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Elections in Australia

The full name of Australia is the Commonwealth of Australia. From a self-governing British colony established in 1788, independence from Britain was legally obtained in 1900 through an Act of the British Imperial Parliament. The political system adopted was a parliamentary democracy within the context of a constitutional monarchy, with the mechanisms of rule largely modeled on the English Westminster system.

Australia has a two-house Parliament, the House of Representatives (aka "lower house" or "house of government") and the Senate (aka "upper house") with the number of seats (members) for the lower house twice that of the upper house. A seat in the House of Representatives represents an electorate in the nation, each of which is an area comprising roughly the same number of people, and is the legislative arm of Parliament. The Senate is based on proportional representation and serves to ensure that each state is equally represented, and in this respect is similar to and in fact inspired by the US Senate. Every state regardless of population size has the same number of seats, and these are determined based on the total number of votes a party or candidate receives in that state. The Senate has the power to block legislation introduced by the House of Representatives.

The head of government is the Prime Minister, who holds this office by virtue of being the leader of the largest elected party in parliament. Put another way, he holds this office because he can command the support of the majority of the House of Representatives, and must resign or advise an immediate election if the House passes a vote of no confidence in his administration.

The Prime Minister has a similar function to the American president in that he is responsible for day-to-day governing of the nation but there are differences. One major difference is that the President is the holder of executive power whereas the Australian Prime Minister is not. Another is that the President is the head of state whereas our head of state is the British monarch, so this position is not elected but inherited. Also, the Australian head of state is the holder of reserve powers (technically they can step in times of constitutional crises and dismiss the government) and does not intervene in day-to-day politics, hence functioning largely as a ceremonial figurehead. The monarch's representative in Australia is the Governor-General who serves a four year term, and traditionally, this person is selected by the Prime Minister.

All seats in both houses are won through general elections which are held at least once every three years, although Senate seats are held for six years so that after each election, only half the seats change. The exact date of an election (always a Saturday) is decided

by the government and typically by the Prime Minister. In principle, an election can be called anytime in the three years after a government has been elected. The Australian Electoral Commission, an independent apolitical body, is responsible for the conducting of an election, such as organizing the logistics of placing polling places, ensuring that every eligible citizen votes etc. Voting for all citizens above the age of 18 is compulsory, and a small fine (currently $25) is imposed on the few who do not turn up at polling places and have their names marked off the electoral role. This of course does not prevent 'informal voting', where a voter fills in a ballot paper incorrectly or incompletely.

On election day, a voter will go to one of a number of polling places in the district in which he is registered. After getting his name marked off, he receives two ballot papers, one for the House of Representatives and the other for the Senate. He then goes to a booth. Australia uses a preferential voting system to determine who wins seats in both houses. Under this system, the voter numbers the candidates on the ballot paper in order of preference. There are two ways this can be done, (1) a voter can either nominate for a particular party, and thereby let the party determine the order of preferences, or (2) order each candidate by ranking every single candidate from 1 to N (N=number of candidates). This can be confusing and time-consuming if there are many candidates. Most people prefer to let their nominated party distribute preferences. This is called 'voting above the line', a reflection on how the ballot paper is drawn up. After casting his vote, the voter places each of the ballot papers into two separate sealed boxes.

A registered voter who is overseas can vote at an Australian embassy. If this is not convenient or a person cannot get to a polling place on election day for a good reason, he can register for postal voting. The Electoral Commission will send ballot papers to the address nominated by the voter, and these have to be returned either to an Australian embassy or to the Electoral Commission directly by a certain date.

After voting closes, counting begins. A candidate who receives an absolute majority (50% + 1) of the formal first preference votes cast in a division is immediately elected. If this does not occur, the candidate polling the smallest number of votes in the division is eliminated, and the votes obtained by the eliminated candidate are transferred to the remaining candidates according to the preferences on the ballot. The process is repeated until one candidate wins an absolute majority of votes. Nevertheless, the distribution of preferences is carried out in all divisions, including those where a candidate has obtained an absolute majority of first preference votes. The result of the full distribution of preferences is used to calculate the two-party preferred vote between the two major parties, Australian Labor Party (ALP), more like the Democratic Party, and the Liberal-National Coalition, similar to the Republican Party. Typically, by the end of election night, the winning party is known, although not all seats will have been determined.