

# Democracy in Australia

The term 'democracy' comes from two Greek words: Demos, meaning people, and Kratos, meaning power, or rule. Democracy roughly translates as 'the power of the people'.



In a democratic system, individuals contribute to the running of society, either by taking a role in government or by electing officials to act in their best interests and to uphold their rights and freedoms.

Modern Australia's system of democracy is called representative democracy. This means that officials are elected for a set term to make decisions as the government or governing parties, or influence government decisions as an elected member of Parliament. Each Member of Parliament should act to represent the people they were elected by.

When citizens vote directly on decisions, such as in a referendum, this is known as direct democracy. Direct democracy usually involves voting on specific questions about issues, such as whether a change should be made to the Australian Constitution.

Free and regular elections are a key feature of democratic societies. In Australia, preferential voting is used in elections. This means that voters list who they would like to represent them in order of preference. If their first choice is eliminated their vote is redirected to their second choice. It can be argued that this is more representative of the people's interests. Other countries use different forms of voting such as the first past the post system where votes are not redirected. Elections often require an absolute majority for a winner to be declared which means the winner must obtain more than half of the votes.

When citizens are not happy with the decisions made by their elected representatives, they may resort to democratic dissent. This can involve protest marches, petitions, meetings with officials, distribution of information and hanging up posters/hiring billboards.

More recently, social media campaigns have been used effectively to highlight citizens' concerns.

Historically, marginalised groups in Australia have been the most likely to engage in democratic dissent as their needs and perspectives are less likely to be considered by elected representatives. Fortunately, instances of democratic dissent in Australia have been mostly peaceful. One example of democratic dissent is when groups including Australian women fought for universal suffrage (the right to vote).

Democracy in Australia is not perfect. Not everyone is equally engaged in, or represented by, the democratic process. For example, people below the age of 18 are not allowed to vote. People who are homeless, in prison, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and some people with disability also sometimes experience difficulty in exercising their right to vote.

For example, while people who have been sentenced to more than three years in prison are not allowed to vote, those serving shorter sentences are. However, in order for prisoners to vote, a polling station must be set up in the prison and this does not always happen.

In the lead up to the 2016 federal election the Australian Electoral Commission reported that an estimated 40% of eligible Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voters were not registered to vote. While there have been repeated efforts to address this issue, the fact remains that significant numbers of Indigenous Australians are missing out on voting in elections.

#### Sources:

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