

fact sheet 41 series

ELECTIONS

The essence of a parliamentary democracy is that citizens elect representatives to make laws on their behalf. General elections are held every three years to elect 150 members of the House of Representatives and 40 senators (half of the 72 state senators plus the four senators representing the two territories). Half-Senate elections are usually held at the same time as elections for the House of Representatives, though they need not be. The most recent separate elections for each house occurred in 1970 (Senate) and 1972 (House of Representatives).

The Constitution sets out the essential rules for calling general elections. It is compulsory for Australian citizens 18 years and over to vote.

Elections for the House of Representatives use a preferential voting system to elect one member for each electorate. Citizens vote by writing a number beside every name on the ballot paper, '1' for the first preference, '2' for the second preference and so on. If a candidate gains an absolute majority of first preference votes, that candidate wins the seat. If no candidate has enough first preference votes for an absolute majority, then all the preferences are counted. The winner is the candidate who gains an absolute majority of first and later preferences.

Elections for the Senate use a more complex voting system known as proportional representation. Voters have two options: they can simply place the number '1' beside their preferred party, or they can number each candidate in order of their preference. The counting procedure is very complicated—it sometimes takes several weeks to count all the Senate votes. State senators must win a 'quota' of first and later preferences that equals 14.3% of the vote, while territory senators need 33.3% to be elected.

A by-election is held for any seat in the House of Representatives when a sitting member resigns or dies. Senators who resign or die are replaced by a candidate from the same party chosen by the Parliament of the state represented.

Elections are run by the Australian Electoral Commission.

An Act of Parliament called the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* sets out the requirements for running Commonwealth elections.



Placing a vote in the ballot box

Photo courtesy of AEC