

Mathematics Level 7

Chapter 1 — Government and democracy

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How votes become a government: parties, independents and the balance of power

Curriculum link: VC2HC8K01. This section draws on VC2HC8K01.E01, VC2HC8K01.E02, VC2HC8K01.E03 and VC2HC8K01.E04.

Theory

The big question of this section. When Australians vote, what exactly are they choosing — a local member, a party, or a government? The honest answer is: all three at once. This section follows a vote from the ballot box to the government of the day, and asks who holds the balance when no side wins outright.

Key term — political party. A *political party* is a group of people who share broad ideas about how the country or state should be run, and who organise to win elections so they can put those ideas into law. Parties pick candidates for each seat, publish a platform of policies, and — if they win — govern as a team.

Key term — independent. An *independent* is a candidate or member who does not belong to any party. Independents are elected the same way as party candidates and do the same jobs; they simply vote on their own judgement rather than along party lines.

Key term — crossbench. In a parliament chamber the government and the opposition sit facing each other, and the members who belong to neither — minor parties and independents — sit on the benches in between, the *crossbench*. When no side has a majority, crossbench members can decide who governs or which laws pass.

1. What parties and independents do (VC2HC8K01.E04)

Parties bundle thousands of individual views into a few clear choices. Instead of every voter comparing every candidate policy by policy, voters can compare party platforms and pick a direction. Parties also train and organise their members: the party that forms the government supplies the Prime Minister or Premier and the Ministers, and the largest party left outside government becomes the opposition, with its own leader and a shadow minister watching each Minister.

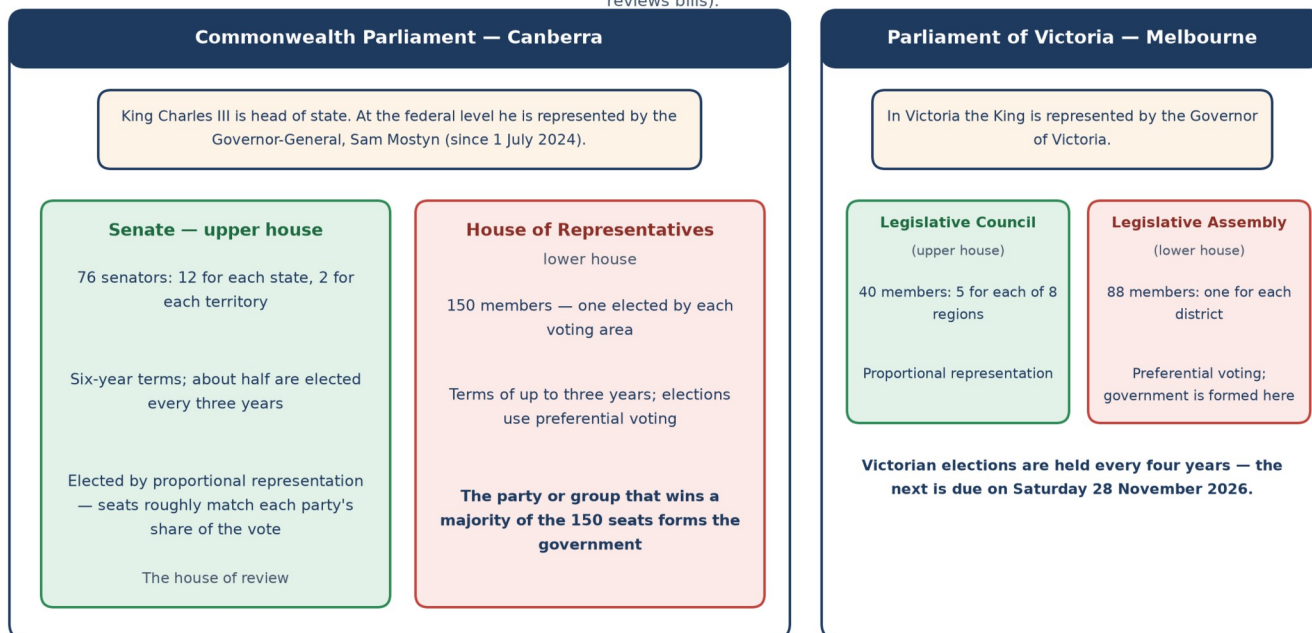
Independents do the same core jobs — representing their local area, speaking on bills, voting on laws — without a party machine. An independent can vote on every bill as they see fit, which a party member usually cannot (see part 5). In recent Australian elections, independents have won more lower-house seats than at any time in decades, which makes their role worth understanding well.

2. The structure and composition of today's parliaments (VC2HC8K01.E01)

Australia has three levels of government — local councils, state and territory parliaments, and the Commonwealth (federal) Parliament — and this section looks closely at the federal and state parliaments. Each has two houses: a lower house that forms the government and an upper house that reviews bills. The territories — the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory — are the exception, with a single-house parliament each.

Australia's parliaments: two houses each

The Commonwealth Parliament and the Parliament of Victoria both have a lower house (where government is formed) and an upper house (which reviews bills).



Seats and terms as set by the Australian Constitution and Victorian law. Federal election held 3 May 2025; Victorian election held 26 November 2022. Governor-General Sam Mostyn took office 1 July 2024.

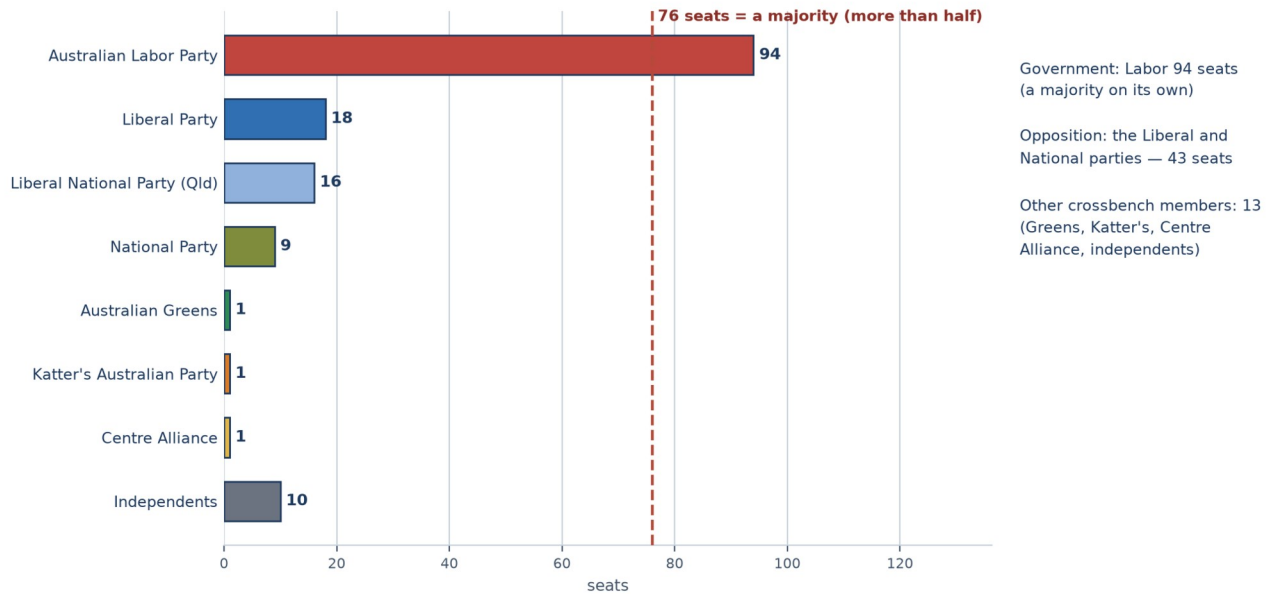
Side-by-side diagrams of the Commonwealth Parliament in Canberra and the Parliament of Victoria in Melbourne, each with two houses: the Senate (76 senators, 12 per state and 2 per territory, elected by proportional representation) beside the House of Representatives (150 members, one per voting area, elected by preferential voting, the house where government is formed); and the Legislative Council (40 members, 5 per region, proportional) beside the Legislative Assembly (88 members, one per district, preferential), with the next Victorian election due on Saturday 28 November 2026

Section 24 of the Australian Constitution says the House of Representatives “shall be composed of members directly chosen by the people of the Commonwealth” — one member per voting area, with the number of areas roughly matching each state’s population. The Senate is built in a different way: section 7 gives each original state the same number of senators (now 12) regardless of population, plus 2 per territory — 76 in total. Why the upper house is built that way is examined in Section 4D.

Composition is a snapshot of who holds the seats right now. After the federal election of Saturday 3 May 2025, the House of Representatives looked like this:

The House of Representatives after the 2025 federal election

Election held Saturday 3 May 2025 — 150 seats, one per voting area



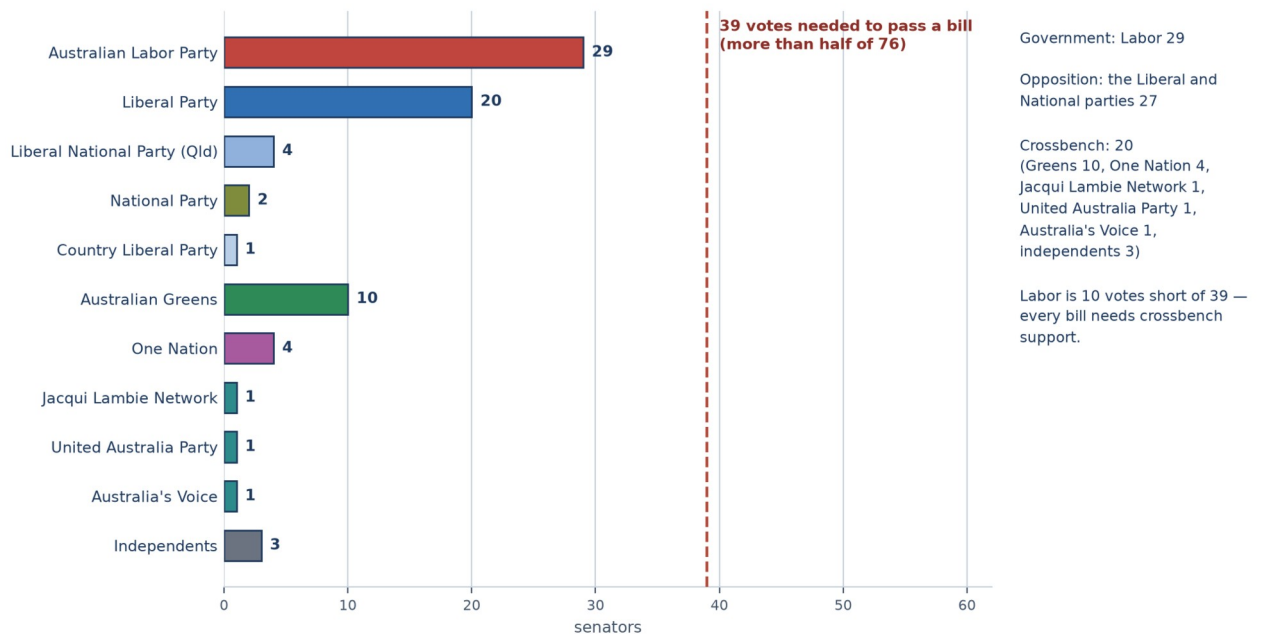
Source: party seats from the 2025 Australian federal election, House of Representatives results. Retrieved 26 August 2026.

Bar chart of the House of Representatives after the 3 May 2025 election: Labor 94 seats, Liberal 18, Liberal National 16, Nationals 9, Greens 1, Katter's Australian Party 1, Centre Alliance 1 and independents 10, with a dashed line at 76, the seats needed for a majority

The Senate changes more slowly, because senators serve six-year terms and about half are elected every three years. From 1 July 2025 the Senate was composed as follows:

The Senate from 1 July 2025

76 senators: 12 for each state, 2 for each territory



Source: Senate composition from 1 July 2025 (after the 3 May 2025 election). Retrieved 26 August 2026.

Bar chart of the Senate from 1 July 2025: Labor 29 seats, Liberal 20, Liberal National 4, Nationals 2, Country Liberal 1, Greens 10, One Nation 4, and 6 others and independents, with a dashed line at 39, the votes needed to pass a law

State parliaments work the same way with their own numbers. After the Victorian election of 26 November 2022, the Legislative Assembly held 88 members (Labor 56, Liberal 19, Nationals 9, Greens 4) and the Legislative Council 40

(Labor 15, Liberal–National 14, Greens 4 and 7 others). Comparing the snapshots is the point of this elaboration: composition shifts election by election, while the structure stays put.

3. Two voting systems: preferential and proportional (VC2HC8K01 . E02)

Australia uses two different counting systems at the one election, and each rewards a different thing.

Preferential voting (House of Representatives and Victorian Legislative Assembly) has been used in federal lower-house elections since 1919, under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*. Voters must number **every** box in order. If no candidate has more than half of the first preferences, the lowest candidate is cut and their votes move to the next number written on each ballot; this repeats until one candidate has a majority.

Key term — preferential voting. A counting method in which voters rank all candidates in order, and votes of the lowest candidate are moved, round by round, until one candidate holds more than half of the votes still counting.

How to vote: a House of Representatives ballot paper

This is a model ballot paper, drawn for this book. The division, the candidates and the parties are fictional. Real ballot papers are issued by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC).

Commonwealth of Australia — House of Representatives

Division of Greenhills (model)

Number every box from 1 to 5 in the order you choose. Write a different number in every box. Your vote is formal — that is, it gets counted — only if every box is numbered.

2	CHEN, Ben Together Australia
4	OKAFOR, Chidi Riverbend Alliance
1	RIVERA, Ava Bluegum Party
5	TAYLOR, Erin Independent
3	NGUYEN, Danh Fair Fields

On election day, every Australian citizen aged 18 or over who is enrolled must vote. Enrolment and voting are compulsory.

A model House of Representatives ballot paper for the made-up voting area of Greenhills, listing five candidates in ballot order with a voter's numbers: Ben Chen (Together Australia) 2, Chidi Okafor (Riverbend Alliance) 4, Ava Rivera (Bluegum Party) 1, Erin Taylor (Independent) 5, Danh Nguyen (Fair Fields Party) 3

The Greenhills ballot above is a made-up teaching model. Reading it: this voter most wants Rivera, then Chen, then Nguyen, then Okafor, then Taylor. If Taylor is cut first, this ballot slides to the next number still in the count.

Preferential voting in action: a full count (model division of Greenhills)

100 formal votes, 5 candidates. A candidate needs more than half — at least 51 votes — to win.

Round	Ava Rivera Bluegum Party	Ben Chen Together Australia	Chidi Okafor Riverbend Alliance	Danh Nguyen Fair Fields	Erin Taylor Independent
1	28	24	20	18	10
2	28	30	24	18	out
3	36	30	34	out	out
4	49	out	51 — wins	out	out

Round 1:

count the first preferences. No one has 51, so Erin Taylor — the fewest votes — is excluded.

Round 2:

Taylor's 10 votes move to each voter's next choice: 6 to Chen, 4 to Okafor. Danh Nguyen now has the fewest.

Round 3:

Nguyen's 18 votes move on: 8 to Rivera, 10 to Okafor. Ben Chen now has the fewest.

Round 4:

Chen's 30 votes move on: 13 to Rivera, 17 to Okafor. Okafor holds 51 of 100 — more than half — and is declared elected.

Model example — Greenhills is fictional. Notice the lesson: Ava Rivera led on first preferences but did not win. Preferences from excluded candidates decided the result.

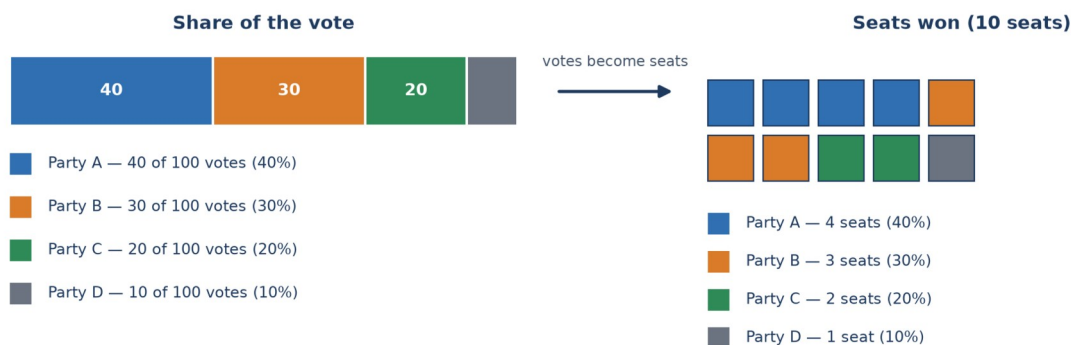
Step-by-step preferential count of the 100 model Greenhills ballots: round 1 first preferences Rivera 28, Chen 24, Okafor 20, Nguyen 18, Taylor 10, so Taylor is cut; round 2 Rivera 28, Chen 30, Okafor 24, Nguyen 18, so Nguyen is cut; round 3 Rivera 36, Chen 30, Okafor 34, so Chen is cut; round 4 Rivera 49, Okafor 51 — Okafor wins with a majority

Proportional representation (Senate and Victorian Legislative Council) has been used for the federal Senate since 1949. Voters still number candidates (or vote 1 for a party group above the line), but the count is built so that a party's share of seats ends up close to its share of the vote. At a half-Senate election a candidate needs a quota of about 14.3% of the vote — one-seventh — to win a seat, which is why minor parties and independents can win Senate seats with a small share of the vote.

Key term — proportional representation. A counting method built so that a group winning, say, 30% of the vote wins close to 30% of the seats, instead of one winner taking everything.

Proportional representation: seats follow votes

A model election for 10 seats with 100 voters. Each party's share of seats roughly matches its share of the vote.



The point: a party winning about 30 per cent of the vote wins about 30 per cent of the seats. Minor parties and independents win seats in line with their real support, so the house ends up looking more like the voters.

Model example. Real Senate counts use a quota: at a usual half-Senate election six of a state's senators are elected, so a candidate needs just over one vote in seven (about 14.3 per cent) to win a seat.

A model of proportional representation with 100 voters electing 10 seats: Party A's 40 votes win 4 seats, Party B's 30 win 3, Party C's 20 win 2 and Party D's 10 win 1, so each seat costs about 10% of the vote; a footnote adds that at a real half-Senate election the quota is about 14.3%, or one-seventh

Two more rules shape every Australian election: enrolment and voting are **compulsory** for citizens aged 18 and over (compulsory voting has applied at federal elections since 1924, and the voting age was lowered to 18 in 1973), so the counts above involve almost every adult Australian.

A contested word: "fair". People regularly call one system fairer than another, but "fair" here has two different senses, and they pull in opposite directions.

- **Fair as proportion.** A group that wins about 30% of the vote should get about 30% of the seats; a system that hands one party a majority of seats from well under half the votes looks unfair from here. This sense favours proportional representation.
- **Fair as majority support and a local voice.** Every voting area gets one local member who, after preferences, is acceptable to more than half of the voters, and the count usually produces a government able to govern without weeks of deals. This sense favours preferential voting.

This section does not settle the question for you. When you evaluate a voting system, state which sense of "fair" you are using, put the other side's best case (not its weakest), and reason to your own view. You will be marked on the reasoning, not the conclusion. (Section 5A is the practical twin of this part: you will run both methods in a class vote and compare the results.)

4. Forming a government — and losing one (VC2HC8K01.E03)

After an election, the party or group that can command a **majority** in the lower house — more than half of the seats — forms the government, and its leader becomes Prime Minister (federally) or Premier (in a state). With 150 House seats, more than half means 76; in Victoria's 88-seat Assembly it means 45. (How the Prime Minister is formally chosen, and the limits on their power, is the job of Sections 1C and 4E.)

Key term — the opposition. The *opposition* is the largest party or group not in government. Its job is to question the government, offer a different choice at the next election, and be ready to govern if it wins.

Key term — hung parliament. A *hung parliament* is the result when no party or group holds a majority of the lower house on its own. Nobody "wins" outright, and the crossbench holds the deciding votes.

Key term — minority government. A *minority government* is a government formed after a hung parliament: one side governs with the written or promised support of enough crossbench members to reach a majority, vote by vote.

Why 76 is the magic number

The House of Representatives has 150 seats. More than half of 150 is 75.5 — so a party needs 76 seats to hold a majority and form government on its own.

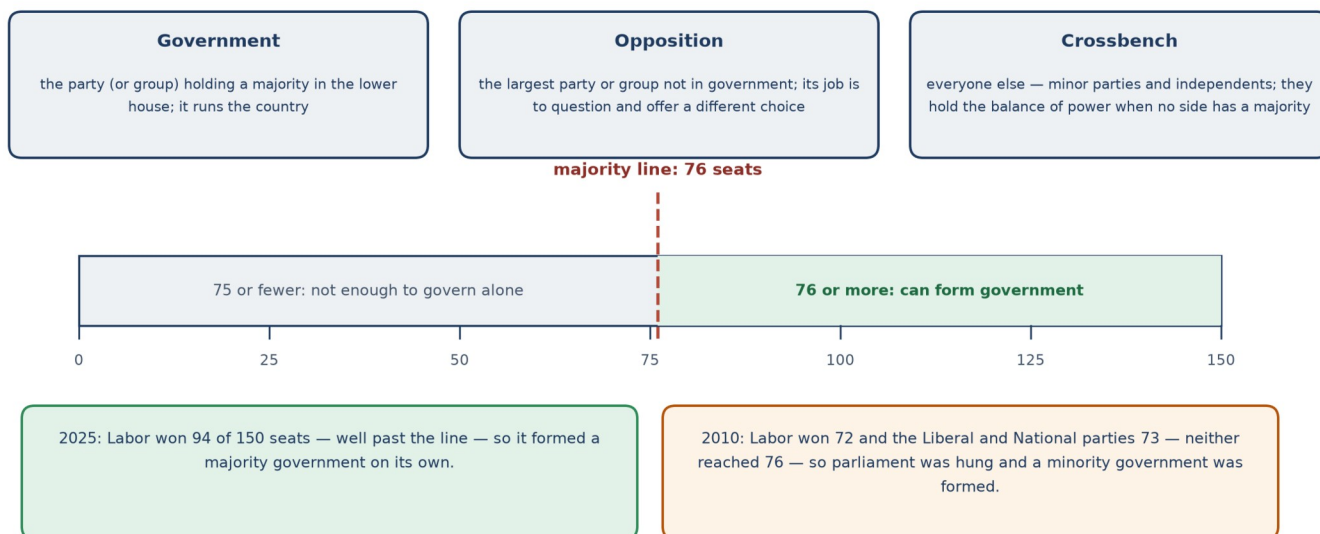
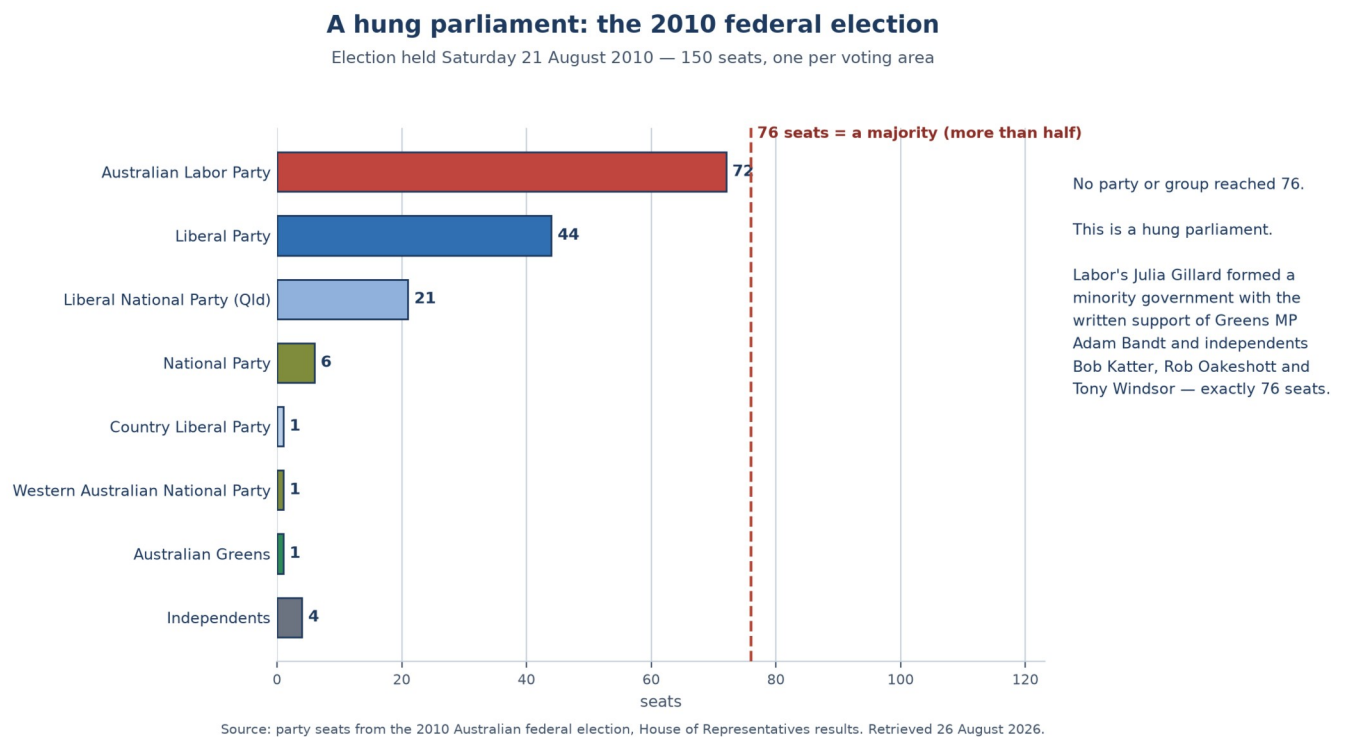


Diagram explaining why 76 is the magic number in the 150-seat House: cards defining government, opposition and crossbench; a number line from 0 to 150 with a dashed majority line at 76 separating “75 or fewer: not enough to govern alone” from “76 or more: can form government”; and two example boxes — 2025, Labor’s 94 seats a majority, and 2010, Labor 72 and the Liberal and National parties 73, a hung parliament

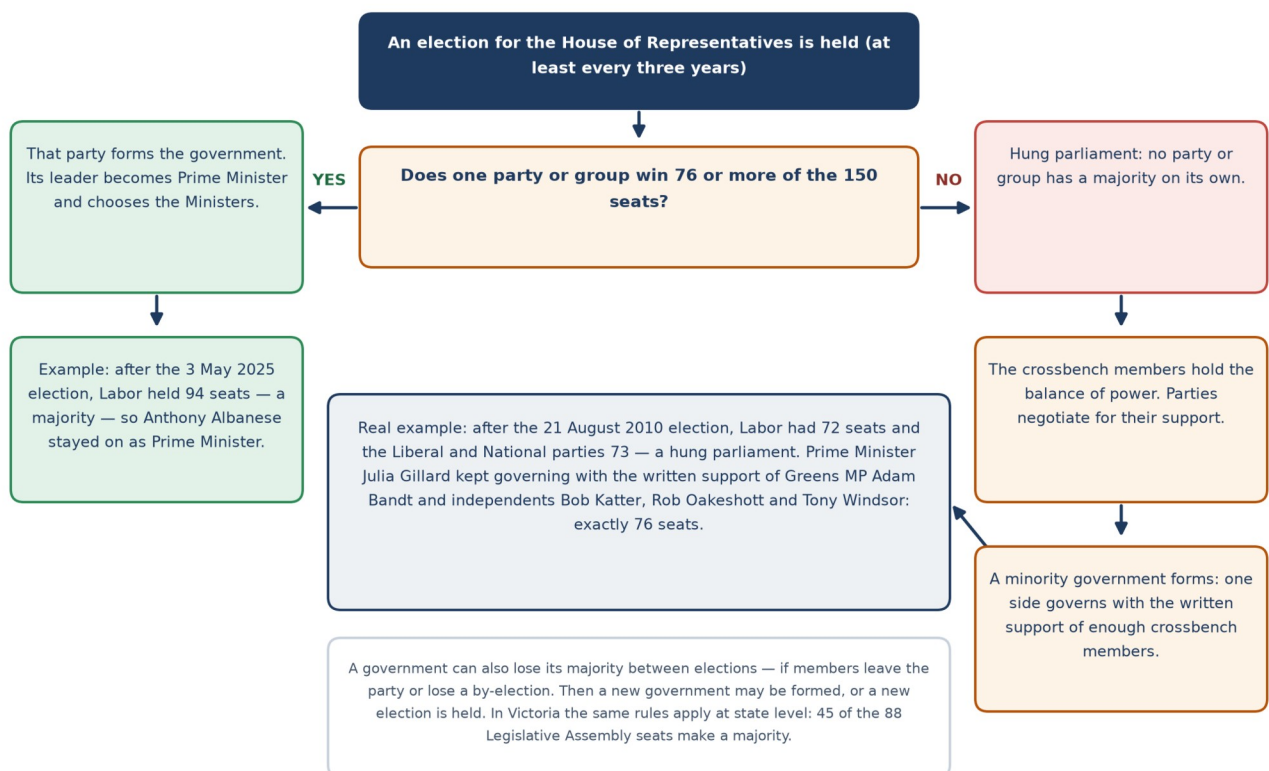
The 2010 federal election is the worked case study for a hung parliament:



Bar chart of the House of Representatives after the 21 August 2010 election: Labor 72, Liberal 44, Liberal National Party (Qld) 21, Nationals 6, Country Liberal Party 1, Western Australian National Party 1, Australian Greens 1 and independents 4, with the 76-seat majority line and a note that no side reached 76, so Labor's Julia Gillard formed a minority government with the written support of Greens MP Adam Bandt and independents Bob Katter, Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor — exactly 76 seats

Putting the pieces together, the general process — and the hung-parliament branch — runs like this:

How a government is formed — and what happens when no one wins outright



Flow chart of government formation: an election for the House of Representatives is held at least every three years; if one party or group wins 76 or more of the 150 seats, that party forms the government and its leader becomes Prime Minister (example: after 3 May 2025, Labor’s 94 seats kept Anthony Albanese as Prime Minister); if no side reaches 76, the parliament is hung, crossbench members hold the balance of power, and a minority government forms with written crossbench support (real example: after 21 August 2010, Julia Gillard’s agreements with Bandt, Katter, Oakeshott and Windsor reached exactly 76); a footnote adds that a government can also lose its majority between elections, and that in Victoria 45 of the 88 Assembly seats make a majority

A government can also be **lost** between elections: if members leave the governing party, or it loses a by-election, the majority can disappear — and then a new government is formed or a new election is held. At an election, of course, voters can simply hand the majority to the other side.

5. Party discipline and the balance of power (VC2HC8K01 .E03)

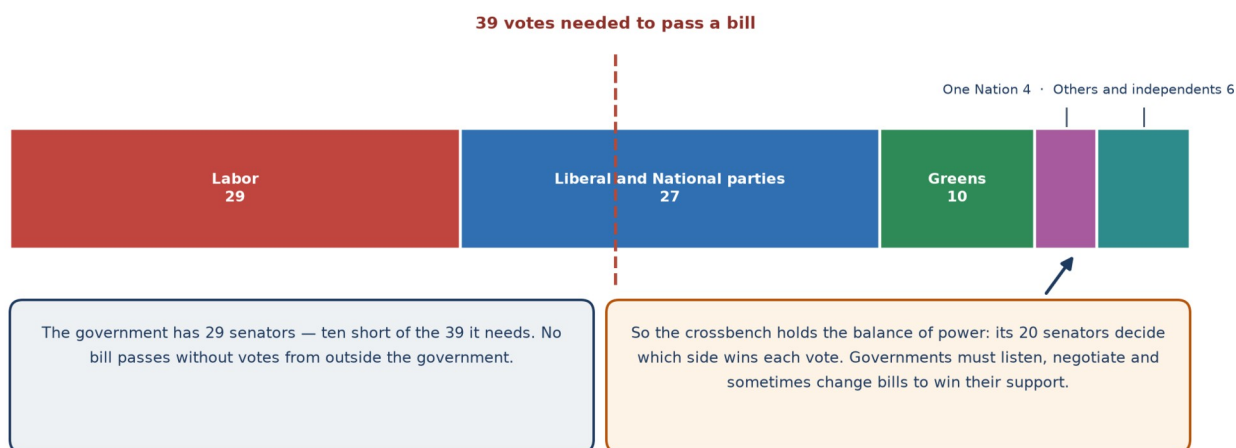
Key term — party discipline. *Party discipline* is the rule and habit that members of a party vote together in parliament. It is why a government with a lower-house majority can usually pass its bills: its own members almost never vote against it. The price of the discipline is that an ordinary government backbencher rarely changes a law by voting alone; their influence runs inside party meetings instead. Independents and many upper-house crossbenchers are free of that discipline, which is exactly why their single votes can carry weight.

Key term — balance of power. The *balance of power* is held by the members whose votes decide a result that neither side can reach alone — usually the crossbench in a hung lower house or in a Senate where the government lacks a majority.

The Senate is where the balance of power bites most often. Governments rarely hold a Senate majority, so a bill that has passed the House usually needs crossbench votes to pass the Senate. From 1 July 2025, with 39 votes needed to pass a law and Labor holding 29, every bill required at least ten votes from outside the government’s own ranks.

The balance of power: the Senate from 1 July 2025

76 senators. To pass a bill, a side needs 39 votes — more than half.



Senate composition from 1 July 2025 (after the 3 May 2025 election): Labor 29; Liberal and National parties 27 (Liberal 20, Liberal National 4, National 2, Country Liberal 1); crossbench 20 (Greens 10, One Nation 4, Jacqui Lambie Network 1, United Australia Party 1, Australia's Voice 1, independents 3). Retrieved 26 August 2026.

Block bar of the 76 Senate seats from 1 July 2025 — Labor 29, the Liberal and National parties 27, Greens 10, One Nation 4, others and independents 6 — with a marker at 39 votes, showing that the government must add crossbench or opposition votes to pass a law, and an arrow pointing to the small crossbench segments whose votes decide the result

Holding the balance of power is not the same as joining the government: crossbench members may support one bill and refuse the next. That is the 2010 lesson again — the four members whose agreements gave the Gillard government its 76th vote set conditions in writing, and a minority government lives or dies by keeping that support.

6. The roles of parties and elected representatives (VC2HC8K01.E04)

Every elected member — party or independent — carries three jobs: representing their voting area or region between elections (helping residents deal with government services, and bringing local concerns into parliament), debating and voting on laws, and (for the government side) supplying Ministers to run departments, or (for the opposition side) shadow ministers to question them. Today the federal opposition is made up of the Liberal and National parties, led by Angus Taylor since 13 February 2026; in Victoria the Premier is Ben Carroll (since 28 July 2026) and the opposition is led by Jess Wilson (since 18 November 2025).

The difference between party members and independents shows up in **how** they vote. A party member brings a team: a shared platform, a chance to form government, and discipline that makes that platform deliverable. An independent brings freedom: no party line to obey, and a direct promise to judge each bill on its merits — at the cost of usually sitting outside the executive. In a hung parliament, that single independent vote can become the most important one in the building, which is why the roles of parties and independents are two halves of the one question: how voters' choices become a government.

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded (VC2HC8K01.E02)

Count the model Greenhills election (the ballot paper and count figures in part 3) from first preferences to a winner.

Step	Working	Comment
1	First preferences: Rivera 28, Chen 24, Okafor 20, Nguyen 18, Taylor 10. No one has more than half of 100 (that is, 51).	Preferential voting demands a majority, not just a lead.

Step	Working	Comment
2	Taylor is lowest and is cut. Her 10 ballots move by next number: 6 to Chen, 4 to Okafor. New totals: Rivera 28, Chen 30, Okafor 24, Nguyen 18.	A cut candidate's votes are not wasted — they slide to the next choice written on each ballot.
3	Nguyen is now lowest and is cut. His 18 ballots move: 8 to Rivera, 10 to Okafor. New totals: Rivera 36, Chen 30, Okafor 34.	The count can reorder the field: Okafor passes Chen without gaining a single first preference.
4	Chen is cut. His 30 ballots move: 13 to Rivera, 17 to Okafor. New totals: Rivera 49, Okafor 51.	Only two remain, so one must now hold a majority.
5	Okafor has 51 of 100 — more than half — and is elected.	The winner carries majority support once all preferences are counted, which is the point of the system.

Example 2 — unscaffolded (VC2HC8K01.E03)

After the federal election of Saturday 21 August 2010, no party or group held 76 seats. Using the 2010 bar chart in part 4, work out (a) why the result is called a hung parliament, (b) how a government was nevertheless formed, and (c) who therefore held the balance of power.

Model reasoning. (a) Labor won 72 seats and the Liberal and National parties 73 ($44 + 21 + 6 + 1 + 1$); neither reached 76, so no side could govern alone — the definition of a hung parliament. (b) Labor's Julia Gillard gathered written support agreements from Greens member Adam Bandt and independents Bob Katter, Rob Oakeshott and Tony Windsor: $72 + 4 = 76$, exactly a majority, so a **minority government** was formed. (c) The balance of power sat with those crossbench members — and with the other independents who chose not to sign — because their few votes were the difference between 72 and 76. The same arithmetic is what makes the balance of power real: small numbers, deciding position.

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Match each term to its meaning: (1) hung parliament; (2) crossbench; (3) independent; (4) preferential voting; (5) balance of power; (6) the opposition. (a) a parliament in which no party or group holds a lower-house majority; (b) a counting method in which voters rank every candidate and cut votes move until one candidate holds a majority; (c) a member who belongs to no party; (d) the largest group not in government, whose job is to question the government and offer a different choice; (e) the deciding power held by crossbench members when neither side has a majority; (f) the minor-party and independent members who are neither government nor opposition.

Q2. Read the 2025 House of Representatives chart. (a) How many seats did Labor win? (b) Add the Liberal, Liberal National and Nationals seats: what is their combined total? (c) Did either side reach the 76-seat majority line, and what followed from that?

Q3. Read the Senate chart (from 1 July 2025). (a) How many votes are needed to pass a law? (b) How many senators did Labor hold? (c) At least how many extra votes did the government need on every bill?

Q4. Read the model Greenhills ballot paper. (a) Which candidate did the voter mark as number 1? (b) How many candidates must the voter number for a formal vote? (c) In one sentence, what makes this ballot formal rather than informal?

Q5. Read the Greenhills count. (a) Who was cut after round 1, and why? (b) Where did that candidate's 10 votes go? (c) Who won, and by what final score?

Q6. Read the proportional model. (a) How many of the 10 seats did Party B's 30 votes win? (b) In one sentence, why is this called *proportional* representation? (c) What share of the vote won a seat in the model, and what is the real quota at a half-Senate election?

Un scaffolded

Q7. A student claims: "Preferential voting is the fairest voting system, full stop." Using the two senses of "fair" defined in part 3, identify which sense the student is using, put the strongest case for the **other** sense, and then give your own judged view with reasons.

Q8. Explain how the 2010 federal election produced a minority government. Your answer must use the seat numbers, name the members whose support made up the difference, and give **one** strength and **one** weakness of a minority government for Australian democracy.

Q9. Someone says: "Independents hold so few seats that they do not matter in Australian democracy." Identify what this claim assumes, test it against **two** figures in this section, and reach a judged conclusion with evidence for and against the claim.

Q10. A made-up result for practice, ahead of the real Victorian election due on Saturday 28 November 2026: in the 88-seat Legislative Assembly, Labor wins 42 seats, the Liberal and National parties 40, the Greens 4 and independents 2. (a) Is this a hung parliament? Show the arithmetic against the 45-seat majority line. (b) List the combinations that could reach 45. (c) Who would hold the balance of power, and what would that mean for the way the government works day to day?

Source inquiry

Source A — *Australian Constitution*, section 24 (excerpt): "The House of Representatives shall be composed of members directly chosen by the people of the Commonwealth..."

Source B — Australian Electoral Commission results, 3 May 2025: after the federal election of Saturday 3 May 2025, the Australian Labor Party holds 94 of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives; the Liberal and National parties hold 43; and Greens, Katter's Australian Party, Centre Alliance and independents hold the remaining 13.

S1. In your own words, what does "directly chosen by the people" require about how members of the House of Representatives get their seats?

S2. Using Source B and the majority line from part 4, name which side formed the government after 3 May 2025 and why, and name the term for the 13 members who belonged neither to Labor nor to the Liberal and National parties.

S3. A student claims: "Because section 24 says 'chosen by the people', the Constitution itself fixes how our votes are counted." List two things this claim assumes, and say for each whether Source A proves it or does not.

S4. You want to check Source B before quoting it in an essay. Name two places you could check it against.

Answers

Q1. (1)-(a); (2)-(f); (3)-(c); (4)-(b); (5)-(e); (6)-(d). **Q2.** (a) 94; (b) 43 ($18 + 16 + 9$); (c) yes — 94 is past 76, so Labor formed a majority government on its own. **Q3.** (a) 39; (b) 29; (c) at least 10 more votes ($39 - 29$). **Q4.** (a) Ava Rivera (Bluegum Party); (b) all 5, in order; (c) every box is numbered once, from 1 to 5, with no repeats or gaps. **Q5.** (a) Erin Taylor, with the fewest first preferences (10); (b) 6 to Chen and 4 to Okafor; (c) Chidi Okafor, 51 votes to Rivera's 49. **Q6.** (a) 3 seats; (b) each party's share of seats ends up close to its share of the vote; (c) about 10% (1 in 10 voters per seat) in the model; about 14.3% (one-seventh) at a real half-Senate election. **Q7.** A reasoned answer naming one sense of fair, steelmanning the other, and judging (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q8.** $72 + 4$ written agreements = 76; strength and weakness reasoned (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q9.** Assumptions surfaced and tested against two figures (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q10.** (a) hung — 42 and 40 are both under 45; (b) Labor $42 + \text{Greens } 4 = 46$, which passes 45 on its own; Liberal and National parties $40 + \text{Greens } 4 + \text{independents } 2 = 46$ also reaches it; (c) the Greens (with the independents) — see Fully-worked solutions. **S1.** Members must be elected by voters, not appointed or chosen by a ruler or a parliament. **S2.** Labor, because 94 is past the 76-seat majority line; the 13 are the crossbench. **S3.** Example assumptions: that the text fixes the counting method (it does not — parliament sets it by law, currently preferential voting); that “the people” means every adult (the text does not say so — the voting age and compulsory voting are set by parliament's laws). **S4.** Any two of: the AEC's own published results; the Parliament of Australia's records; dated news reports from 3-4 May 2025.

Fully-worked solutions

Marking guide. For the open questions (Q7-Q10, S3), marks are awarded for the reasoning steps, not for the conclusion: terms defined; the sense of a contested word stated; assumptions surfaced; evidence cited for **and** against; limits of the evidence admitted; a conclusion that follows from the evidence. Two students reaching different conclusions can both earn full marks. The closed questions (Q1-Q6, S1, S2, S4) are complete as given in Answers.

Q7. The “full stop” claim almost always uses *fair as majority support and a local voice*: every voting area ends with a member more than half can accept, and the count usually delivers a workable government. The strongest case for the other sense: under preferential voting in single seats, a party can win a large share of seats from well under half of the national vote, while a party with steady 10-15% support across many seats may win almost nothing — votes that never help elect anyone, which *fair as proportion* calls a defect. A judged conclusion may land on either system (or a mix, as Australia already has), provided it names the sense used, grants the other side its best case, and weighs them with evidence from the figures.

Q8. Full marks require: the hung-parliament arithmetic (Labor 72, Liberal and National parties 73, neither at 76); the four written agreements (Bandt, Katter, Oakeshott, Windsor) making 76; one reasoned strength — for example, the crossbench conditions put extra checks on the government, and every bill needed real argument; and one reasoned weakness — for example, a few members outside government held deciding power that most voters could not directly remove at the next election, or government business took longer to settle.

Q9. The claim assumes that seats are all that matter, and that independents only matter when governing. Evidence **against** the claim: in the 2010 figure, four independents and one Greens member decided who governed — 72 became 76 only through them; and in the Senate figures (2025), the government's 29 senators could pass nothing without at least ten crossbench votes, so independents and minor parties shape most laws. Evidence **for** the claim: in the 2025 House figure, the 10 independents could not form or block a government (Labor's 94 governs alone), and independents hold no ministries. Judged conclusion: independents matter most exactly when the majority is thin — in a hung lower house or a balanced Senate — so “few seats, no power” is true in some parliaments and decisively false in others.

Q10. (a) Hung: the majority line is 45 (more than half of 88), and 42 and 40 both fall short. (b) Labor 42 + Greens 4 = 46; Liberal and National parties 40 + Greens 4 + independents 2 = 46; Labor 42 + independents 2 = 44 falls short, as does Liberal and National parties 40 + independents 2 = 42. (c) The balance of power sits with the Greens (and, in the second combination, the independents as well): a minority government would have to win their support bill by bill, with written or promised conditions, exactly as in 2010 — and every Greens decision between elections would be a public, accountable one.

S3. Assumption 1: that “directly chosen by the people” fixes the counting method. Source A does not prove it — the Constitution sets who chooses (the people) and leaves the method to laws made by parliament, which is how preferential voting (1919) and proportional representation (1949) arrived by statute. Assumption 2: that the section alone guarantees who counts as “the people”. Again not proven by the text — the age of voting (18 since 1973) and compulsory voting (since 1924) are parliamentary laws, not constitutional text. The claim reads into four words what parliamentary law actually supplies.

Real referents in this section: the House of Representatives and Senate compositions after the federal election of Saturday 3 May 2025 (Senate from 1 July 2025); the federal election of Saturday 21 August 2010 and the Gillard minority-government agreements; the Victorian state election of 26 November 2022 (next due Saturday 28 November 2026); the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (preferential voting from 1919), the 1924 amendments (compulsory voting) and the 1973 amendments (voting age 18); Senate proportional representation from 1949; sections 7 and 24 of the Australian Constitution; office-holders as at August 2026 (Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, opposition leader Angus Taylor, Governor-General Sam Mostyn, Victorian Premier Ben Carroll, Victorian opposition leader Jess Wilson). The Greenhills count and the 10-seat proportional model are made-up teaching models, labelled as such. Seat counts, dates and office-holders retrieved 26 August 2026.

Do Australia's institutions live up to democratic values?

Curriculum link: VC2HC8K02. This section draws on VC2HC8K02.E01, VC2HC8K02.E02, VC2HC8K02.E03 and VC2HC8K02.E04.

Theory

The big question of this section. Some questions ask for a yes or a no. This one does not. “How far do Australia’s institutions and systems go in reflecting democratic values?” asks **how much** — and a good answer collects evidence on both sides before it picks a point on a scale.

Key term — institution. In civics, an *institution* is not a building. It is a settled part of our system of government with a job to do: a parliament, a court, a government department, or a body set up by law such as Victoria Legal Aid.

Key term — the executive. The *executive* is the part of government that runs the country day to day: at the national level, the Prime Minister, the Ministers and the departments they lead; in a state, the Premier, the Ministers and their departments. (How the executive fits with the parliament and the courts is the job of Section 1C.)

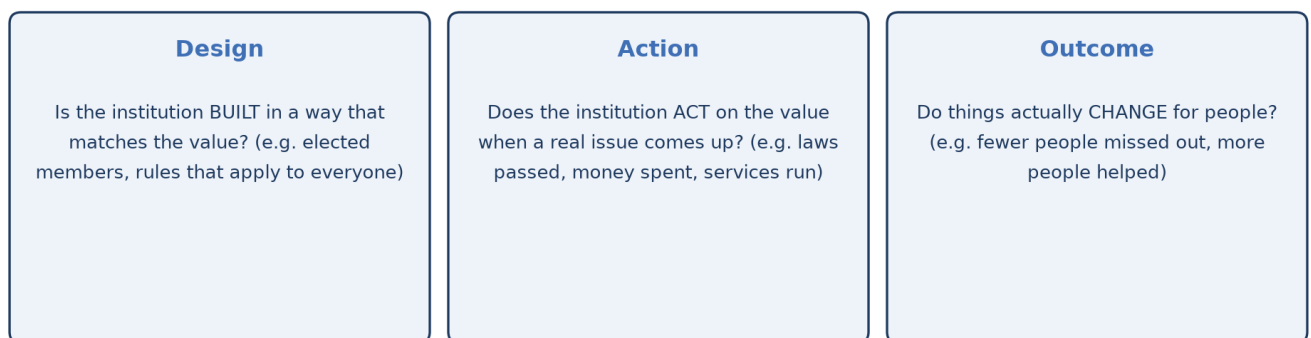
1. “How far” is a scale, not a yes-or-no answer

"The extent to which" is a scale, not a yes-or-no answer

Your answer sits somewhere on this scale, and you must say why.



Use evidence for AND against before you choose a point.



Created for this book as a thinking scaffold for 'extent to which' questions.

A four-step scale running from “reflects fully” to “reflects little”, with three cards below it: design, action and outcome

Use the three checks in the figure every time you judge an institution:

- **Design** — is the institution built in a way that matches the value?
- **Action** — does it act on the value when a real issue comes up?
- **Outcome** — do things actually change for people?

A strong answer says which checks pass, which fail, and where on the scale that puts the institution.

2. The five freedoms

The curriculum names five democratic values: the freedoms of speech, association, assembly, movement and religion. These are argued-about ideas — people disagree about where each freedom stops — so this section uses them in the sense given by the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948), a world list of basic rights that Australia helped to write. The Australian Minister for External Affairs, Dr H. V. Evatt, was President of the United Nations General Assembly when it was adopted on 10 December 1948.

The five freedoms named in the curriculum for this section

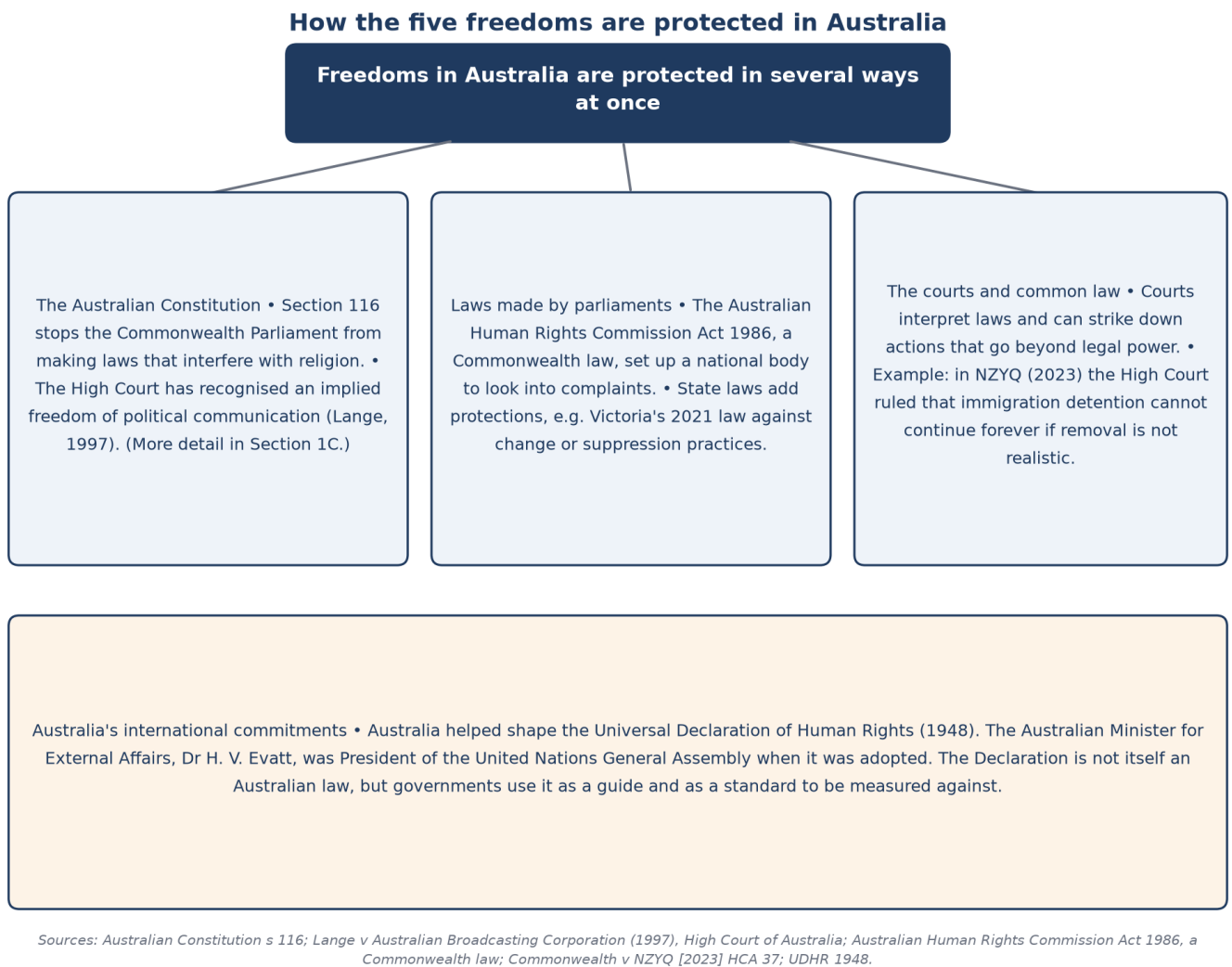
Freedom	Where it appears in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948)	What it means in everyday language
Freedom of speech	Article 19	You may hold your own opinions and say or write them, including about the government, without unlawful punishment.
Freedom of association	Article 20	You may join groups such as clubs, unions, community groups or political parties, and meet with others.
Freedom of assembly	Article 20	You may gather peacefully with others in public, for example at a rally, march or protest.
Freedom of religion	Article 18	You may hold, change and practise a religion, or hold no religion at all.
Freedom of movement	Article 13	You may move around freely and choose where to live within your own country.

Source: Universal Declaration of Human Rights, United Nations, adopted 10 December 1948. Plain-language meanings written for this book.

A table of the five freedoms, showing the article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights for each one and a plain-language meaning

Two things to notice. First, Australia has **no single national bill of rights**: no one Australian law lists all five freedoms the way the Declaration does. Second, none of the freedoms is without limits — your freedom of speech does not cover threats of violence. The “how far” question is really two questions: how well does the system protect each freedom, and how sensible are the limits it draws?

3. Where the protections sit (VC2HC8K02 . E03)



A diagram with a banner at the top and four boxes below: the Australian Constitution; laws made by parliaments; the courts and common law; and Australia's international promises

- **The Australian Constitution.** Section 116 stops the Commonwealth Parliament from making laws against the free practice of religion. The High Court of Australia has also found an *implied* freedom of political communication — a freedom the Court read into the Constitution even though it is not written there (*Lange v Australian Broadcasting Corporation*, 1997). The Constitution's full story belongs to Section 1C.
- **Laws made by parliaments.** The *Australian Human Rights Commission Act 1986*, a Commonwealth law, set up a national body that looks into complaints about rights. State parliaments add their own protections, as you will see below with Victoria's 2021 law.
- **The courts and the common law.** *Common law* is law made by judges' decisions, not by parliaments. In *Commonwealth v NZYQ* (2023) the High Court ruled that a person cannot be held in immigration detention — locked up while their visa case is dealt with — forever, if there is no real chance of removing them from Australia.
- **Australia's international promises.** The Declaration is not an Australian law, but governments use it as a standard to be measured against.

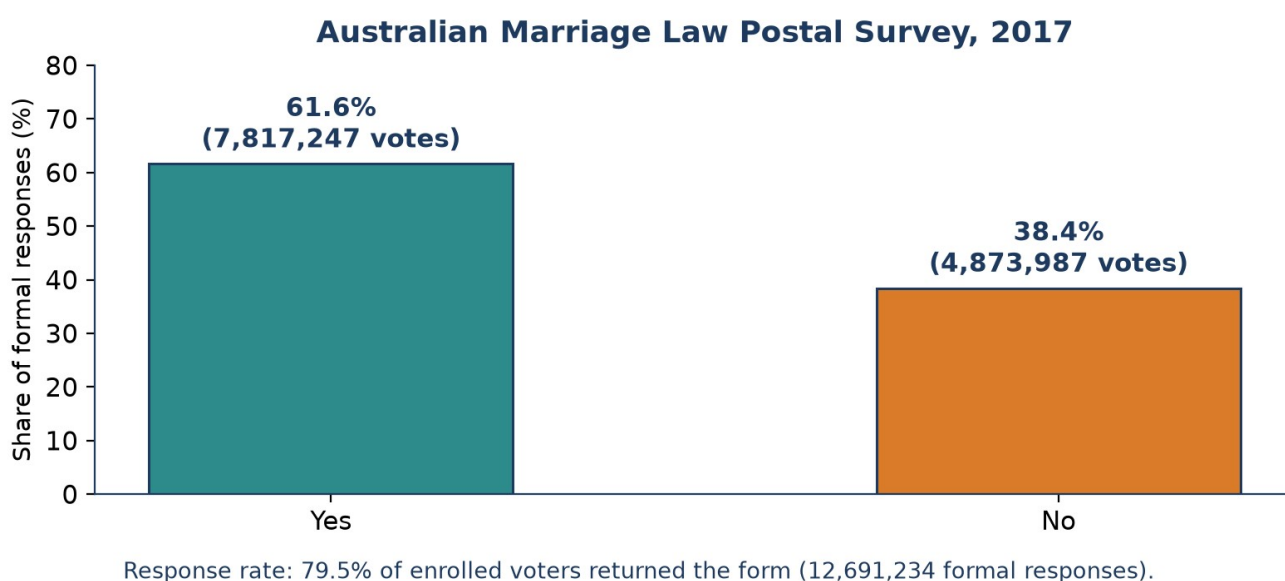
4. The executive, a contemporary issue and public opinion (VC2HC8K02 . E01)

A *contemporary* issue is one happening now, in your living memory. Here is a current one: many Victorians said mental health care was too hard to get, especially for young people. That public opinion reached the executive, and the executive acted. Worked Example 1 below walks through the chain: concern → Royal Commission (a formal public inquiry set up by the government) → report → response. At the national level too, the Australian Government has funded headspace, the National Youth Mental Health Foundation, since 2006, giving young people aged 12 to 25 free early help.

5. Parties respond in different ways, and legislation resolves it (VC2HC8K02.E02)

When a contemporary issue divides the country, the parties in Parliament often respond in different ways — and sometimes their own members do too. In 2017 the issue was whether same-sex couples should be able to marry. Supporters said marriage is about equality: two people who love each other should have the same rights as anyone else. Opponents, including some religious groups, said the traditional definition of marriage should not change, and asked for strong protections for religious freedom in any new law. Both views are real views held by real Australians, and judging the issue means taking each one as real.

Because opinions crossed party lines, members were allowed a **conscience vote** — a vote where each member follows their own judgement instead of their party's line. Before the vote, the government tested public opinion with a voluntary postal survey run by the Australian Bureau of Statistics.



Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey 2017, released 15 November 2017. Retrieved 26 August 2026.

A bar chart of the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey: Yes 61.6 percent, No 38.4 percent, with a note that 79.5 percent of enrolled voters returned the form

Worked Example 2 below shows how the survey result became a law.

6. An institution responds: the Parliament of Victoria (VC2HC8K02.E03)

The same pattern — issue, values, response — appears at state level. In 2021 the Parliament of Victoria dealt with practices aimed at changing or suppressing a person's sexual orientation (who they love) or gender identity (their own sense of being a man, a woman, or neither).

An institution responds: the Parliament of Victoria

Question	Answer
What was the issue?	Some people and groups ran practices aimed at changing or suppressing a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. Survivors said these practices caused serious harm.
What did the Parliament of Victoria do?	It debated the issue and passed the Change or Suppression (Therapy) Prohibition Act 2021, a Victorian law, which received Royal Assent on 22 February 2021. The law bans these practices.
Which democratic values does the law support?	Equality and protection from harm: the law treats LGBTQI+ Victorians as equal citizens and uses the law's power to stop practices the Parliament judged harmful.
What was argued against it?	Some religious groups argued the law should have done more to protect freedom of religion, and worried about how it could affect the teaching of traditional beliefs. Supporters answered that teaching beliefs is different from practices that try to change who a person is.

Source: Parliament of Victoria, Change or Suppression (Therapy) Prohibition Act 2021, a Victorian law, Royal Assent 22 February 2021. Retrieved 26 August 2026.

A four-row table about the Parliament of Victoria's response: the issue, what the Parliament did, which values the law supports, and what was argued against it

The debate is a good example of values in tension. Supporters said the practices caused serious harm and that equality means the law must protect LGBTQI+ Victorians. Some religious groups argued the law should have done more to protect freedom of religion, worrying about how it might affect the teaching of traditional beliefs. A fair analysis holds both sides in view and then weighs the evidence.

Another Victorian institution supports the same values from a different angle. Victoria Legal Aid is a body set up by the *Legal Aid Act 1978*, a Victorian law, to help Victorians with legal problems.

Victoria Legal Aid: how one institution supports democratic values

What Victoria Legal Aid does	The democratic value it supports
Free legal advice for eligible Victorians	Equality before the law: advice should not depend on how much money you have.
Duty lawyers at courts, including the Magistrates' Court of Victoria	A fair hearing: people who cannot pay can still be represented.
Grants of legal assistance for serious matters	Access to justice: the system helps where the need is greatest.
Community legal education and information	Informed citizens: people can only use their rights if they know they have them.

Source: Victoria Legal Aid, a statutory authority established by the Legal Aid Act 1978, a Victorian law. Retrieved 26 August 2026.

A table showing four things Victoria Legal Aid does and the democratic value each one supports

7. Four issues, four readings (VC2HC8K02 . E04)

The same institutions read different issues in different ways. Compare the four rows: notice which value each institution leans on, and which branch of government does the responding.

Comparing how institutions interpret different contemporary issues

Issue	Values in play	Key institutions	How they responded
Health care (including mental health)	Fairness; people in need deserve support	Victorian Government; Australian Government (the Executive)	Royal Commission into Victoria's mental health system (2019-21); Australian Government funds headspace for young people (since 2006).
Rights of people seeking asylum	Freedom of movement; protection from harm; rule of law	Commonwealth Parliament; Australian courts	The Migration Act 1958, a Commonwealth law, requires detention of people who arrive without a visa; in <i>NZYQ</i> (2023) the High Court ruled detention must not continue forever when removal is not realistic.
Food insecurity (not having enough to eat)	Dignity; a 'fair go'	Charities such as Foodbank Australia; Australian Government income support	Foodbank's Hunger Report 2025 said over 3 million households ran out of food in the last year; governments respond with income support and cost-of-living help.
LGBTQI+ rights	Equality; freedom of religion (where views differ)	Commonwealth Parliament; Parliament of Victoria	The Marriage Act was changed in 2017 so same-sex couples can marry; Victoria banned change or suppression practices in 2021.

Sources as listed in this section; all retrieved 26 August 2026.

A four-column table comparing health care (including mental health), the rights of people seeking asylum, food insecurity, and LGBTQI+ rights, with the values in play, the key institutions and how they responded

The asylum row is worth slowing down on, because both sides of it are argued in good faith. Successive governments have said that detaining people who arrive without a visa keeps the process orderly and stops dangerous boat journeys. Refugee advocates answer that long detention harms people, including children, and that Australia's international promises give people who fear harm a right to have their case heard. The courts sit between the two: in *NZYQ* (2023) the High Court did not end detention, but it ruled that detention cannot go on forever when removal is not realistic. That is the system working as designed — and it is also evidence you can use when you judge the extent.

8. Making your judgement

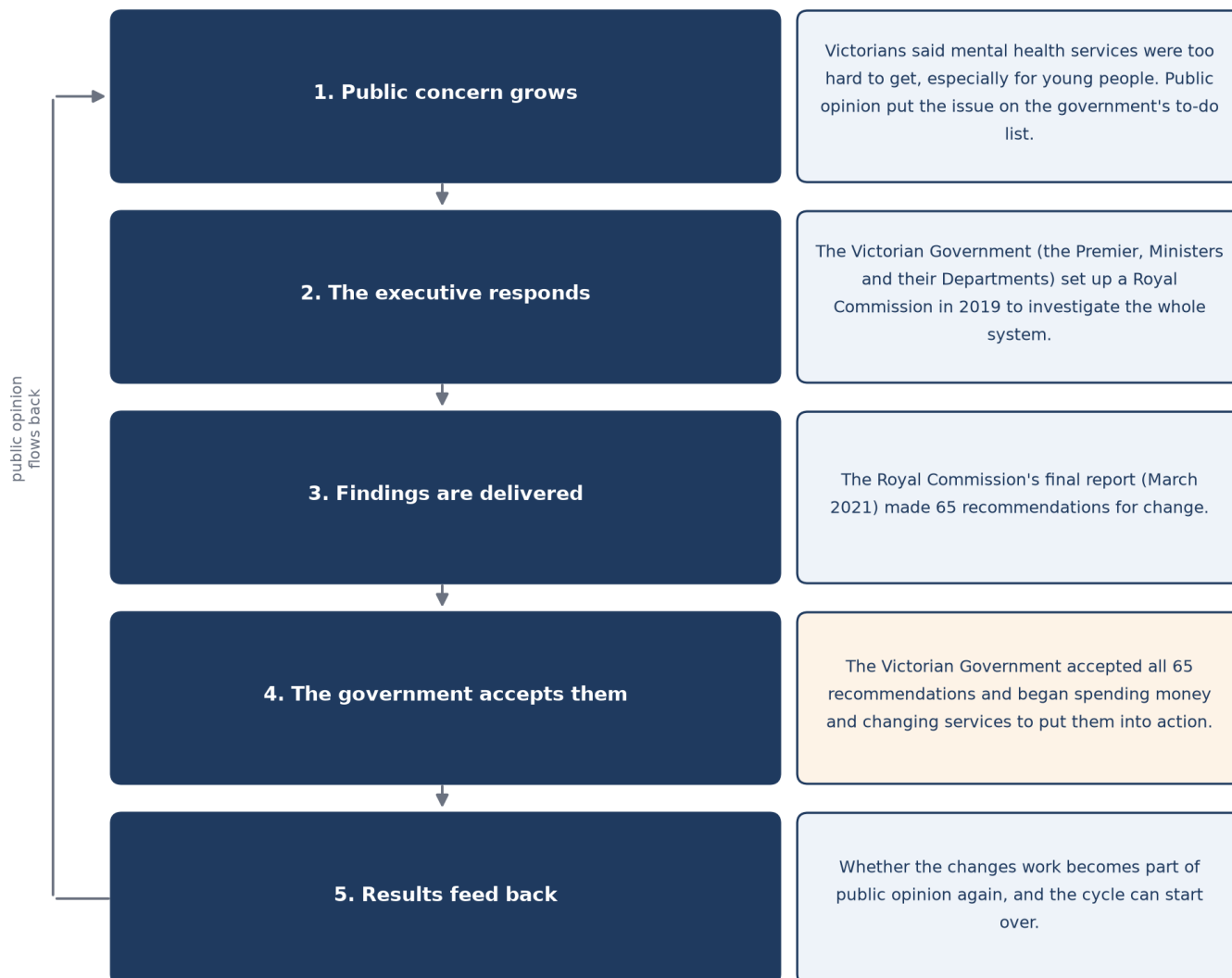
Return to the scale from part 1. For each freedom, ask the design, action and outcome checks, put the evidence for and against on the table, and place the institution on the scale. Two students can reach different points on the scale and both reason well — what earns the marks is the reasoning: terms defined, evidence cited on both sides, limits of the evidence admitted, and a conclusion that follows.

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded (VC2HC8K02.E01)

Trace how the executive responded to a contemporary issue, then judge the extent.

Worked Example 1: how the executive responded to a contemporary issue



Sources: Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System, Final Report, March 2021; Victorian Government response, 2021; headspace, National Youth Mental Health Foundation (established 2006 with Australian Government funding). Retrieved 26 August 2026.

A five-step flow chart: public concern grows; the executive responds by setting up a Royal Commission in 2019; findings are delivered in March 2021 with 65 recommendations; the government accepts them all; results feed back into public opinion

Step	Working	Comment
1	The issue: many Victorians found mental health care hard to get.	Public opinion makes an issue visible.
2	The Victorian executive set up a Royal Commission in 2019.	The executive responds with its biggest tool: a formal public inquiry.
3	The final report (March 2021) made 65 recommendations.	Evidence is gathered and turned into advice.
4	The Victorian Government accepted all 65 recommendations and began changing services.	Response, not just words: money and action.

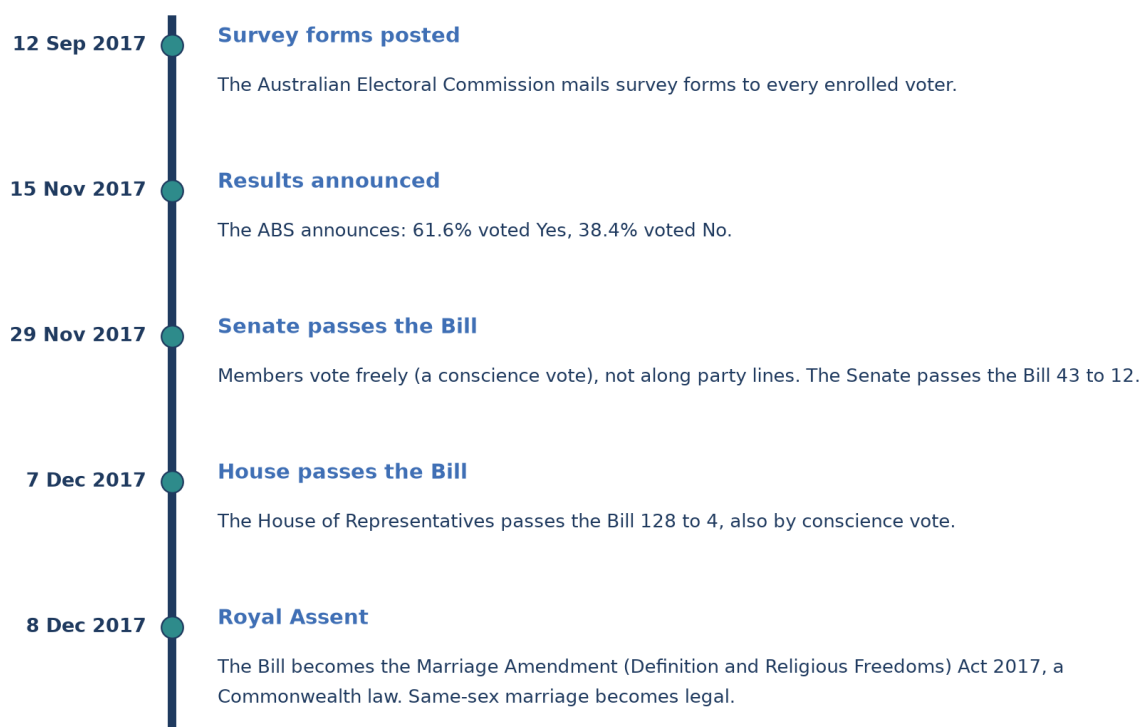
Step	Working	Comment
5	Whether the changes work feeds back into public opinion.	Democracy is a loop, not a one-off event.

Judging the extent. Design: a system that lets public concern trigger a top-level inquiry matches the value. Action: accepting all 65 recommendations is strong action. Outcome: the changes take years to show results, so the outcome check is still running. A fair judgement: on this issue, Victoria’s institutions **mostly** reflect democratic values — strong on design and action, with the outcome still to be proven.

Example 2 — *unscaffolded* (VC2HC8K02.E02)

How did parties in the Commonwealth Parliament respond in different ways to the same-sex marriage issue, and how was it resolved through legislation?

Worked Example 2: how a contemporary issue became law, September to December 2017



Sources: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017 postal survey results, 15 November 2017; Parliament of Australia, Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Bill 2017. Retrieved 26 August 2026.

A vertical timeline from 12 September 2017 to 8 December 2017: survey forms posted; results announced, 61.6 percent Yes; Senate passes the Bill 43 to 12; House passes the Bill 128 to 4; Royal Assent on 8 December 2017

Model reasoning. The parties did not split into two clean sides: members of every party held both views, which is why a conscience vote was used. Members who voted Yes leaned on equality; members who voted No leaned on tradition and religious freedom, and the final Act carried the title *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017*, a Commonwealth law, because it added protections for religious bodies as well as changing the definition of marriage. The survey showed a clear majority of voters wanted change (61.6% Yes on a 79.5% response rate), and Parliament acted on it within weeks. **Extent:** for freedom of association and equality before the law, the system mostly reflected the values — it took decades of debate to get there, which is the evidence you would cite for “not perfectly, and not quickly”.

Practice questions

Scaffolded

- Q1.** Match each situation to the freedom it mainly tests: (a) a student club holds a weekly meeting; (b) a newspaper criticises a Minister; (c) a family chooses to live in Geelong rather than Bendigo; (d) a group holds a peaceful march outside Parliament; (e) a student joins a faith group at lunchtime.
- Q2.** For each item, name which protection from part 3 of the Theory is doing the work: (a) Section 116; (b) the *Lange* case (1997); (c) the *NZYQ* case (2023); (d) the Declaration of 1948.
- Q3.** Look at the flow chart in Worked Example 1. (a) At which step does public opinion first enter the system? (b) At which step does it enter again? (c) Which branch of government did the responding in steps 2-4?
- Q4.** Read the postal survey chart. (a) What share of formal responses said Yes? (b) What share of enrolled voters returned a form? (c) In one sentence, why would an executive want to test public opinion before changing a law?
- Q5.** From the Parliament of Victoria table, name (a) the two values the 2021 law supports, and (b) the value its critics said was at risk.
- Q6.** From the Victoria Legal Aid table, match these values to a service: (a) a fair hearing; (b) informed citizens.

Un scaffolded

- Q7.** Using the three checks (design, action, outcome) and the flow chart in Worked Example 1, explain the extent to which the Victorian executive's response to the mental health issue reflected democratic values. Place your answer on the scale and say why.
- Q8.** Choose **one** issue from the four-issue table. Explain which values were in play, which institutions responded, and how. Then judge the extent, with one piece of evidence for and one against your point on the scale.
- Q9.** Someone says: "Because Section 116 is in the Constitution, freedom of religion is fully protected in Australia, and nothing more is needed." Identify what this claim assumes, give one piece of evidence that supports it and one that challenges it, and reach your own judged conclusion.
- Q10.** Foodbank's Hunger Report 2025 said over 3 million Australian households ran out of food in the last year. Judge how far Australia's institutions reflect the value of a "fair go" in their response to food insecurity. Use the design, action and outcome checks, and give evidence on both sides.
-

Source inquiry

Source A — Article 19 of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (United Nations, 1948), in plain words: *Everyone has the right to hold opinions without interference, and to share information and ideas through any media, regardless of borders.*

Source B — Australian Bureau of Statistics, 15 November 2017: the result of the Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey is announced — 61.6% of formal responses Yes, 38.4% No, on a 79.5% response rate. Within weeks, the Commonwealth Parliament passes the *Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017*, a Commonwealth law.

- S1.** Which of the five freedoms is Source A protecting?
- S2.** Name two institutions in Source B, and say which one tested public opinion and which one turned the result into law.
- S3.** A student claims: "The survey settled the argument, because most people agreed." List two things this claim assumes, and say whether Source B proves or does not prove each one.
- S4.** You want to check Source B before using it in an essay. Name two places you could check it against.
-

Answers

Q1. (a) association; (b) speech; (c) movement; (d) assembly; (e) religion. **Q2.** (a) the Constitution; (b) the courts and common law (implied freedom of political communication); (c) the courts and common law; (d) Australia's international promises. **Q3.** (a) step 1; (b) step 5; (c) the executive. **Q4.** (a) 61.6%; (b) 79.5%; (c) checking public opinion first lets the government say the change is what most voters asked for, and adjust if the response shows the public disagrees. **Q5.** (a) equality, and protection from harm; (b) freedom of religion. **Q6.** (a) duty lawyers at courts; (b) community legal education and information. **Q7.** A reasoned placement at "reflects mostly" or "reflects in part" (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q8.** Any of the four issues, with the values, the institutions and a scale placement (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q9.** The claim assumes Section 116 covers every religion issue; evidence for and against is possible (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q10.** A reasoned placement at "reflects in part" or "reflects little" (see Fully-worked solutions). **S1.** Freedom of speech (opinion and expression). **S2.** The Australian Bureau of Statistics tested public opinion; the Commonwealth Parliament turned the result into law. (The Australian Electoral Commission ran the survey's mailing.) **S3.** Example assumptions: that a majority view ends a debate; that the survey was binding. **S4.** Any two of: the ABS website's survey release; the Parliament of Australia's record of the Bill; dated news reports from November-December 2017.

Fully-worked solutions

Marking guide. For the open questions, marks are awarded for the reasoning steps, not for the conclusion: terms defined; assumptions surfaced; evidence cited for **and** against; limits of the evidence admitted; a conclusion on the scale that follows from the evidence. Two students reaching different points on the scale can both earn full marks. The answers to the closed questions (Q1-Q6, S1, S2, S4) above are complete as given.

Q7. Design: public concern could trigger a top-level inquiry (pass). Action: all 65 recommendations accepted, money spent (pass). Outcome: the changes take years to show results (partial). A reasoned placement at "reflects mostly" or "reflects in part" with this evidence earns full marks; a placement with no evidence earns little.

Q8. Accept any of the four issues. Full marks require: the values named; at least two institutions with their distinct responses; one piece of evidence for and one against; a scale placement tied to the evidence.

Q9. The assumptions to make visible: that Section 116 covers every religion issue (it binds only the Commonwealth, not states or individuals); that a written protection makes extra laws unnecessary (parliaments still pass laws touching religion, and the implied freedom was read in by the High Court because the text alone left gaps). Supporting evidence: Section 116 has protected religious practice from Commonwealth laws since 1901. Challenging evidence: the *Lange* case shows the Court had to imply a freedom the text does not list, and debates about religious freedom laws continued well after 2017. Any judged conclusion that follows from the student's evidence earns full marks.

Q10. Both sides: for — income support, Foodbank and other charities working with governments, cost-of-living help; against — the report’s own figure that over 3 million households still ran out of food, which suggests the outcome check is failing. Reasoned placements at “reflects in part” or “reflects little” both earn full marks if the evidence is used.

S3. Example assumptions: that a majority view ends a debate (it does not — rights are not always decided by majority); that the survey was binding (it was a guide, and Parliament still had to vote). Source B proves a majority and a parliamentary response; it does not prove that the debate ended or that the survey forced the vote.

All real-world facts in this section are real, named and dated (D9): Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System, Final Report, March 2021; Victorian Government response, 2021; headspace (established 2006 with Australian Government funding); Australian Bureau of Statistics, Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey 2017, released 15 November 2017; Parliament of Australia, Marriage Amendment (Definition and Religious Freedoms) Act 2017, a Commonwealth law, Royal Assent 8 December 2017; Parliament of Victoria, Change or Suppression (Therapy) Prohibition Act 2021, a Victorian law, Royal Assent 22 February 2021; Commonwealth v NZYQ [2023] HCA 37; Lange v Australian Broadcasting Corporation (1997); Foodbank Australia, Hunger Report 2025; Victoria Legal Aid, Legal Aid Act 1978, a Victorian law. Retrieved 26 August 2026.

Australia's Constitution: key institutions, political actors and how they interact

Curriculum: VC2HC8K03

Linked elaborations: VC2HC8K03.E01 · VC2HC8K03.E02 · VC2HC8K03.E03 · VC2HC8K03.E04

Theory

Part 1 — A rulebook for the nation

A **constitution** is a rulebook for a country: it sets out who may make decisions, what powers they have, and how those powers are checked. The Australian Constitution took effect on **1 January 1901**, when the six colonies joined in one federation. It was passed by the United Kingdom parliament as the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900* (UK), and it is still the highest law in Australia today.

Source: Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 (UK); Parliament of Australia, 'About the Constitution' (retrieved 26 August 2026).

The Constitution is organised into eight chapters. The map below shows what each one covers.

Inside the Australian Constitution	
Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 (UK) - in force from 1 January 1901	
Chapter I ss 1-60	Parliament The Senate and the House of Representatives make the Commonwealth's laws.
Chapter II ss 61-70	Executive Government The Governor-General and Ministers put the laws into practice and run the government.
Chapter III ss 71-80	The courts The High Court of Australia and other federal courts hear disputes and say what the law means.
Chapter IV ss 81-99	Finance and Trade How Commonwealth money is raised and spent, and rules about trade.
Chapter V ss 106-115	The States The States keep their own parliaments and powers. Section 109 settles clashes between State and Commonwealth laws.
Chapter VI ss 121-124	New States How new States can be added to the federation.
Chapter VII ss 125-126	Miscellaneous The seat of government, and other details.
Chapter VIII s 128	Alteration of the Constitution The Constitution can only be changed by the people, through a referendum.

Chapters I-III set up the three branches of government. Chapter VIII means only the voters can change the document.

Eight-chapter map of the Australian Constitution, listing what each Chapter covers, from the Parliament in Chapter I to the alteration of the Constitution in Chapter VIII

Two big ideas run through the whole document:

1. **It hands out power.** It gives power to the Commonwealth (the national level), leaves power to the States, and creates the key institutions named in this section.

2. **It is hard to change.** It can only be changed by a **referendum** — a national vote of all electors — under section 128. That is deliberate: a rulebook should not change on a narrow or temporary wish.

Part 2 — The key actors and how they interact

Australian electors vote for the **Commonwealth Parliament**, which has two houses: the **House of Representatives** (151 members) and the **Senate** (76 senators — 12 for each State and 2 for each mainland Territory).

Source: Parliament of Australia, 'Senate' and 'House of Representatives' fact sheets (retrieved 26 August 2026).

The group that can win the support of a majority of the House of Representatives forms the government, and its leader becomes the **Prime Minister**. The Prime Minister today is **Anthony Albanese**, in office since 23 May 2022 and re-elected at the election of 3 May 2025.

Source: Parliament of Australia, 'Prime Ministers of Australia' (retrieved 26 August 2026).

A surprise fact: the words “Prime Minister” and “cabinet” never appear in the Constitution. Section 64 speaks only of **Ministers of State**, and says they must be or become members of parliament within three months. The Prime Minister’s job exists through **convention** — the unwritten rules of our system that are always followed in practice.

The **Governor-General** is the King’s representative in Australia. The Governor-General today is **Sam Mostyn**, sworn in on 1 July 2024 — the first woman to hold the office. The Governor-General gives **royal assent** to every bill before it becomes law, appoints Ministers and judges on advice, and holds **reserve powers** — rare personal powers to act without advice.

Source: Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia (retrieved 26 August 2026).

The reserve powers are real. On **11 November 1975**, Governor-General Sir John Kerr **dismissed** Prime Minister Gough Whitlam — the most dramatic use of reserve powers in our history, and still argued about today. The event shows both that the check exists and how carefully it must be used.

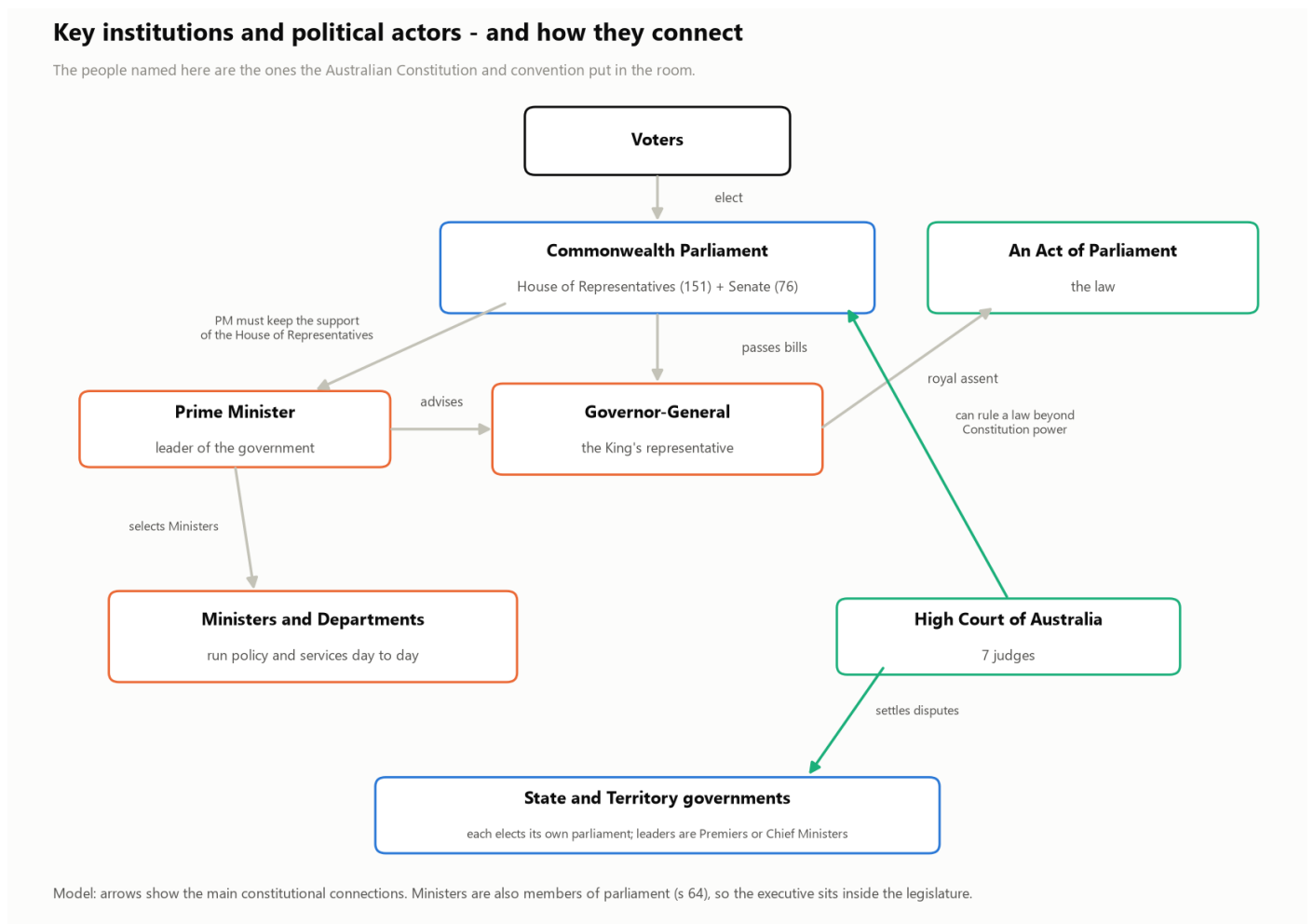
Ministers and Departments put the law into practice day to day. The Prime Minister selects the Ministers, and each Minister runs a department, such as the Department of Defence or the Department of Education.

State and Territory governments each have their own parliament, and their leaders are Premiers (States) or Chief Ministers (Territories). They do not simply take orders from the Commonwealth: they run their own responsibilities, and they cooperate — or clash — with the Commonwealth over shared problems, such as at leaders’ meetings on health or housing.

The **High Court of Australia** is the final interpreter of the Constitution. It has seven judges, led by Chief Justice **Stephen Gageler** since November 2023. High Court judges must retire at age 70. The Court acts as the umpire between the Commonwealth and the States, and between government and the Constitution itself.

Source: High Court of Australia, 'Justices of the High Court' (retrieved 26 August 2026).

The diagram below puts the actors together and shows how they connect.

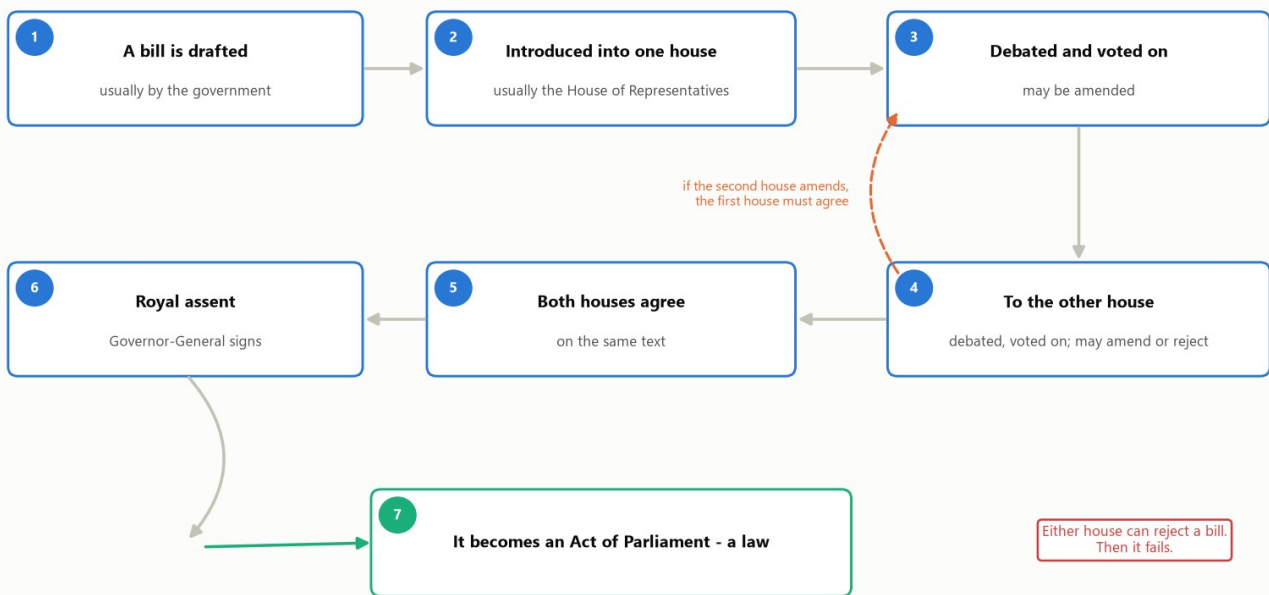


Network diagram connecting voters, the Commonwealth Parliament, the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, the Ministers and their Departments, the High Court of Australia and the State and Territory governments, with labelled arrows such as elects, advises, royal assent, and can rule a law beyond Constitution power

One interaction is so important it gets its own diagram: how a bill becomes a law. Both houses must pass the **same text**, and the Governor-General must give royal assent.

How a bill becomes a law

A bill is a proposed law. It needs both houses - and the Governor-General - to become an Act.



Most bills start in the House of Representatives, but they may start in either house (except money bills, which must start in the House).

Flow chart of the seven steps a bill follows to become an Act of Parliament, including the amendment loop between the two houses and a note that either house can reject a bill

Part 3 — The separation of powers and why it matters

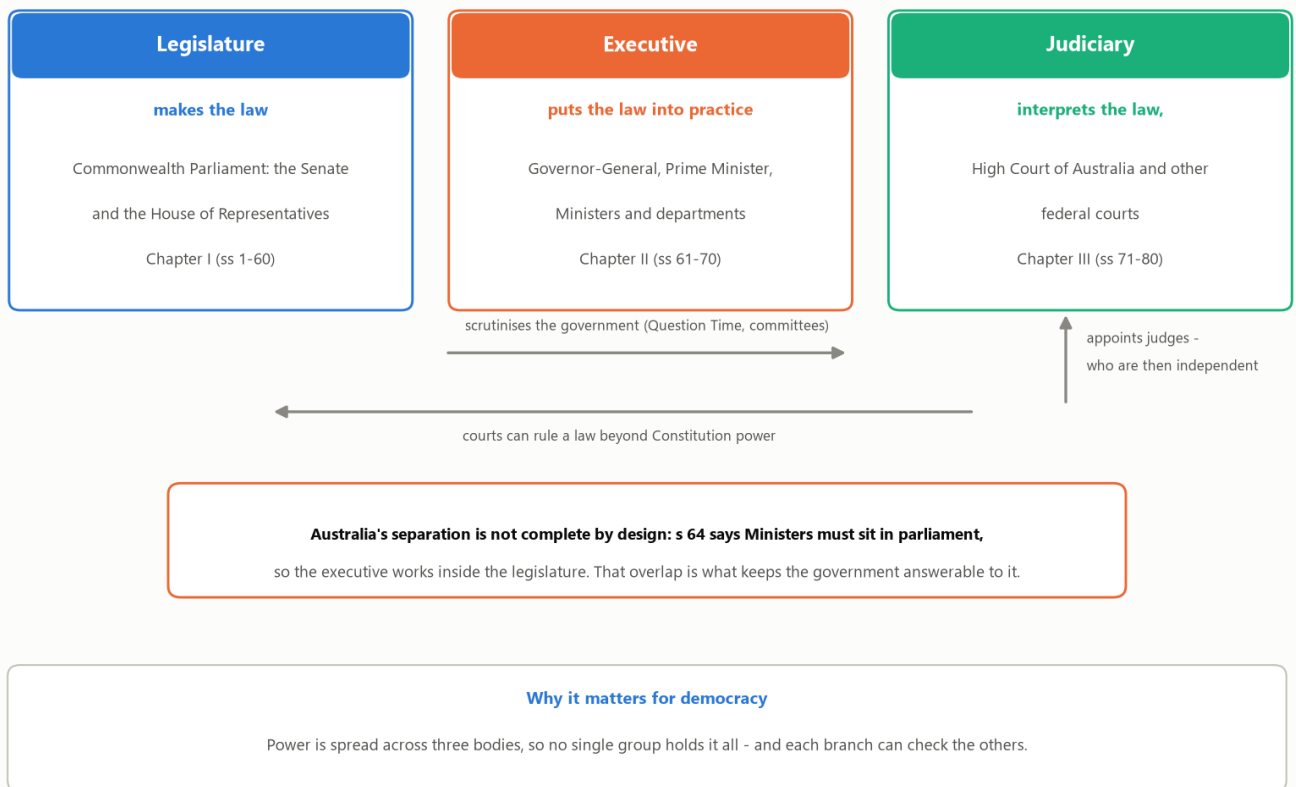
The Constitution splits the work of government across three branches:

- the **legislature** (Chapter I) — the parliament, which makes the law;
- the **executive** (Chapter II) — the Governor-General, the Prime Minister, and the Ministers and Departments, which puts the law into practice;

- the **judiciary** (Chapter III) — the High Court and other federal courts, which interpret the law.

Separation of powers under the Australian Constitution

Three jobs of government, split across three Chapters of the Constitution.



Idea set out by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748); the Australian Constitution applies it in Chapters I-III.

Three panels for the legislature, executive and judiciary under Chapters I, II and III, with arrows showing the checks between them and a note that section 64 keeps Ministers inside parliament

Why is this important for democratic government? If one group could make, run and judge the law by itself, it could use power against the people without any check. Spreading power across three branches means **each branch can check the others**.

Australia's separation is not complete, and that is also by design. Section 64 requires Ministers to sit in parliament, so the executive works *inside* the legislature. This overlap is called **responsible government**: the government must face parliament every sitting day (for example at Question Time) and can be defeated if it loses the House's support. The overlap is what keeps the executive answerable.

The checks are not just theory. In *Australian Communist Party v Commonwealth* (1951), the Commonwealth Parliament had passed a law to ban the Communist Party. The High Court ruled the law **invalid** — beyond the power the Constitution gives. Even in a fearful time, the government could not step outside the Constitution. The **Boilermakers' case** (1956) later confirmed that only Chapter III courts can exercise judicial power, keeping the judiciary separate.

Source: High Court of Australia, case summaries (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Part 4 — Dividing power between the Commonwealth and the States

Section 51 lists the areas where the Commonwealth Parliament may make laws. The source below is a word-for-word quote of some of those areas, with dots showing where text has been left out.

Source reproduction: Section 51 of the Australian Constitution (excerpt)

Word-for-word quote. The dots (...) show parts of the original text left out.

"The Parliament shall, subject to this Constitution, have power to make laws
for the peace, order, and good government of the Commonwealth with respect to:

- (i) Trade and commerce with other countries, and among the States;
- (ii) Taxation; ...
- ...
- (vi) The naval and military defence of the Commonwealth and of the several States, ...
- ...
- (xii) Currency, coinage, and legal tender;
- ...
- (xxi) Marriage;
- ...
- (xxix) External affairs;

..."

Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 (UK), s 51 (shortened).

These are concurrent powers: areas where the Commonwealth Parliament may make laws.

The States keep every area the Constitution does not hand over - the residual powers.

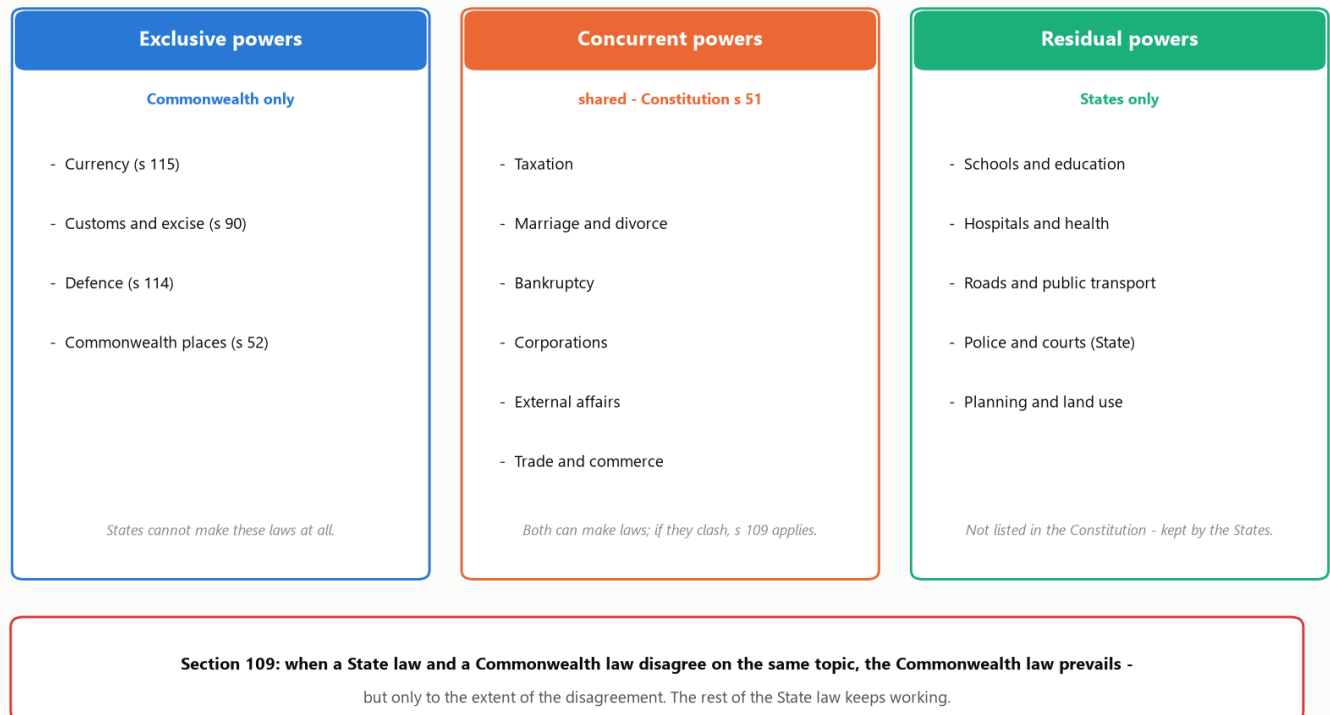
Word-for-word quote of section 51 of the Australian Constitution listing selected lawmaking powers such as trade, taxation, defence, currency, marriage and external affairs

Those powers fall into three buckets:

- **exclusive powers** — for the Commonwealth alone, such as defence and currency;
- **concurrent powers** — shared with the States, such as marriage and taxation;
- **residual powers** — everything the Constitution does not hand over, which the States keep: schools, hospitals, police and transport.

The division of powers: who can make laws about what

The Constitution lists Commonwealth powers in s 51. Everything it does not hand over stays with the States.



Three columns sorting lawmaking powers into exclusive Commonwealth powers, concurrent shared powers and residual State powers, with a section 109 banner reading that when a State law is inconsistent with a Commonwealth law the Commonwealth law applies instead

What happens when both levels make laws on a shared area and the laws clash? **Section 109** answers: the Commonwealth law applies instead, and the State law does not operate to the extent of the inconsistency.

Two cases show the division in action:

- ***Commonwealth v Tasmania (1983)*** — the Tasmanian Dam case. Tasmania wanted to build a dam in a wilderness area; the Commonwealth used the **external affairs power** (s 51(xxix)) to stop it. The High Court upheld the Commonwealth law, showing that a wide reading of a Commonwealth power can reach into an area that looks like a State responsibility.
- ***Commonwealth v Australian Capital Territory (2013)*** — the ACT passed its own marriage law. The High Court ruled it invalid, because the Commonwealth *Marriage Act 1961* already covered the whole field of marriage, so a territory law on the same subject could not stand. The case is a modern example of inconsistency in action.

Source: High Court of Australia, case summaries; *AustLII*, (2013) 250 CLR 441 (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Part 5 — Changing the Constitution: the double majority

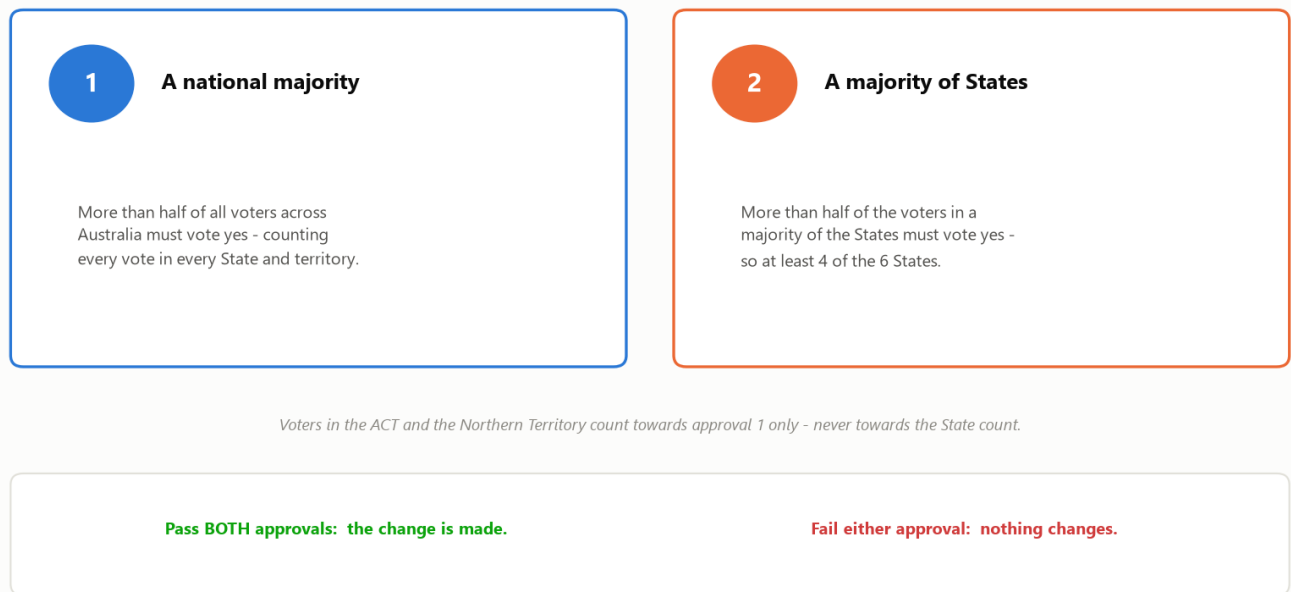
A proposed change to the Constitution must first pass the Commonwealth Parliament, and then be voted on by all electors at a referendum. Section 128 requires a **double majority**:

1. a majority of all electors voting across Australia; **and**
2. a majority of electors voting in a majority of States — that is, at least **4 of the 6 States**.

Territory voters count towards the national majority but not towards the State tally.

Changing the Constitution: the double majority (s 128)

A referendum is a vote of the people on a proposed change to the Constitution. Two approvals are needed.



Two-panel diagram of the double majority: approval 1, a national majority of all voters, and approval 2, a majority of voters in at least four of the six States, with a note that territory votes count only towards the national tally

The record shows how demanding the test is. Between 1906 and 1999, Australians voted at **22 referendums** covering **44 proposals**. Only **8 proposals were carried**, and the most recent successful referendum was in **1977**.

A proposal only changes the Constitution if it passes the double majority.

Australia's referendum record: 22 referendums, 44 proposals, 1906-1999



Only 8 of the 44 proposals have ever been carried. The most recent successful referendum was in 1977.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, referendum results (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Bar chart of Australia's referendum record from 1906 to 1999: of 44 proposals, 8 were carried and 36 were not carried

Part 6 — The media picture versus the real job

News coverage focuses on what is personal and dramatic: the Prime Minister as the star of every story, the Governor-General at ceremonies, the High Court almost invisible except in big cases. That picture is not false, but it is incomplete — and it can hide where power really sits and what checks apply.

Media picture versus the real job

Model text for classroom discussion - made-up examples in the style of news coverage, not real articles.

Actor	How the media often shows them	What the role actually is
Prime Minister	In the spotlight every day - speeches, debates, wins and losses, as if one person decides everything.	Leads the government and the ministry, but must keep the House's support; laws still need both houses and royal assent.
Governor-General	Mostly seen at ceremonies - openings, swearing-in, anniversary events.	Gives royal assent to every bill; appoints Ministers and judges on advice; holds reserve powers, used very rarely (1975).
High Court of Australia	Reported rarely - usually only when a case is big news.	Working all the time as the final interpreter of the Constitution; can rule laws of any parliament beyond power.

Ask: what does coverage focus on? What does it leave out? How might that shape what people believe about who holds power?

Three-row table comparing how the media often shows the Governor-General, the Prime Minister and the High Court with what each role actually is, with prompts asking what coverage focuses on and what it leaves out

When you read a political story, ask: *Who actually made this decision? Which check applied? What part of the process is not being shown?*

Part 7 — How representative are the institutions?

To **consider how representative** an institution is, we compare the people inside it with the people it serves — for example, the share of women, or the share of Australians born overseas. That comparison is a measuring tool for discussion, not a final answer: members of parliament represent *all* Australians, including people unlike themselves.

Some dated facts to measure with:

- **1902** — the *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902* allowed women to vote and to stand for the Commonwealth Parliament, putting Australia among the first countries in the world to do so.
- **1943** — the first women entered the Commonwealth Parliament: **Enid Lyons** in the House of Representatives and **Dorothy Tangney** in the Senate.
- **2022** — after the 2022 election, women made up **38%** of the House of Representatives, a record — yet still below half.
- **2021** — the Census counted about **25.4 million** people in Australia, of whom **27.6%** were born overseas.

Source: Parliament of Australia, 'Women in Parliament'; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2021 Census (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Compare those numbers with the parliament in the room today, and ask whether it “looks like Australia”. One more fact belongs in the picture: voting in Australia has been **compulsory** since 1924, so every member must win the support of a broad mix of electors, whatever the member’s own background.

Worked examples

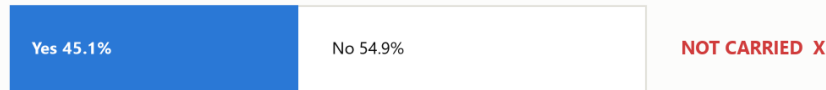
Example 1 — Did the 1999 republic proposal pass the double majority? (scaffolded)

At the **1999 referendum**, electors were asked whether Australia should become a republic with a president chosen by parliament. We apply the double majority step by step.

Worked example: the 1999 republic referendum

Voters were asked whether Australia should become a republic with a president chosen by parliament.

Approval 1 - a national majority of all voters



Approval 2 - a majority of voters in a majority of States (4 of 6 needed)



No State voted yes, so approval 2 also fails. NOT CARRIED X

Only the ACT voted yes (63.3%) - and territories do not count towards the State tally.

Outcome: both approvals failed

The Constitution was not changed. The result shows how hard the double majority makes change - by design.

Notice: a proposal could win the national vote and still fail if it is not spread across the States.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, 1999 referendum results (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Worked example diagram applying the double majority to the 1999 republic referendum: the national tally of Yes 45.1 per cent and No 54.9 per cent, the tally for each State and Territory, and the outcome that both approvals failed

Step 1 — Approval 1, the national vote. Yes received **45.1%** of the national vote; No received **54.9%**. A majority needs more than 50%, so Approval 1 **fails**.

Step 2 — Approval 2, the State vote. Count the States where Yes beat No: NSW No, Vic No, Qld No, WA No, SA No, Tas No — **0 of 6 States**. (The ACT voted Yes at 63.3%, but territories do not count towards the State tally.) Approval 2 needs at least 4 States, so it **fails**.

Step 3 — Combine. Both approvals must pass. Here *neither* passed, so the proposal was **not carried** and the Constitution was not changed.

Step 4 — What the result teaches. Even a proposal that wins a large share of the national vote can fail if it is not spread across the States. The double majority makes change hard — by design.

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, 1999 referendum results (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Example 2 — Who can make this law? (scaffolded)

Sort three scenarios into the right bucket, and name the rule that applies.

Scenario (a): The Commonwealth Parliament passes a law to build two new warships for the Navy. *Reasoning:* Defence is listed in s 51(vi) and is an **exclusive** Commonwealth power. A State could not pass this law. **Answer:** **valid Commonwealth law — exclusive power.**

Scenario (b): A State parliament passes a law changing the hours of its public schools. *Reasoning:* Schools are not listed in s 51, so they are a **residual** power the States keep. **Answer:** **valid State law — residual power.**

Scenario (c): A State passes a marriage law that contradicts the Commonwealth *Marriage Act 1961*. *Reasoning:* Marriage is a **concurrent** power (s 51(xxi)). When the laws are inconsistent, **s 109** says the Commonwealth law applies instead. This is exactly what happened in *Commonwealth v Australian Capital Territory* (2013), where a territory marriage law was ruled invalid. **Answer: the State law does not operate — s 109.**

Practice questions

Scaffolded

- Q1.** Name the three branches of government in the Australian Constitution and the Chapter that houses each one.
- Q2.** The steps below are out of order. Rewrite them in the correct order, using the flow chart in this section.
- A. The Governor-General gives royal assent.
B. The bill is introduced into one house.
C. Both houses agree on the same text.
D. The bill is debated and voted on; it may be amended.
E. The bill is drafted, usually by the government. F. The bill goes to the other house, which may amend or reject it. G. It becomes an Act of Parliament — a law.
- Q3.** Section 64 says Ministers must be members of parliament. Explain in one or two sentences why this keeps the executive answerable to the legislature.
- Q4.** A referendum proposal wins 60% of the national vote, but wins a majority of voters in only 3 of the 6 States. Is it carried? Explain which approval fails.
- Q5.** Which institution can rule a Commonwealth law invalid for going beyond the Constitution's power? Name one case from this section where it did.
- Q6.** Match each actor to its role: (i) gives royal assent to bills; (ii) leads the government and selects Ministers; (iii) interprets the Constitution and umpires disputes; (iv) runs policy and services day to day. Actors: Prime Minister, Governor-General, High Court of Australia, Ministers and Departments.

Un scaffolded

- Q7.** Australia's separation of powers is "not complete", because s 64 puts Ministers inside parliament. Explain why this overlap is a strength of our democracy rather than a weakness.
- Q8.** In the Tasmanian Dam case (1983), the Commonwealth stopped a dam that Tasmania wanted to build. Which constitutional power did it use, and what does the case show about the balance between Commonwealth and State power?
- Q9.** A friend says: "The Prime Minister is the most powerful person in Australia, and nobody can stop them doing what they want." First, restate their view in its strongest form. Then respond to it using at least three checks on the Prime Minister from this section.
- Q10.** Using the 2022 figure (38% women in the House of Representatives) and the 2021 Census (27.6% of Australians born overseas), discuss how representative the House is of contemporary Australia. Give one reason why the numbers alone are not the whole story.
-

Source-based inquiry

Source A — the Australian Constitution, section 128 (shortened): a proposed law to alter the Constitution must be put to the electors, and it becomes law only if it is approved by **a majority of the electors voting across Australia** and by **a majority of the electors voting in a majority of the States**.

Source: Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 (UK), s 128 (retrieved 26 August 2026).

- I1.** In your own words, state the two approvals a proposed change needs.
- I2.** Explain why a proposal could win the national vote but still fail under section 128.
- I3.** Only 8 of the 44 proposals put to referendums between 1906 and 1999 were carried. Using section 128, argue one reason *for* this strict test and one reason *against* it, then give your own reasoned view.
-

Answers

Q1. Legislature — Chapter I (makes the law); Executive — Chapter II (puts the law into practice); Judiciary — Chapter III (interprets the law).

Q2. E, B, D, F, C, A, G.

Q3. Because Ministers sit in parliament, they must explain and defend their decisions there every sitting day (for example at Question Time), and the House can defeat the government if it loses support. The people who run the law must answer to the people who made it.

Q4. Not carried. Approval 1 (national majority) passes at 60%, but Approval 2 fails: 3 States is fewer than the 4 of 6 needed. Both approvals are required.

Q5. The High Court of Australia. Example: *Australian Communist Party v Commonwealth* (1951), where a law banning the Communist Party was ruled invalid; the Boilermakers' case (1956) is also acceptable.

Q6. (i) Governor-General; (ii) Prime Minister; (iii) High Court of Australia; (iv) Ministers and Departments.

Q7. Model points: the overlap means the executive cannot rule from outside parliament — it must face questions, debate and votes in the House daily (responsible government); a government that loses the House's support falls; so the "overlap" is actually the legislature's main check on the executive. By contrast, a complete separation could leave the executive unanswerable between elections.

Q8. The external affairs power, s 51(xxix). The case shows that where a Commonwealth power is read widely, it can reach into areas that look like State responsibilities — so the federal balance can shift towards the Commonwealth when a listed power is engaged.

Q9. Model points: steelman — the PM leads the government, sets the agenda, controls the ministry, and usually commands a majority in the House, so on most days the PM can get their way. Response — checks include: the PM must keep the support of the House of Representatives (lose it and they fall, as in 1975); the Senate can reject or amend bills; the High Court can rule laws invalid (Communist Party case, 1951); the Governor-General holds reserve powers; and the PM faces the electors at least every three years for the House.

Q10. Model points: 38% women is a record but below the roughly 50% of the population who are women; 27.6% born overseas versus the share of MPs born overseas invites the same comparison — so by the numbers the House is not fully "like Australia". But numbers are not the whole story: under compulsory voting every MP must win a broad mix of votes, and MPs represent all electors, not only those who share their background; representation is about acting for others, not mirroring them.

I1. A majority of all electors voting across Australia, and a majority of electors voting in a majority of the States (at least 4 of 6).

I2. Because the two approvals are separate: a large national majority can be built mostly from voters in one or two big States, while a majority of States votes no — so Approval 2 fails and the change is not made.

I3. Model points: for — the Constitution is the top rulebook, so change should need broad, lasting support across the country, not a narrow or temporary majority; against — the test is so strict that even widely supported changes fail (8 of 44), leaving an old rulebook hard to update. Reasoned view: either side is acceptable if it uses the double majority and the record as evidence.

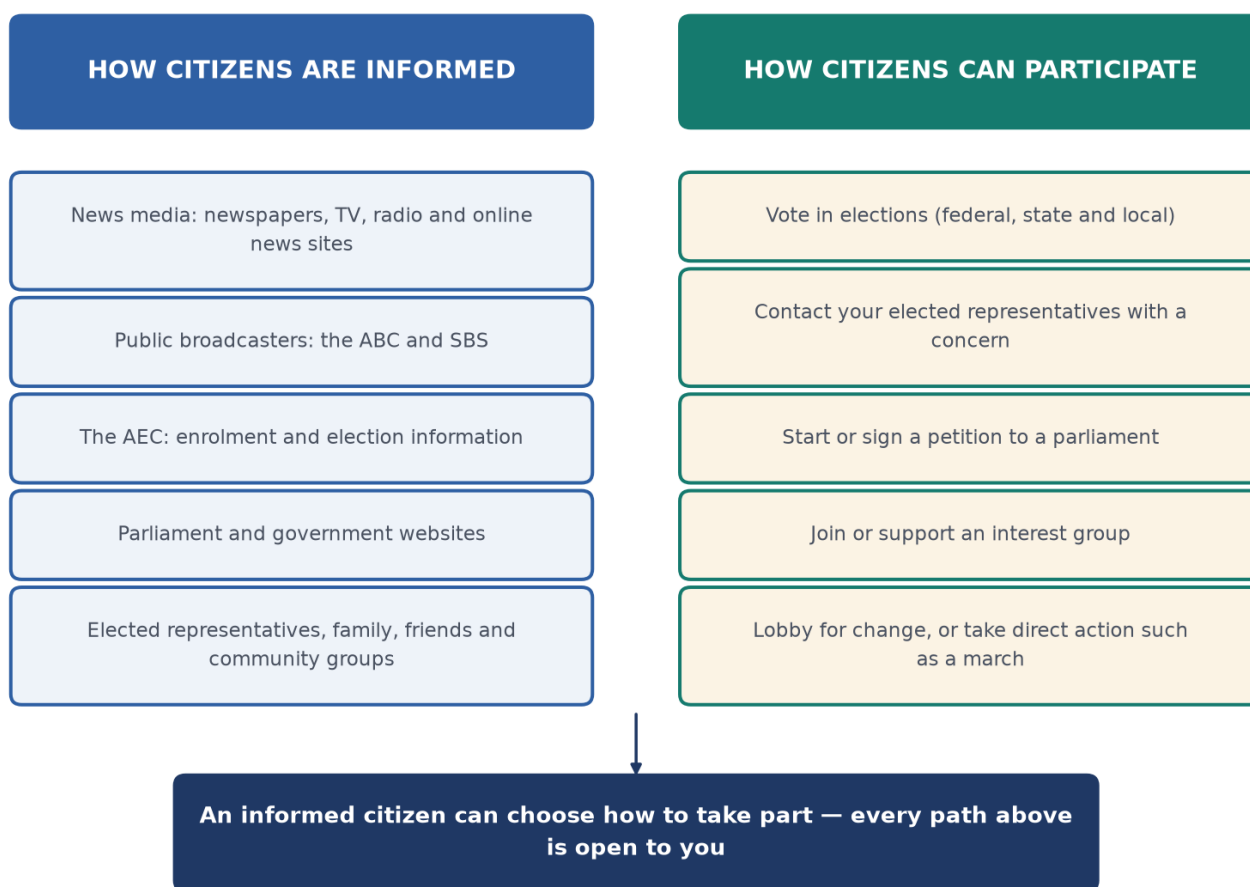
How citizens find out and take part in Australia's democracy

Curriculum links — Victorian Curriculum 2.0, Civics and Citizenship, Levels 7–8 band (VC2HC8K04). This section draws on VC2HC8K04.E01, VC2HC8K04.E02, VC2HC8K04.E03 and VC2HC8K04.E04.

Theory

A democracy is a way of running a country in which citizens have a say in who makes the decisions and how. This section looks at that idea from *your* side of the fence: how you find out what is going on, and the many paths you can take to have a say. Every one of the paths below is open to Australian citizens — some even before you turn 18.

How citizens find out and take part in Australia's democracy

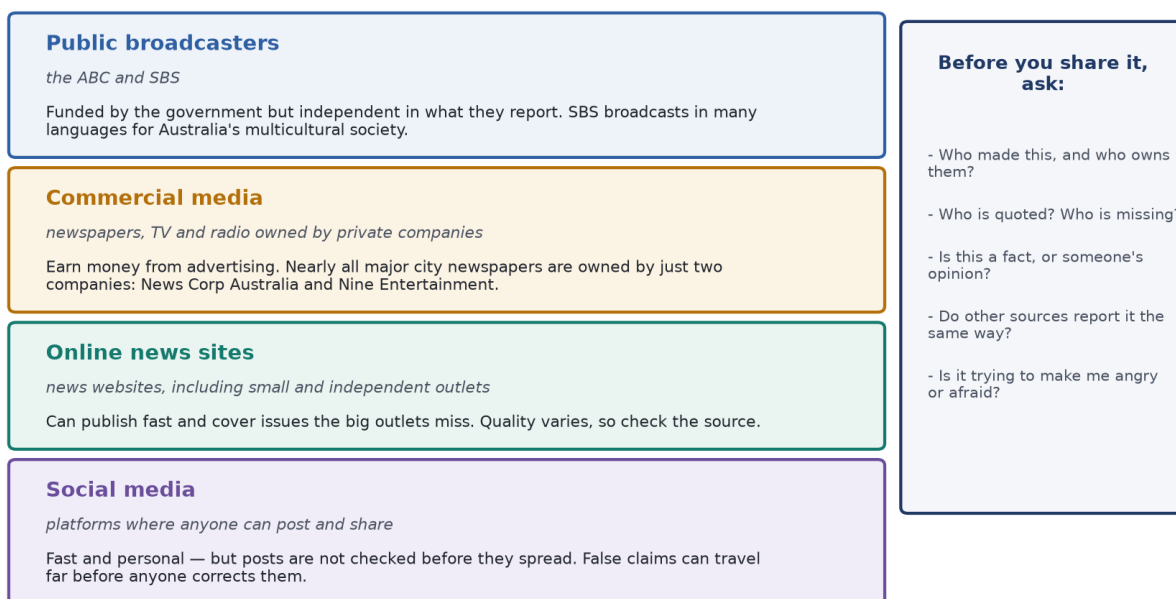


Two columns listing how citizens are informed (news media, public broadcasters, the AEC, parliament websites, and people around them) and how citizens can participate (voting, contacting representatives, petitions, interest groups, lobbying and direct action), joined to a banner reading that an informed citizen can choose how to take part.

Part 1 — How citizens are informed

Citizens cannot have a real say unless they know what is happening. In Australia, information about public life reaches people through the five paths in the left-hand column of the map above. The news media is the biggest of them, so it is worth looking at how the media works here.

The Australian media landscape — who informs us?



Media ownership in Australia is highly concentrated compared with similar countries (Source: Wikipedia, 'Media ownership in Australia', retrieved 26 August 2026).

Four bands describing public broadcasters (the ABC and SBS), commercial media, online news sites and social media, beside a checklist of five questions to ask before sharing a story, with a source line on media ownership.

Media freedom is the freedom of news outlets to report the news and criticise the government without the government controlling what they say. Australia has a strong tradition of it. Reporters Without Borders, a non-government group that tracks media freedom around the world, placed Australia 29th out of 180 countries in its 2025 World Press Freedom Index (Source: Wikipedia, 'Reporters Without Borders', retrieved 26 August 2026).

That freedom also has legal backing. In *Lange v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (1997), the High Court of Australia ruled that the Constitution carries an **implied freedom of political communication**. Because the Constitution requires the federal parliament to be chosen by the people, the Court said laws cannot stop Australians from openly discussing politics and government. Notice carefully what this freedom is: a limit on what laws can do, not a personal right you can take to court against another person.

Governments watch **public opinion** — what people in the community generally think about an issue at a particular time. It is measured in opinion polls, seen in the media and in petitions, and finally expressed at elections. In a democracy, public opinion is meant to shape what governments do. That is why *who owns the news* matters: owners and editors decide what gets covered and how. In Australia, nearly all major city newspapers are owned by just two companies, News Corp Australia and Nine Entertainment — a higher level of media ownership concentration than in most similar countries (Source: Wikipedia, 'Media ownership in Australia', retrieved 26 August 2026). Different owners can mean a narrower range of views in print, which is one reason the checklist in the figure above matters for every reader.

The last box in the checklist is about **misinformation** — false or misleading information that spreads before anyone checks it. Online, a false claim can reach thousands of people in an hour. Checking before you share is a small but real part of being an informed citizen.

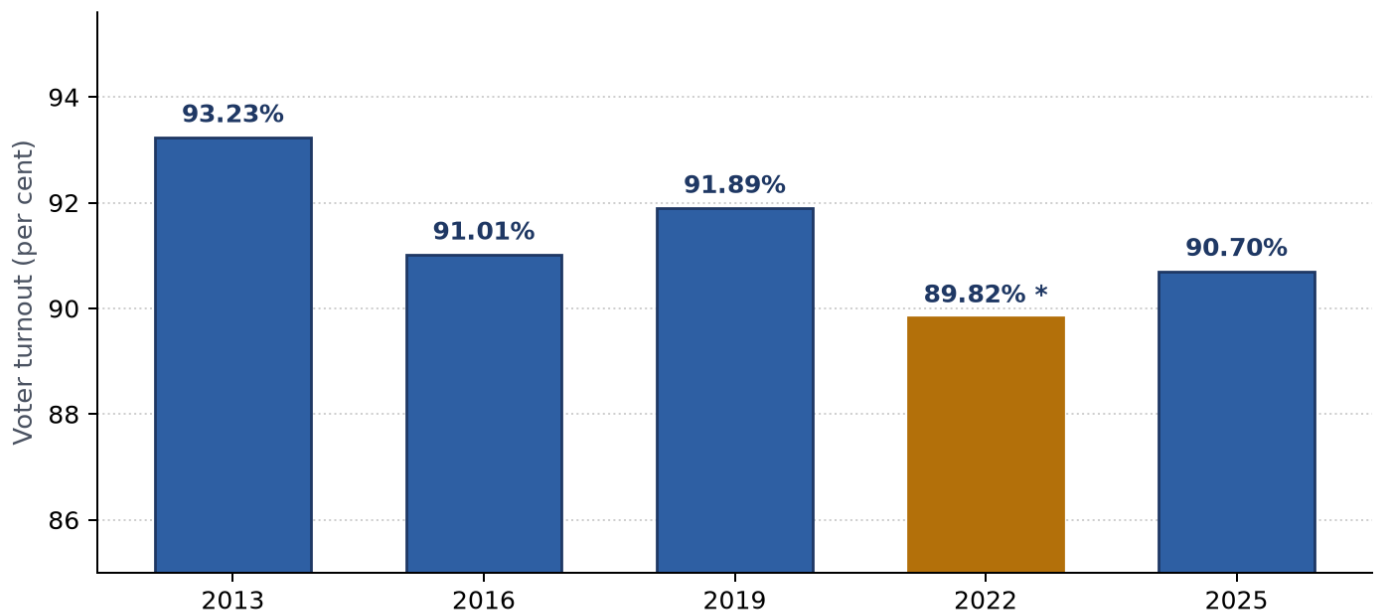
Not all information comes from the news. The **Australian Electoral Commission (AEC)** runs federal elections and also informs citizens: its website explains how voting works, lists the candidates at each election and publishes the results. Parliament and government websites publish laws, debates and committee reports. And talking to people — family, friends, teachers, community groups — is still one of the oldest ways citizens find out about public life.

Part 2 — The electoral system: the first path of participation

Section 1A explains how Australia’s electoral system works, so here is the short version: Australia is a federal democracy with a parliament chosen by voting, and elections use preferential voting (you number every box in order of choice). What matters for this section is what the system asks of *you*, and what it gives you.

- **Enrol.** Citizens 18 and over must be on the electoral roll to vote, and you may enrol from age 16 so that you are ready.
- **Vote.** Voting in federal elections is *compulsory* — required by law. A federal law passed in 1924 made voting compulsory, and the 1925 election was the first held under that law. An adult who does not vote without a good reason can be fined.
- **Choose.** On polling day you choose who represents you. The party (or parties) with majority support in the lower house forms the government.

**Turnout at Australian federal elections
(House of Representatives, 2013-2025)**



*Voting in Australia is compulsory, so turnout stays high. Each bar shows the share of enrolled voters who voted.
* the first time turnout fell below 90 per cent since 1922.*

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, federal election results (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Bar chart of voter turnout at Australian federal elections for the House of Representatives from 2013 to 2025, with values 93.23, 91.01, 91.89, 89.82 and 90.70 per cent, the 2022 bar marked as the first time turnout fell below 90 per cent since 1922, with an AEC source line.

Because voting is compulsory, Australian turnout — the share of enrolled voters who vote — stays high by world standards, as the chart shows. It is not perfect: 2022 was the first federal election since 1922 at which turnout fell below 90 per cent, and informal (missed or wrongly filled-in) votes still happen. But compared with countries where voting is voluntary, Australia’s elections speak for most of the adult population, not just the most passionate part of it.

Your pathway through a federal election



At the 2025 federal election, 18,098,797 Australians were enrolled and 90.70 per cent voted. Source: Australian Electoral Commission; retrieved 26 August 2026.

Five boxes joined by arrows showing the citizen's pathway through a federal election: enrol, get informed, vote, votes are counted, result; with a source line giving the 2025 enrolled and turnout figures from the AEC.

Part 3 — Contact with elected representatives

Australia has three levels of government — federal, state and local — and each level has representatives you can contact. Each member represents an **electorate** — the geographic area whose people chose them. Between elections, contacting your representatives is the most direct path of participation open to you.

Who represents you — and how to contact them

Australia has three levels of government: federal, state or territory, and local.

Level of government	Your elected representatives	Where they sit	How to reach them
Federal (Commonwealth)	A member of the House of Representatives for your electorate, plus senators for your state or territory	Commonwealth Parliament, Canberra	The member's electorate office; letters and petitions through the parliament
State (Victoria)	A member of the Legislative Assembly for your electorate, plus members of the Legislative Council for your region	Parliament of Victoria, Melbourne	The member's electorate office; e-petitions through the parliament
Local	Councillors for your ward	Your local council	Council offices, council meetings and the council website

Find your federal electorate at aec.gov.au, your Victorian electorates at vec.vic.gov.au, and your ward on your council's website.

Table showing, for federal, state (Victoria) and local government, who your elected representatives are, where they sit, and how to reach them, with a footnote pointing to the AEC and VEC websites for finding your electorate.

An elected representative's job is not only to vote in parliament. Representatives **advocate** on behalf of citizens — they speak and act for the people they represent. That can mean raising a local problem with a minister, helping a citizen untangle a problem with a government service, or presenting a petition to the parliament. Since 2008 the federal House of Representatives has had a Standing Committee on Petitions — a small group of members whose whole job is to receive petitions from the public and follow up what happens to them.

A ***petition*** is a written request to a decision-maker, signed by many people to show the request is shared. Petitions can be on paper or online (e-petitions exist at the federal parliament and at the Parliament of Victoria). Writing to your member is just as direct: members keep electorate offices that read and answer mail from the public, including from people too young to vote.

A model email to your local member (structure to copy, words to change)

To: Office of the Member for Riverdale

From: Alex Chen, Year 8 student, Riverdale Secondary College

Subject: Safer crossing on Elm Road outside our school

Dear Member for Riverdale,

My name is Alex Chen. I am a Year 8 student at Riverdale Secondary College, and I live in your electorate.

I am writing about the crossing on Elm Road outside our school. More than 400 students cross it each morning, and there is no pedestrian crossing. Two students have had near misses this term.

Our student council collected 312 signatures asking for a safer crossing. I have attached the petition.

We ask you to raise this matter with the minister responsible for roads, and to tell us what can be done. We would also welcome a meeting at our school.

Thank you for your time and for your help.

Yours sincerely,
Alex Chen

← Say who you are, and that you are one of the people they represent.

← State the issue clearly, with facts. Specific details make your case stronger.

← Show that others agree — a petition or survey adds weight.

← Ask for a specific action, and say how the member can reply.

← Finish politely and sign your name.

MODEL TEXT — the person, school and street are invented to show the structure. Use the same shape for a real concern.

A model email from a Year 8 student to their local member about a safer crossing outside the school, with notes in the margin explaining the job of each paragraph, and a footer stating the person, school and street are invented to show the structure.

The model email above shows the shape of an effective letter to a representative: say who you are, state the issue with facts, show others agree, ask for one specific action, and finish politely. The person, school and street are invented; the structure is the real skill.

Part 4 — Acting with others: parties, interest groups, lobby groups and direct action

Most citizens do not act alone. The figure below compares the three main kinds of organised group in Australian public life.

Groups in Australia's democracy — three kinds, three jobs

	Political party	Interest group	Lobby group
Main aim	Win elections, form government and put its policies into action	Give members with a shared concern a stronger voice in public life	Influence a particular decision made by government or parliament
Stands candidates in elections?	Yes	No	Usually no
Common methods	Campaigning, policy platforms, debating bills in parliament	Petitions, campaigns, submissions to committees, media work	Direct meetings with decision-makers, submissions, media campaigns
Australian examples	Australian Labor Party, Liberal Party, Australian Greens, The Nationals	Australian Council of Trade Unions, Amnesty International Australia	Business Council of Australia, National Farmers' Federation

In real life the labels blur: many interest groups also lobby, and some lobby groups run public campaigns. What matters is the job the group is doing on a given issue.

Table comparing political parties, interest groups and lobby groups by main aim, whether they stand candidates in elections, common methods, and Australian examples, with a footnote that in real life the labels blur.

An **interest group** is an organised group of people with a shared concern who try to influence public decisions without standing for election themselves. A **lobby group** (and the verb *to lobby*) names the activity of pressing decision-makers directly — meetings with ministers and their staff, written views sent to committees, media campaigns. In real life the labels blur: many interest groups also lobby. Real Australian examples: the Australian Council of Trade Unions (the peak body for trade unions) and Amnesty International Australia act as interest groups; the Business Council of Australia and the National Farmers' Federation are often described as lobby groups because direct meetings with decision-makers are central to what they do. Political parties — the Australian Labor Party, the Liberal Party, the Australian Greens, the Nationals — are different again: they stand candidates and seek to form government.

When formal channels feel too slow, some citizens choose **direct action** — taking part outside those channels, as in marches, strikes and boycotts. Direct action is a genuine part of democratic history, and it is also genuinely debated. The figure below gives each side's strongest case, stated as its own supporters would state it.

Direct action: the strongest case on each side

Each column is written as its own supporters would state it — that is how fair comparison works.

The strongest case FOR direct action	The strongest case AGAINST direct action
It draws public attention to issues that formal channels are ignoring or moving too slowly on.	It can divide the community and push away the very people a campaign needs to persuade.
It is open to people with no money or inside access — including young people who cannot vote yet.	Some tactics break the law — blocking roads, for example — and protesters can face fines or charges.
Peaceful marches and strikes have a long record of helping change laws and policies in democracies.	Critics argue change should come through voting and parliament, where every citizen gets an equal say.
In September 2019, about 300,000 people joined School Strike 4 Climate marches across Australia, putting climate at the top of the national news.	A protest states a demand but does not draft the law: someone in parliament still has to act.

Your task is not to pick a side once and for all, but to weigh both cases for the specific issue in front of you.

Two columns giving the strongest case for and the strongest case against direct action, including the September 2019 School Strike 4 Climate marches, with a footer noting the task is to weigh both cases for the issue in front of you.

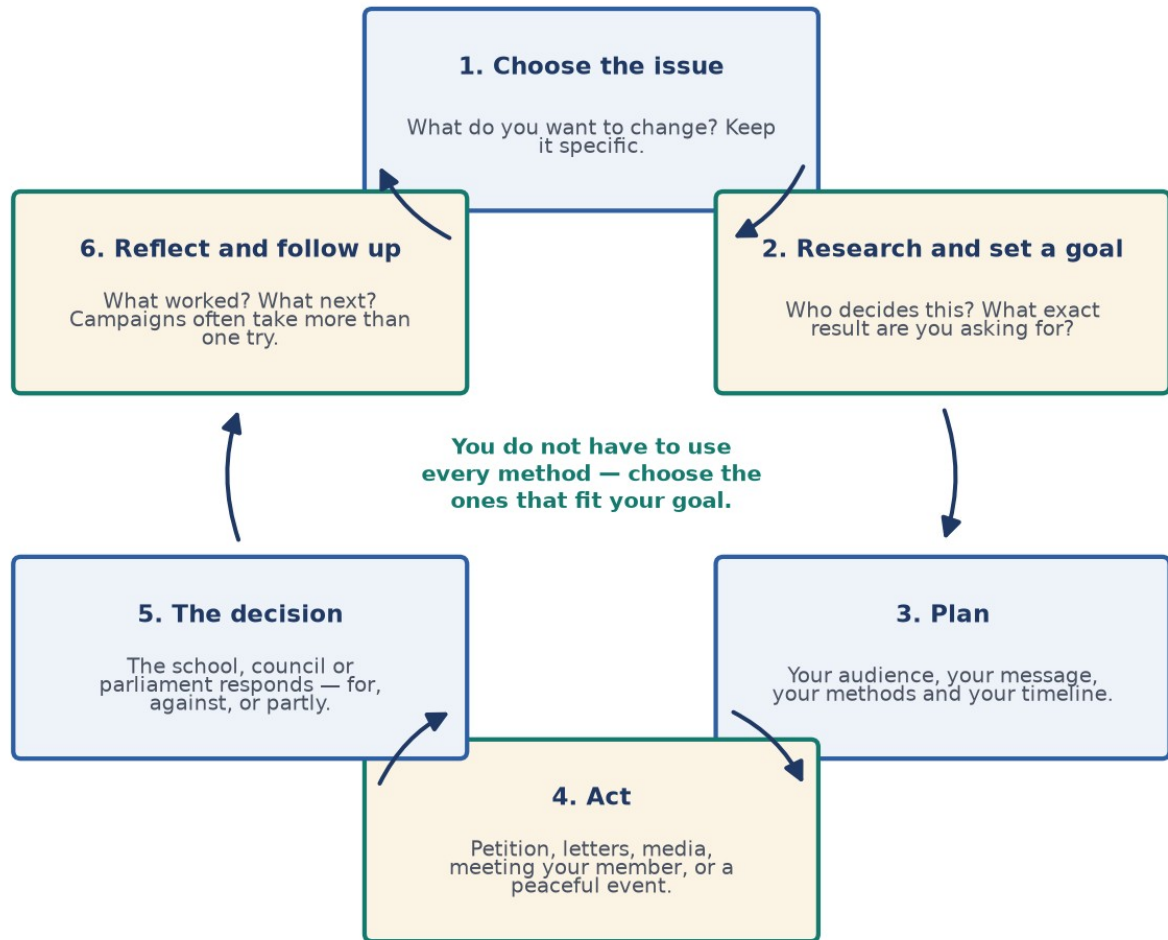
On 20 September 2019, about 300,000 people joined School Strike 4 Climate marches across Australia, many of them students who could not yet vote (Source: Wikipedia, ‘School strike for climate’, retrieved 26 August 2026). Whether you think such action is justified depends on the issue and the tactics — which is exactly the weighing-up the figure asks you to practise. Note the law matters here: a peaceful march with a permit is lawful; blocking a road is not, and protesters can face fines or charges.

Part 5 — Running a campaign for change

Everything in this section joins up when you run a campaign. A **campaign** is a planned effort to bring about a particular change. Campaigns can run at school level (your student council or principal), local level (your council) or state level (the Parliament of Victoria). The cycle below is the shape of it — and it is the seed of Section 5B, where you will build a full campaign of your own.

The campaign cycle

A campaign for change can run at school, local or state level



A circular diagram of six steps — choose the issue, research and set a goal, plan, act, the decision, reflect and follow up — joined by arrows, with a centre note that you choose the methods that fit your goal.

Two ideas from the cycle are worth keeping. First, *who decides*: every campaign aims at a real decision-maker — a principal, a mayor, a minister, a parliament — and naming that person early saves wasted effort. Second, *follow up*: campaigns often take more than one try, and a polite follow-up letter after a decision is part of the method, not an afterthought.

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded

Follow one citizen's pathway through a real election: the 2025 federal election, held on Saturday 3 May 2025.

Step	What happened in 2025	The citizen's path being used
1. Enrol	The roll closed with 18,098,797 Australians enrolled (AEC).	Compulsory enrolment puts nearly every adult citizen on the roll; 16-

Step	What happened in 2025	The citizen's path being used
2. Get informed	The AEC published candidate lists and polling-place information; news outlets and the ABC ran election coverage.	The informed-citizen paths from Part 1.
3. Vote	Polling places opened across Australia on 3 May 2025; voting was compulsory.	The first and most equal path of participation — one citizen, one vote.
4. Votes are counted	The AEC counted the votes and published results; turnout was 90.70 per cent of enrolled voters.	A public count, published for everyone to check.
5. Result	The Australian Labor Party won 94 of the 150 House of Representatives seats, a majority, and Anthony Albanese continued as Prime Minister.	The voters' choice decided who formed government.

(Source: Australian Electoral Commission and Wikipedia, '2025 Australian federal election'; retrieved 26 August 2026.)

The point of the table is the chain: each step depends on the one before it. Without enrolment there is no vote; without information there is no informed choice; without the count being published, there is no way to check the result.

Example 2 — unscaffolded

Read the timeline. It describes a real Australian change.

- For years, environment groups ran campaigns against lightweight plastic bags — petitions, school campaigns, media work.
- In 2018, Coles and Woolworths, Australia's two biggest supermarket chains, stopped offering free lightweight plastic bags in their stores.
- The Victorian Government then made its own decision: a state ban on lightweight plastic bags took effect in Victoria on 1 November 2019.

(Source: Wikipedia, 'Plastic bag bans in Australia'; retrieved 26 August 2026.)

Model analysis. Which paths of participation appear? The environment groups used interest-group methods (petitions, campaigns, media work) and, in some places, direct action such as rallies and bag-free days. Supermarket customers influenced the chains by changing their own buying — a kind of boycott. The final rule, though, came from a decision-maker: the Victorian Government at state level, using parliament and the law. The timeline shows the big lesson of the campaign cycle: groups and citizens can push for years, but a lasting, state-wide rule needed the formal system to act. Notice too the two-way traffic — public opinion shaped the government's decision, and the government's ban then shaped everyday behaviour.

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Use the participation map (first figure). Sort these four activities into *informed* or *participate*: (a) watching the nightly news; (b) signing an e-petition to the Parliament of Victoria; (c) reading the AEC's website before an election; (d) joining a march for a cause you care about.

Q2. Use the turnout chart. (a) Which election between 2013 and 2025 had the highest turnout, and what was it? (b) What was turnout at the 2025 election? (c) Why is the 2022 bar a different colour?

Q3. Use the groups table. Name the kind of group (political party, interest group or lobby group) that best fits each description: (a) stands candidates at elections and seeks to form government; (b) never stands candidates, but gives members with a shared concern a stronger voice; (c) makes direct meetings with ministers and their staff a central method.

Q4. Use the model email. Give the job done by each of these parts: (a) 'I am a Year 8 student at Riverdale Secondary College'; (b) 'More than 400 students cross it each morning'; (c) 'We ask you to raise this matter with the minister responsible for roads.'

Q5. Fill in the gaps, then check against the groups table: 'A group that wants to **win elections** and form government is a _____. A group that wants to **influence a decision** without standing candidates is an _____ or a _____.'

Q6. Use the 'Before you share it, ask' checklist from the media landscape figure. A post claims: 'Schools in your area will close next term. Share before it is deleted!' Which two questions from the checklist are the best first checks, and why?

Un scaffolded

Q7. Apart from voting, describe three different ways an Australian citizen can participate in democracy. For each, name one real organisation or institution from this section that a citizen could use or contact.

Q8. 'Compulsory voting is a good thing for Australian democracy.' Give the strongest case **for** this claim and the strongest case **against** it, then state your own view with a reason. You are marked on the fairness of your two cases, not on which side you choose.

Q9. Choose a real issue at your school or in your local area (for example: an unsafe crossing, litter in a park, missing shade at the oval). Outline a campaign for change using at least four steps of the campaign cycle. Name the real decision-maker your campaign would aim at.

Q10. Two news outlets cover the same story — a protest about a new road — with different headlines: 'Residents stand up for their suburb' and 'Traffic chaos as protesters block road.' Explain, using the idea of media ownership from Part 1, why two outlets can honestly report the same event in such different ways, and say what an informed citizen should do with the two reports.

Source inquiry (Knowledge and Understanding)

Read the short source, then answer SI1–SI3.

Source: excerpts from the Australian Constitution (Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900, ss 7 and 24).

Section 7: 'The Senate shall be composed of senators for each State, **directly chosen by the people** of the State, voting, until the Parliament otherwise provides, as one electorate.'

Section 24: 'The House of Representatives shall be composed of members **directly chosen by the people** of the Commonwealth, and the number of such members shall be, as nearly as practicable, twice the number of the senators.'

SI1. In your own words, what do the bolded words require of the two houses of the federal parliament?

SI2. In *Lange v Australian Broadcasting Corporation* (1997), the High Court said these words give rise to the implied freedom of political communication. Explain, in two or three sentences, why free public discussion might be *necessary* if the people are truly to 'choose' their representatives.

SI3. Voting in Australia is compulsory: adults must vote or face a fine. Put the strongest case for each side of the following debate. (a) The strongest case that compulsory voting is **consistent** with a parliament 'directly chosen by the people'. (b) The strongest case that it is **in tension** with those words. You are marked on the quality of your reasoning, not on your conclusion.

Answers

Q1. (a) informed; (b) participate; (c) informed; (d) participate.

Q2. (a) 2013, 93.23 per cent. (b) 90.70 per cent. (c) 2022 (89.82 per cent) was the first federal election since 1922 at which turnout fell below 90 per cent.

Q3. (a) political party; (b) interest group; (c) lobby group.

Q4. (a) says who you are and that you are one of the people the member represents; (b) states the issue with specific facts, which makes the case stronger; (c) asks for one specific action and tells the member how to reply.

Q5. political party; interest group; lobby group.

Q6. Any two applied sensibly; the best are ‘Who made this, and who owns them?’ (the post gives no source at all) and ‘Do other sources report it the same way?’ (a real school closure would be reported by real news outlets). ‘Is it trying to make me angry or afraid?’ also applies — ‘Share before it is deleted!’ is pressure, not information.

Q7. Any three, each with a real referent, e.g.: contact a representative (your federal member’s electorate office, or a Victorian member through vec.vic.gov.au); start or sign a petition (federal Standing Committee on Petitions; Parliament of Victoria e-petitions); join or support an interest group (Amnesty International Australia, ACTU); lobby (write to a minister); take lawful direct action (join a permitted march).

Q8. For: near-universal turnout means parliaments are chosen by almost the whole adult community, not only the most passionate; it protects against governments being chosen by small, organised minorities; it makes politicians attend to non-voters’ interests too. Against: forcing people to vote turns a civic right into a legal duty; it can produce informal or donkey votes from people who are not engaged; some say choice should include the choice not to vote. Own view: any position, with a reason that answers the better of the two cases.

Q9. Any issue with a coherent cycle: e.g. shade at the oval — 1 choose the issue (no shade at the oval); 2 research and goal (count unshaded seating; ask for two shade sails); 3 plan (survey students, draft a cost, decide to approach the principal and the council); 4 act (petition, meeting, letter to the council, local paper); 5 decision (principal or council responds); 6 reflect (follow up; try the grants program next if refused). Decision-maker named: principal and/or the local council.

Q10. Owners and editors choose what a headline emphasises; with most city papers owned by two companies, the range of framings can be narrow, so different outlets can honestly stress different facts. An informed citizen reads both, checks a third source (e.g. the ABC or SBS), asks the checklist questions, and separates the facts both agree on from the framing each adds.

SI1. Both houses must be elected by the people — members and senators hold their seats because voters chose them, not because a king, a governor or a government appointed them.

SI2. If voters must choose their representatives, they must be able to discuss who those people are and what they have done; laws that silence political discussion would leave the people choosing without knowing the facts, so free communication is necessary for the choice to be real.

SI3. (a) Consistent: compulsory voting makes the ‘people’ who choose the parliament nearly all of the people, so the parliament is more, not less, directly chosen by the people as a whole; it prevents capture by loud minorities. (b) In tension: ‘chosen by the people’ suggests a free choice, and a legal duty with a fine removes the freedom not to take part; a choice no one may refuse is, some would say, not free. Credit lies in stating each side at its strongest.

Fully-worked solutions

Solution to Q2 (how to read the chart). Read each bar against the scale and the printed values. Highest: 2013 at 93.23 per cent. The 2025 bar reads 90.70 per cent. The 2022 bar is a different colour and starred because at 89.82 per cent it was the first election since 1922 below 90 per cent — a fact the footnote states, so the ‘why’ is read from the chart itself, not invented.

Solution to Q6 (how to apply the checklist). Step 1, ask *who made this*: the post names no source, no person, no outlet — the first checklist question fails at once. Step 2, ask *do other sources report it the same way*: a school closure is a big, checkable fact; if no news outlet and no education department reports it, the claim fails again. Step 3, notice the pressure language — ‘Share before it is deleted!’ is designed to make you act fast and afraid, which is exactly what the last checklist question warns about. An informed citizen stops sharing and checks.

Solution to Q8 (how to put both cases at their strongest). A full-marks answer states each side as *its own supporters* would. For: ‘Compulsory voting means the parliament really is chosen by the people — turnout above 90 per cent means governments must persuade almost everyone, not just their base.’ Against: ‘A democracy rests on free choice; making voting a legal duty with a fine turns a right into an order, and forces the uninterested to the polls.’ Then the own-view sentence must engage with the stronger case, e.g. ‘On balance I support compulsory voting *because* the fairness argument answers the freedom argument: the duty is small (one Saturday in three years) while the gain — a parliament chosen by nearly all citizens — is large.’ The conclusion may go either way; the marking is on the reasoning.

Solution to Q10 (how to use ownership and framing). Name the mechanism: editors choose emphasis, and owners choose editors, so ownership can tilt which facts lead. Apply it: both headlines can be true — residents did stand up, and traffic was blocked — but each headline chooses which truth the reader sees first. With most major city papers owned by News Corp Australia or Nine Entertainment, reading only one paper can mean seeing only one framing. The informed-citizen move is to read both, add a public broadcaster (ABC or SBS), keep the facts both agree on, and treat the difference as framing.

Solution to SI3 (how to hold both cases at once). Write (a) and (b) as if you believed each. (a) ‘The words say the parliament is chosen by the people. Voluntary voting hands that choice to whoever bothers — often older, wealthier, angrier citizens. Compulsory voting makes the choosing body the whole people, so it makes “directly chosen by the people” more true.’ (b) “‘Chosen by the people” describes a free choice. A duty backed by a fine removes the freedom to stay out of the choice; a parliament chosen under compulsion is chosen by a forced, not a free, people — a choice no one may refuse is, some would say, not free.’ A strong finish notices the tie-breaker the High Court would use: in Australia, compulsory voting has always been treated as consistent with ss 7 and 24, because the choice of *who to vote for* remains completely free — only the act of attending is compelled.