Elections are an integral part of our democracy. Elections attempt to translate public opinion into parliamentary representation. In this lesson students compare and utilise systems of voting: first-past-the-post and preferential voting. Proportional voting is also considered.

**Outcomes**

Students will:

- examine why and how elections are conducted in Australia
- compare first-past-the-post, preferential and proportional systems of voting

**Focus questions**

- Why are elections held in Australia?
- What is a preference?
- What is a proportion?
- Do Australians get who they vote for?

**Concept words**

- Preferential
- First-past-the-post
- Ballot paper
- Secret ballot
- Plurality
- Proportional
- Electioneering
- Scrutineer
- Distribution
- Democracy
- Represent

**Getting started**

1. Initiate discussion by asking for the name of Australia’s system of governance. *(representative democracy under a constitutional monarchy)*
2. Brainstorm the names of elected representatives in the current federal Parliament.
3. Name other Australian representatives elected to their positions *(state premiers, mayors and aldermen, students serving on school representative councils etc.)*
4. Explore the concept of ‘three levels of government’ *(federal, state and local government).*
   - What are levels of government? What do they do? How do they work?
5. Discuss federal elections. Is a vote once every three years an effective way of contributing to the decision making process? If not, what is the alternative?
Main activity

First-past-the-post
1. Tell students that they will vote for a representative of the Australian music industry to advance the interests of one music genre with recording contracts, air time and live performances in big venues.
2. Brainstorm music genres and list on the board (e.g. rock, pop, country, jazz, hip-hop etc.)
3. Ask students to determine their music genre preference and to vote accordingly with a show of hands.
4. Tally the votes for each music genre on the board. The genre with the most votes wins (first-past-the-post)
5. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of first-past-the-post voting (a simple system, but minority interests cannot win)

Preferential voting
1. Ask students for an alternative to first-past-the-post selection. Introduce the preferential voting system. (rank preferences in order; first preference to last)
2. Distribute voting slips and instruct students to number the music genres listed on the board in order of preference.
3. Ask two students to collect, group and count the ballot papers and two students to act as scrutineers.
4. Record the total votes for each genre on the board. Re-distribute the least votes according to subsequent preferences until one genre receives more than 50% of the total vote (see Preferential voting diagram)
5. Discuss the outcome. Did the winning genre win because of the distribution of preferences or because of an initial majority?
Debrief

1. Discuss: Which genre/s were successful in each vote?
2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of both systems of voting?
3. Did anyone try to influence the outcome of the vote? (e.g. by cheating, coercing other voters, voting more than once, or changing their vote between the public show of hands and the secret ballot etc.)
4. Discuss: which music genre best reflects student preferences?

Parliamentary context

• Members are appointed to the federal House of Representatives using the preferential voting method. Can you work out why this system is used in the lower house? (elects major parties and supports efficient government)

• Senators are appointed to the federal Senate using the proportional voting method. Can you work out why this system is used in the upper house? (leads to a strong voice for minor parties that helps to keep a government ‘on its toes’)

• Voting in the Parliament is public. Why is this so?

• How closely do you think elected representatives reflect the views and interests (preferences) of Australians?

Extension activities

• Write 200 words outlining the strengths and weaknesses of first-past-the-post, proportional and preferential voting. Which do you favour for the selection of members of parliament? Why?

• Voting in Australia is compulsory. Argue for or against.