

POLITICAL PARTY

A political party is an organisation that works to represent groups of people and ideas. They aim to have members elected to Parliament so their ideas can impact the way Australia is governed.

The two biggest parties in Australia are the Australian Labor Party and the Liberal Party of Australia. Smaller parties, also called 'minor parties', include the Nationals, the Australian Greens, the Country Liberal Party and the Democratic Labor Party.

Political parties have branches around Australia. Party members in each branch suggest ideas for party policies. They help choose or pre-select party candidates for local, state and federal elections. They also assist with election campaigns, distribute 'how to vote' cards on Election Day, and help scrutinise the counting of votes.

Before a political party can enter a candidate in an election they must officially register with the Australian Electoral Commission. They also have to meet certain criteria under the Electoral Act, which includes having at least 500 members (who are eligible to be on the electoral roll) and having a written constitution.

Parliamentary parties

A political party becomes a parliamentary party when it has party members elected to a parliament at a federal, state or territory level, or elected to local council.

Parliamentary parties are powerful because their members work as a team and generally vote the same way on issues before the parliament. Members of parliament within a party are assigned specific tasks so that the work can be divided and particular people can focus on specific issues of importance. Parties also employ specialist research and administrative staff to assist members of parliament in developing policy.

Coalitions

A coalition is the joining together of two or more parliamentary parties. Parliamentary parties that do not have enough members to form a government or opposition by themselves may form a coalition to gain greater power by having more support in the chamber.

In the federal Parliament, a coalition that forms government may choose several ways of working together. For example:

- the Prime Minister may be drawn from the larger party
- the Deputy Prime Minister may be drawn from the smaller party
- ministries may be shared between the two parties according to the ratio of seats held by the two parties.

Coalition members usually sit in the House of Representatives and the Senate in adjacent groups. The members of a coalition generally vote the same way, although they may have different ideas on particular bills. Each party in a coalition usually holds separate party meetings.

The Liberal Party of Australia and the Nationals have formed the longest-running coalition in the federal Parliament. These two parties ran coalition governments in the three periods 1949–1972, 1975–1983 and 1996–2007.

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Minor parties

Minor parties may form part of the government or the opposition through a coalition or agreement with another party. If this is not the case, minor party members sit on the 'cross benches' in the chambers, together with any Independents.

Sometimes minor parties can hold what is called the 'balance of power'. This means that their vote may decide the outcome of an issue if the government and opposition are in disagreement.

Party meetings

During sitting weeks, each parliamentary party has a party meeting. The meeting is held in a designated party room, and is chaired by the leader of the party. Party meetings generally only involve members of the parliamentary party and their proceedings are confidential.

The main purpose of party meetings is to decide how the party will work as a team to make an impact on the floor of the Parliament. In party meetings, members of parliament may:

- elect office holders such as the party leader, ministers, party spokespersons and the Whips
- debate and make decisions about party policy
- discuss tactics and organise party members to speak on particular bills
- resolve potential conflict and differences of opinion to ensure that the party displays a united front.

Outside the Parliament, political parties also hold meetings, referred to as branch meetings. These meetings are generally open to all members of the party, as well as those members of the public interested in becoming involved.

History

In the first decade after Federation (1901), the major parties in the federal Parliament were the Free Trade Party, the Protectionist Party and the Australian Labor Party. The Australian Labor Party is the oldest Australian political party and was formed by the trade union movement in the 1890s.