Australia's system of government is known as a representative democracy. At each level of government we elect politicians to represent us. Elections give voters the freedom to choose the people (party) they think will best represent their interests.

Choosing our Governments

Representative Democracy

Australia's system of government is known as a 'representative democracy'. 'Democracy' comes from an ancient Greek word meaning 'rule by the people'. Obviously, in most countries, including Australia, it would be impossible for all the people to come together and make every decision about how they are governed. So, we elect a small number of people - our 'representatives' - to make decisions for us.

At the local government level, we elect representatives known as councillors or, in the case of municipal (town) or city councils, aldermen. ('Alderman' comes from an old English word, *alderman*, which meant something very like the word 'elder' used to describe the older Aboriginal people who know and understand the traditional laws of their communities.)

At the Territory level, our representatives are the Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs for short) and, in the Commonwealth parliament, they are the Member of Parliament (MP) and Senators.

The people who represent us at these different levels are also known, in general, as politicians.

In Australia, at each level of government, they are elected by compulsory preferential voting.

Compulsory Voting

If you are an Australian citizen, once you turn eighteen years of age you are expected to vote in elections. However, before you can vote, you must enrol as an elector, which is easily done by obtaining an enrolment form at a post office. (In fact, seventeen-year-olds can enrol, but not actually vote until they turn eighteen.)

If you are eighteen or over and not enrolled, you can be fined. Even if you are enrolled, you can be fined if you fail to vote during an election unless you have a very good reason.

For most people, voting means attending a 'polling place' on the day - also called 'polling day' - an election is held to make (or 'cast') their vote.

('Polling' comes from an old word for 'head' and goes back to the time when electors simply gathered at a polling place where they were counted according to whom they said they wished to vote for.)

Preferential Voting

In Australia, voting is not only compulsory, but follows what is called a 'preferential' voting system.

When we go to vote, we usually have to choose between two or more candidates (people who want to be elected). When voting, we must indicate which candidate is our first choice and then our second choice, our third choice and so on.

We do this by filling in a form (ballot paper) which has on it the names of all the candidates in the electorate.

In NT Legislative Assembly elections, the candidates' names are in alphabetical order and each name is accompanied by a photograph of the candidate. In House of Representative elections, the order of the names is decided by drawing them out of a container.

Next to each name is a box where we can fill in numbers - starting with '1' for our first choice of candidate, '2' for our second choice, and so on, until all the boxes are filled in. Each box should be filled in and the numbers must go from '1' to the total number of boxes on the paper. A properly filled in ('formal' or 'valid') ballot paper will be counted. An informal ballot paper (for example, with empty boxes or with one number written in twice) will not be counted.

(In some cases, a ballot paper with just one box left empty may be counted if it is still very clear what the voter intended. For example, if there are four boxes with three of them clearly filled in with '1', '2' and '3', it is assumed that the blank box stands for '4' and the vote is formal.)

For a variety of reasons, some people deliberately make informal votes - perhaps as a protest against compulsory voting or because they do not wish to vote for any of the particular candidates in their electorate - by leaving boxes empty or by simply scribbling or writing on the ballot paper without filling in the boxes clearly.

Sometimes people make what is called a 'donkey vote', by simply numbering the boxes on their ballot paper from top to bottom starting with '1' at the top, then '2' and going down until each box is numbered. More rarely, donkey voters start with one in the bottom box and work up to the top. These can be counted as formal votes and are perfectly reasonable - if they really reflect the elector's wishes. However, if donkey voting is simply done out laziness, it can be unfair because it gives an advantage to the candidate whose name is at the top of the ballot paper.

To win an election in Australia, a candidate must get more than fifty per cent of all the formal votes.

After all the number '1' votes ('first preferences') for each candidate have been counted, it is quite common for nobody to have more than fifty per cent of all the votes. When that happens, the candidate who received the fewest first preferences is eliminated, and the ballot papers which had him or her marked as '1' are added to the ballot papers of the candidates marked as '2'.

If there is still no candidate with more than fifty per cent, the candidate with the next fewest votes is eliminated and, again, that person's number '2' votes are distributed among the other candidates.

This continues until one candidate has more than fifty per cent of the votes - an 'absolute majority'.

In the Northern Territory, because our electorates for the Legislative Assembly are quite small (with about 4000 electors in each), the counting sometimes continues through almost to the last preference.

An example of preferential voting

In an electorate with 2500 voters, four candidates - **A,B,C** and **D** - receive the following numbers of first preferences:

A 700

B 600

C 580

D 620

While candidate **A** clearly has the largest number of votes (a 'simple majority'), they make up only twenty-eight per cent of the total. In other words, more than seventy per cent of the electors did not actually want candidate **A** to win.

Candidate **C**, with the lowest number of first preferences, is eliminated and his or her second preferences are distributed. In this case, candidate **C**'s number '2' votes were added to the votes for the others as follows:

A received 300 (now giving A a total of 1000)

B received 250 (now giving B a total of 850)

D received 30 (now giving D a total of 650)

Because no-one still has an absolute majority, candidate **D**'s second preference votes are divided between **A** an **B**:

A received 200 (now giving A a total of 1200)

B received 450 (now giving B a total of 1300)

Although candidate **B** had only the third highest number of '1' votes, **B** actually wins the election because more than half the electors preferred candidate **B** to candidate **A**.

Electing Senators

Each state in Australia is represented in the Commonwealth Parliament by twelve senators, each of whom normally remains a member of parliament for six years. Every three years, half the senators complete their six year term and there has to be a senate election (normally timed to fit in with House of Representative elections which also have to be held at least every three years).

So, each state becomes one large electorate, electing not one but twelve people to represent it in the Senate.

Electors can choose one of two ways to fill in their ballot papers for a Senate election.

- They can go through the paper, writing in their preferences (1, 2, 3 and so on) until all the boxes have numbers in them, just as they would for a Legislative Assembly or House of Representatives election. However, as there are often fifty or more candidates' names on a Senate ballot paper, that can be time consuming and confusing.

- Because most candidates for the Senate belong to a group (usually a political party) that is trying to win all six places, electors can choose simply to vote for the group of their choice by putting '1' in the box next to its name. When the votes are counted, preferences are distributed according to the way each group has previously advised the Australian Electoral Commission it wants them to go.

The system of voting for senators, which is called proportional representation, uses a very complicated system of counting to ensure that preferences are distributed fairly. Basically, to be elected, a candidate must receive (after the distribution of second and further preferences, if necessary) a minimum number of votes (a 'quota') which is calculated according to the total number of electors who have voted formally.

It is usually several days, and sometimes weeks, before the final results of a Senate election are known. Because the Northern Territory - like the Australian Capital Territory - elects only two senators, the results of their Senate elections are usually known much more quickly.

Secret Ballot

In 1856, the colonies of Victoria and South Australia introduced the secret ballot - sometimes called the Australian ballot - which is now used for all parliamentary and local government elections throughout Australia and in most other countries.

The secret ballot allows people to fill in their ballot paper however they wish, without anyone being able to tell who voted for any particular candidate.

Before the secret ballot was introduced, it was easy to see who voted for each candidate. Sometimes, people were paid to vote for candidates, or were threatened with the loss of their job or even violence unless they voted a particular way. The secret ballot enables people to vote honestly and without fear.

Political Parties and Independent Candidates

Most of the members of Australia's parliaments belong to political parties - groups of people who share similar ideas about how we should be governed. While some political parties are quite small, others are large organisations made up of thousands of people who belong to party branches in every electorate across the country.

Before elections, the various parties choose (or 'preselect') the people they would like to see elected in each electorate. Each party supports the candidates it has chosen (or 'endorsed') by helping them try to win votes. In turn, the candidates they have endorsed are expected to follow the party's policies if they win seats in parliament, unless the party decides that they may vote on a particular issue according to their own conscience.

The biggest parties raise large amounts of money and support their endorsed candidates by running advertising campaigns - mainly on television and radio and in newspapers - to attract the votes of the electors. As a result, the major parties and their leaders are often more familiar to many of the electors than the actual candidates for the electorates they live in. Therefore, many people vote for a candidate more because he or she has been endorsed by a particular political party than for any other reason.

However, it is not necessary to be a member of a political party to become a candidate for election and many people put themselves forward as independent candidates.

Independent candidates are not bound by a political party's policies which, in some cases, might be unpopular with the electorate. If elected to parliament, they are free to make their own decisions about which ideas they will support and which they will oppose.

However, without the help of a party, it is often difficult for independent candidates to win elections. In parliament, independent members do not always have as much influence on what is decided as members working together through a political party.

Polling Day

In Australia, elections are always held on a Saturday and polling places (there are usually several in each electorate, often located in schools) are open from 8.00 am until 6.00 pm.

Arriving outside a polling place, electors usually find people from the various political parties waiting to give them how-to-vote cards - slips of paper, each showing how a particular party would like electors to number their ballot papers. It is not permitted to hand these out - or to do or say anything that might influence an elector's vote - inside the polling place itself.

Inside, one or more officials sit behind tables. They ask each elector his or her name and address and whether he or she has already voted in that election. Provided the answer to the last question is 'no', the clerk marks out the name and address of the elector in a copy of the electoral roll and gives the elector a ballot paper.

The elector then goes to a small cubicle or screened area (polling booth) where, in private, he or she can fill in the ballot paper before folding it and putting it through the

small slot in the top of a sealed ballot box. If the election is for both the House of Representatives and the Senate, separate ballot papers and ballot boxes are provided for each.

The elector should then leave the polling place immediately.

The officials at each polling place are supervised by an officer-in-charge. Their work can also be observed by scrutineers - people appointed by the candidates who have the right to observe the sealing of the empty ballot boxes before the polling place opens and watch out for any irregularities in voting procedures that might disadvantage the candidate they are working for.

After the voting finishes at 6.00 pm, each polling place becomes a counting centre where the ballot boxes are opened and officials sort the ballot papers according to the first preference votes. Again, scrutineers are permitted to watch and they have the right to challenge any ballot paper they believe is informal.

The count of votes from each counting centre is then sent to a central counting place (the tally room) where the results are recorded. When it is clear that a candidate has won an absolute majority in an electorate, this is officially announced by what is known as a 'declaration of the poll'.

While most people vote by going to a polling place near their home on an election day, special arrangements are made for electors who are genuinely unable to attend a polling place in their electorate. The most important of these are:

- **Postal Voting**

  People who know they will not be able to go to a polling place (for example, because of illness, infirmity or religious beliefs that will not allow them to vote on Saturdays, or because they will be out of their home state or territory) can arrange to have a ballot paper sent to them by mail before polling day. After filling it out, they post it back to the electoral office.

- **Absent Voting**

  Electors who are in their home state or territory on polling day, but who are too far from their own electorate to go to a polling place there, can vote at a polling place in another electorate. They vote for candidates in their own electorate, not the one they are visiting.

- **Mobile Polling**

  People in some hospitals and prisons can arrange to vote on or before polling day when an official called an electoral visitor brings them their ballot papers.

  Mobile polling is also used in remote areas - particularly in the Northern Territory - where teams of officials visit communities before polling day, sometimes for only a few hours, and set up small polling stations where people can vote.

  Special arrangements are also made for people who can attend a polling place but who are unable to fill out a ballot paper because of, for example, a physical disability such as impaired sight or because they are illiterate. They can choose someone to fill out their ballot paper, fold it and place it in the ballot box for them.