigenous people already entitled to vote remained so, but no new enrolments by Aboriginal people were accepted.

In 1949 the Chifley government passed an act of Parliament conferring the right to vote in Commonwealth elections on everybody entitled to vote in their State, Aboriginal people included. It wasn't until 1962, however, that the Commonwealth Parliament bestowed complete voting rights on all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the Commonwealth Electoral Act.

In 1971, less than a decade later, Senator Neville Bonner became the first Indigenous person to sit in the Commonwealth Parliament.

Who organises Australia's elections?

The Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) was established in 1984. The AEC is responsible for conducting federal elections and maintaining the Electoral Roll. The AEC also draws the boundaries for Australia's 150 House of Representative seats.

The AEC is a statutory authority and operates independently of the government.

How often does an election result in a change of government?

Out of the 46 federal elections held in Australia, four were held for the Senate only, and thus could not have caused a change of government. Of the remaining 42, just ten have directly caused a change of government.¹ Sometimes, governments have changed between elections, usually due to a government losing its working majority in the House of Representatives. This was particularly the case in the early days of the Commonwealth when minority governments which relied on other parties to maintain control of Parliament were common. The 1975 election is a special case - though it did not in itself cause a change of government, the election itself was a result of the dismissal of the Whitlam government and the appointment of Malcolm Fraser as caretaker Prime Minister.

Find out more

Aiton, D. & Lane, T., *The First Century: Australia's Federal Elections since Federation*, Melbourne: Information Australia, 2000

Attwood, B. & Markus, A., *The 1967 Referendum: Race, Power and the Australian Constitution*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, c. 2007

Farrell, D. & McAllister, I., *The Australian Electoral System: origins, variations and consequences*, Sydney: UNSW Press, 2006

Sawer, M. (ed.), *Elections Full, Free and Fair*, Sydney: The Federation Press, 2001

Australian Electoral Commission – www.aec.gov.au

This website contains a host of information on Australia's electoral laws, system and history.

¹ 1910, 1913, 1914, 1929, 1931, 1949, 1972, 1983, 1996 and 2007