

Civics and Citizenship Level 9

Chapter 1 — Government and democracy

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The Australian Constitution: federal government, democratic institutions and change by referendum

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- VC2HC10K01.E01
- VC2HC10K01.E02
- VC2HC10K01.E03
- VC2HC10K01.E04 (this book examines the *Constitution Alteration (Establishment of Republic) 1999*; other examples VCAA lists here are recorded as excluded — see the note at the front of the book)

Every law, parliament and court in Australia operates under one older, deeper set of rules: the Australian Constitution. This section is the spine of the book. It explains what the Constitution is and why it was written the way it was, the federal system and democratic institutions it sets up, and the one way its words can be changed — a national vote called a **referendum**. It then tests that process with a real case: the republic referendum of 6 November 1999.

Theory

What the Constitution is

A **constitution** is the set of basic rules about how a country is governed: who holds power, how it is used, and what limits apply. The Australian Constitution is a single written document. It took effect on **1 January 1901**, when the six British colonies in Australia agreed to unite as one nation while keeping their own state governments. It does three jobs:

1. it creates the institutions of the new national (Commonwealth) government — the Parliament, the executive (the ministers and departments that put the laws into effect) and the courts;
2. it divides lawmaking power between the Commonwealth and the states; and
3. it sets the rule for changing itself — section 128, which requires a referendum.

The Constitution is the **highest law** in Australia. Any law passed by any parliament that goes against the Constitution is **invalid** — that is, it has no legal force. Figure 1 maps what is inside the document.

One document, eight chapters

The Australian Constitution, in force since 1 January 1901, has 128 sections grouped into eight chapters.

Part	Sections	What it does
Cover clauses and preamble	before s 1	record that the people of the colonies agreed to unite
Chapter I — The Parliament	ss 1–60	creates the Commonwealth Parliament: the monarch, the Senate and the House of Representatives
Chapter II — The Executive Government	ss 61–70	the Governor-General and ministers carry out the laws
Chapter III — The Judicature	ss 71–80	creates the High Court of Australia and the federal court system
Chapter IV — Finance and Trade	ss 81–105A	Commonwealth money, and free trade between the states
Chapter V — The States	ss 106–120	keeps the states' constitutions, parliaments and borders; s 123 protects state borders
Chapter VI — New States	ss 121–124	how new states may join or be formed
Chapter VII — Miscellaneous	ss 125–127	includes s 125, the rule that placed the capital in New South Wales away from Sydney
Chapter VIII — Alteration of the Constitution	s 128	the only way the words may be changed: a referendum

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

A map of the Australian Constitution: one document of 128 sections grouped into eight chapters. Chapter I The Parliament (sections 1 to 60) sets up the three-part Parliament and its two houses. Chapter II The Executive Government (sections 61 to 70) sets out the Governor-General and ministers. Chapter III The Judicature (sections 71 to 80) creates the High Court and the federal court system. Chapters IV to VIII cover finance and trade, the states, new states, and miscellaneous matters including section 123 on state borders and section 128 on how the Constitution is changed. The cover clauses before section 1 include the preamble, which records that the people of the colonies agreed to unite.

Figure 1. What is inside the Australian Constitution: eight chapters, 128 sections (source on the figure).

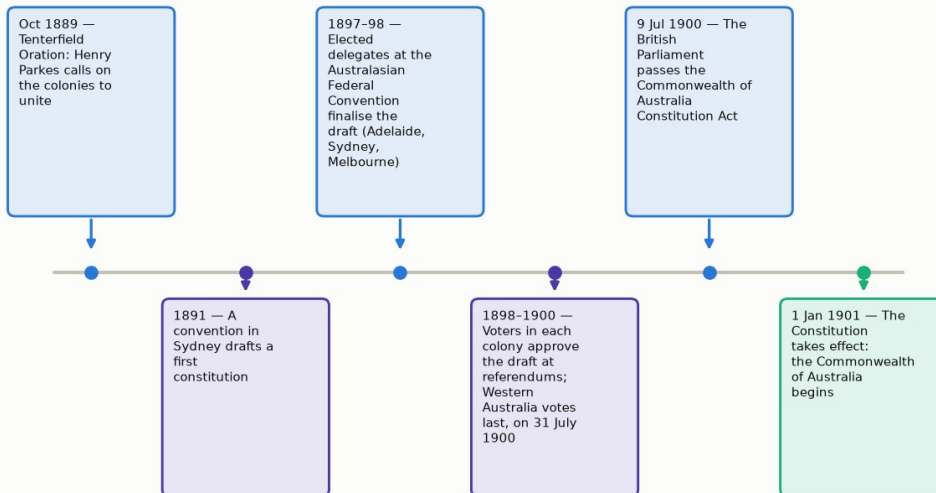
Where it came from: the aims of its authors

In the 1890s, Australia was not one country. It was six separate British colonies — New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania — each with its own parliament, premier and laws. Leaders of the colonies wanted to unite, for three main reasons (Figure 2):

- **Defence and security.** Each colony was small on its own; a united Australia could defend its coastline and speak with one voice in the region.
- **Trade.** The colonies taxed goods crossing their borders, which made trade between them costly. One national market would be richer for all.
- **A stronger voice.** A single nation could deal with other countries, and manage immigration and affairs in the Pacific, more strongly than six small colonies.

How the Constitution was made, 1889–1901

Six British colonies became one nation. Voters in every colony had to agree before the new system could begin.



Sources: records of the Australasian Federal Convention 1897–98; Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 (UK); referendum dates, Australian Electoral Commission (retrieved 26 August 2026).

A timeline of six events: October 1889, Henry Parkes gives the Tenterfield Oration calling the colonies to unite; 1891, a convention in Sydney drafts a first constitution; 1897 to 1898, an elected Australasian Federal Convention meets in Adelaide, Sydney and Melbourne and finalises the draft; 1898 to 1900, voters in each colony approve the draft at referendums, Western Australia last on 31 July 1900; 9 July 1900, the British Parliament passes the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act; 1 January 1901, the Constitution takes effect and the Commonwealth of Australia begins.

Figure 2. How the Constitution was made, 1889–1901 (sources on the figure).

The authors of the Constitution met at **conventions** — formal meetings where delegates (representatives chosen by the colonies) debated and drafted the document. The main convention met in 1897–98 with elected delegates. Its members had to balance two aims that pull against each other: build a strong national government, but keep the colonies' own identity and power over their local affairs. That balance needed **compromise** — each side giving up something to reach an agreement all could accept.

The biggest compromise shaped the Parliament itself (Figure 3). The bigger colonies, such as New South Wales and Victoria, wanted seats based on population — more people, more votes in parliament. The smaller colonies, such as Tasmania, feared being outvoted in everything. The answer, borrowed from the United States, was two houses with different jobs.

The great compromise: two houses, two ideas of fairness

At the conventions of 1897–98, the bigger and smaller colonies both had to accept the deal. This was the deal they reached.

The bigger colonies (New South Wales, Victoria) wanted seats by population: more people, more votes in parliament.

The smaller colonies (such as Tasmania) feared being outvoted in everything and refused to join on those terms.

The compromise: two houses, each protecting one side

House of Representatives — 151 members
Seats are shared by population, so bigger states have more members.
Laws need the support of the majority of Australians.

Senate — 76 senators
Every original state has 12 senators, no matter its size; each territory has 2.
The smaller states cannot be outvoted here — it is sometimes called the states' house.

One house by population, one house by state — that deal is why the Commonwealth Parliament has two houses, and why both must agree before a law is made.

Source: Australian Constitution ss 7 and 24; records of the Australasian Federal Convention 1897–98 (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Two panels comparing the two houses created by the compromise of 1897 to 1898. House of Representatives: 151 members, seats spread by population so bigger states have more members, laws need the support of the majority of Australians. Senate: 76 senators, 12 for each original state no matter its size plus 2 for each territory, so the smaller states cannot be outvoted. A note reads: one house by population, one house by state — that deal is why the Parliament has two houses, and why the Senate is sometimes called the states' house.

Figure 3. The great compromise: two houses, two different ideas of fairness.

Other compromises are built in too. Lawmaking power was split between the new Commonwealth and the states, with the rest left to the states. Section 125 even settled where the capital would sit — in New South Wales, but at least 160 km from Sydney, to calm the rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne — and Canberra was built on that deal.

The federal system: who holds which power

A **federal system** is a way of governing in which power is divided between a national government and regional governments — here, the Commonwealth and the six states (plus two mainland territories). The division is written into the Constitution (Figure 4):

- **Specific powers** are the matters listed in section 51 — around 40 of them — that the Commonwealth Parliament may make laws about: defence, currency, immigration, marriage, taxation, trade with other countries, and external affairs, among others.
- **Residual powers** are all the matters not listed, which stayed with the states: schools, hospitals, police, roads and public transport are mainly state responsibilities.
- **Section 109** settles clashes: when a valid Commonwealth law and a state law disagree on the same matter, the Commonwealth law prevails (wins).

The federal split of lawmaking power

The Constitution divides lawmaking between the Commonwealth and the states. The rule for clashes is section 109.

Commonwealth specific powers (section 51)

Defence
Currency
Immigration
Marriage
Taxation
Trade with other countries
External affairs
— around 40 matters in total

State residual powers

Schools
Hospitals
Police
Roads and public transport
— all matters not listed in section 51 stayed with the states

Section 109: when a valid Commonwealth law and a state law clash on the same matter, the Commonwealth law prevails — it wins over the state law.

When the two levels disagree about who has power, the High Court of Australia decides. Sections 2A and 2B show how courts and the High Court work.

Source: Australian Constitution ss 51, 92, 106–109 (retrieved 26 August 2026).

A diagram of the federal split of powers. Left column, Commonwealth specific powers under section 51: defence; currency; immigration; marriage; taxation; trade with other countries; external affairs. Right column, state residual powers: schools; hospitals; police; roads and transport. Centre rule, section 109: where a valid Commonwealth law and a state law clash on the same matter, the Commonwealth law prevails (wins). Bottom note: when the two levels disagree about who has power, the High Court of Australia decides — sections 2A and 2B show how.

Figure 4. The federal split of lawmaking power.

The states were not swallowed up by the union. Sections 106 to 108 keep each state's constitution, parliament and governor in place. And when the Commonwealth and a state disagree about who holds a power, the **High Court of Australia** — the court the Constitution creates in Chapter III — decides. Sections 2A and 2B look at the courts and the High Court in detail; here the point is that the umpire, too, is part of the Constitution's design.

The democratic institutions the Constitution upholds

To what extent does the Constitution uphold democratic institutions? Figure 5 works through the five features named in the curriculum, one row at a time: what the Constitution provides, and where that support has limits.

How far does the Constitution uphold democratic institutions?

For each feature: what the Constitution provides, and where that support has limits. This is the 'extent' question of the section.

Feature	What the Constitution provides	Where the support has limits
Constitutional monarchy	Australia's head of state is the monarch — now King Charles III — whose role is limited by the Constitution and long-followed custom. The Governor-General (now Sam Mostyn, since 2024) acts for the monarch in Australia.	The head of state is not chosen by Australians, and the role is inherited — which is exactly what the 1999 referendum asked about.
Elected federal parliament	Section 1 creates the Parliament of the monarch, Senate and House of Representatives. Sections 7 and 24 say members of both houses are "directly chosen by the people"; House elections must be held at least every three years.	The details of enrolment and voting are left to parliament's own laws, so parliament holds considerable power over the system that elects it.
Protection of states' rights	Every original state has 12 senators, large or small. Sections 106–108 keep each state's constitution, parliament and governor. Section 123 protects state borders; section 128 gives voters in every state an equal say in constitutional change.	Section 109 means Commonwealth law wins in a clash, so state power only goes as far as the Constitution allows.
Protection of individual rights	A few express rights are written in: section 41 (right to vote), section 51(xxxi) (property taken on just terms), section 80 (trial by jury), section 92 (free trade between states), section 116 (freedom of religion), section 117 (no discrimination by state residence).	There is no full bill of rights; most rights depend on parliaments and courts. Section 2B takes this further.
All Australians represented	The Senate gives smaller states a strong voice; section 24 makes the House directly chosen by the people; referendums give every enrolled voter an equal say in changes. Today every Australian citizen aged 18 or over can enrol to vote.	Who may vote is set by parliament's laws, not fixed in the Constitution itself.

Source: Australian Constitution ss 1, 2, 7, 24, 28, 41, 51(xxxi), 80, 92, 106–108, 116, 117, 123, 128; Governor-General's office (retrieved 26 August 2026).

A table with one row per democratic feature. Constitutional monarchy: Australia's head of state is the monarch, now King Charles III, whose role is limited by the Constitution and convention; the Governor-General, now Sam Mostyn since 2024, acts for the monarch in Australia; the monarch does not make policy, but critics note the head of state is not chosen by Australians. Elected federal parliament: section 1 creates the Parliament of the monarch, Senate and House of Representatives; sections 7 and 24 say members of both houses are directly chosen by the people; House elections at least every three years; the limit is that voting details are left to parliament's laws. Protection of states' rights: every state, large or small, has 12 senators; sections 106 to 108 keep state constitutions and parliaments; section 123 stops borders changing without a state's consent; section 128 gives every state an equal say in constitutional change. Protection of individual rights: a few express rights are written in, such as section 41 the right to vote, section 51 xxxi property taken on just terms, section 80 trial by jury, section 116 freedom of religion and section 117 no discrimination by state residence; the limit is there is no full bill of rights — section 2B takes this further. All Australians represented: the Senate gives smaller states a strong voice; section 24 makes the House directly chosen by the people; referendums give every enrolled voter an equal say in changes; today every Australian citizen aged 18 or over can enrol to vote.

Figure 5. How strongly the Constitution supports democratic institutions.

Three of those words are subject terms for this course. Australia is a **constitutional monarchy** — a system in which the head of state is a monarch (a king or queen), but the monarch's powers are limited by the constitution and by long-followed custom, and elected politicians make the decisions of government. The monarch is the **head of state** — the formal leader of the country who represents it — and today the Governor-General carries out most of that role in Australia. A **republic**, by contrast, is a system in which the head of state is not a monarch. Whether Australia should

remain a constitutional monarchy or become a republic is one of the long-running debates the referendum process exists to settle — as the 1999 case study below shows.

Changing the Constitution: the referendum

The Constitution is hard to change by design. A parliament cannot alter it by passing an ordinary law, because the Constitution is what gives the parliament its power in the first place. Section 128 puts the decision in the hands of the people, through a **referendum** — a national vote in which Australians decide whether to approve a proposed change to the Constitution. Figure 6 shows the path a proposal follows.

Changing the Constitution: the path under section 128

A parliament cannot alter the Constitution by itself. The people decide, through a referendum run by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC).

1 A proposal

The government of the day announces a proposed change, usually after public debate or an inquiry.

2 Through parliament

A bill to alter the Constitution must pass both houses of the Commonwealth Parliament, each by an absolute majority — at least 76 of 151 in the House of Representatives and 39 of 76 in the Senate. Section 128 has a rarely used reserve path if the houses keep disagreeing.

3 The vote is set

The referendum must be held between two and six months after the bill passes.

4 The AEC runs the vote

The AEC updates the electoral roll, posts every household the official pamphlet with the yes case and the no case (written by members of parliament), runs polling places and postal voting, and counts the votes. Voting is compulsory for enrolled voters.

5 The double majority test

The change passes only if BOTH legs are met: a majority of all voters across Australia votes yes, AND a majority of voters in at least 4 of the 6 states votes yes. Territory votes count in the national total only.

6 The result

Carried: the Governor-General gives formal approval, and the words of the Constitution change. Not carried: the Constitution stays exactly as it was.

Why so demanding?

The Constitution is what gives parliament its power, so parliament should not rewrite it alone. Section 128 puts the final decision with the people — and demands support that is broad across the country and across the states.

Source: Australian Constitution s 128; Referendum (Machinery and Other Provisions) Act 1984 (Cth); Australian Electoral Commission (retrieved 26 August 2026).

A flow chart of six steps. Step 1, a proposal: the government of the day announces a proposed change, often after inquiry or public debate. Step 2, parliament: a bill to alter the Constitution must pass both houses of the Commonwealth Parliament, each by an absolute majority — at least 76 of 151 in the House of Representatives and 39 of 76 in the Senate; if the houses keep disagreeing, section 128 has a rarely used reserve path. Step 3, the vote is set: the referendum must be held between two and six months after the bill passes. Step 4, the Australian Electoral Commission runs the vote: it updates the electoral roll, posts every household a pamphlet of the yes case and the no case written by members of parliament, runs polling places and counts the votes. Step 5, the double majority test: the change passes only if a majority of all voters across Australia vote yes AND a majority of voters in at least four of the six states vote yes; territory votes count in the national total only. Step 6, the result: carried means the Governor-General gives formal approval and the words of the Constitution change; not carried means the Constitution stays exactly as it was.

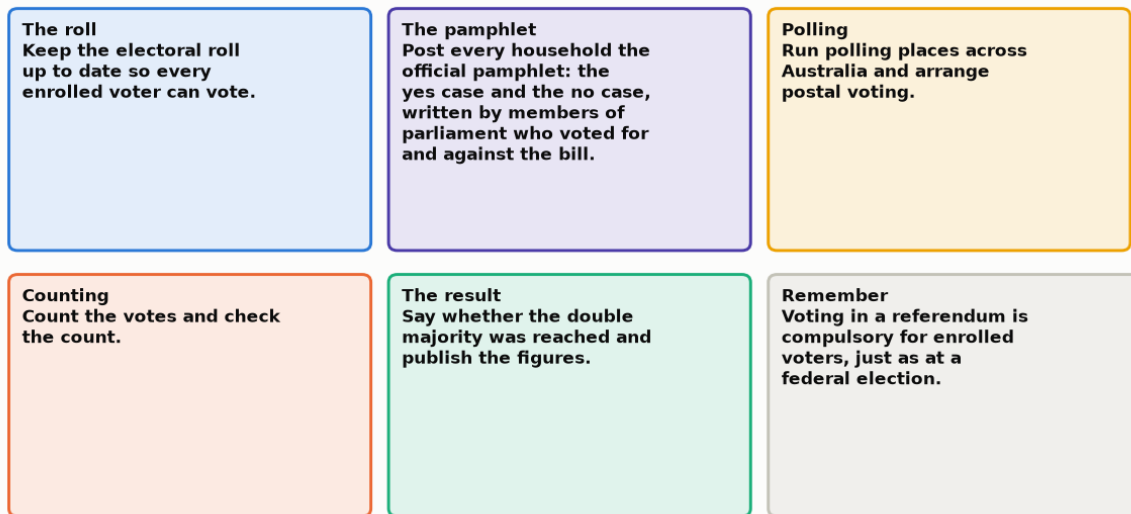
Figure 6. The path from proposal to changed Constitution, under section 128.

Two rules in that path deserve a closer look.

First, the **Australian Electoral Commission (AEC)** — the independent body that runs federal elections and referendums — carries the machinery of the vote (Figure 7).

The AEC's roles at a referendum

The Australian Electoral Commission is an independent body. It keeps the machinery of the vote neutral — it does not argue for either side.



Source: Australian Electoral Commission, roles at referendums (aec.gov.au); Referendum (Machinery and Other Provisions) Act 1984 (Cth) (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Five role cards for the Australian Electoral Commission at a referendum. Roll: maintain the electoral roll so every enrolled voter can vote. Pamphlet: post every household the official pamphlet with the yes case and the no case, written by members of parliament who voted for and against the bill. Polling: run polling places across Australia and postal voting. Counting: count the votes and check them. Result: declare whether the double majority was reached and publish the figures. A note reads: voting in a referendum is compulsory for enrolled voters, just as at a federal election.

Figure 7. The AEC's roles at a referendum (source on the figure).

Second, the result rule — the **double majority**. For a referendum to pass (to be **carried**), two things must both happen (Figure 8):

1. a majority of **all** voters across Australia must vote yes; and
2. a majority of voters in at least **four of the six states** must vote yes.

Votes in the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory count in the national total, but not in the state count — territory voters have been counted this way since a 1977 change to section 128.

The double majority: both legs must be met

For a referendum to be carried (to pass), two things must both happen.

Leg 1 — a national majority
More than half of all formal votes across Australia must be YES.

Leg 2 — a majority of states
Voters in at least 4 of the 6 states must vote YES. Territory votes count in the national total only.

Both legs together: a change needs broad support across the country AND across the states.

Why not leg 1 alone?
A national majority alone would let the voters of New South Wales and Victoria — the two biggest states — decide for everyone.

Why not leg 2 alone?
A majority of states alone could pass a change that most Australian voters oppose.

Territory voters: since a 1977 change to section 128, votes in the ACT and the Northern Territory count in the national total — but not in the state count.

Source: Australian Constitution s 128; Constitution Alteration (Referendums) 1977 (retrieved 26 August 2026).

The double majority rule shown as two legs that must both be met. Leg 1, a national majority: more than half of all formal votes across Australia must be YES. Leg 2, a majority of states: voters in at least 4 of the 6 states must vote YES, with territory votes counting in the national total only. Below, the reason for two legs: a national majority alone would let the voters of New South Wales and Victoria decide for everyone; a majority of states alone could pass a change most Australians oppose; both legs together need broad support across the country and across the states.

Figure 8. The double majority: both legs must be met for a referendum to be carried.

Why a rule this demanding? The idea underneath it has a name: **popular sovereignty**.

Defining popular sovereignty. The Victorian Curriculum uses the term *popular sovereignty* but does not define it. This section therefore treats it as the idea that the final authority over the Constitution belongs to the Australian people — that government power rests on their agreement, and changes to the Constitution are decided by the people themselves, not by parliaments alone. This matches the sense of the preamble of the Act — the introductory words that state its basis — which begins “WHEREAS the people ... have agreed to unite”. Every question about popular sovereignty in this section is answerable on this definition alone.

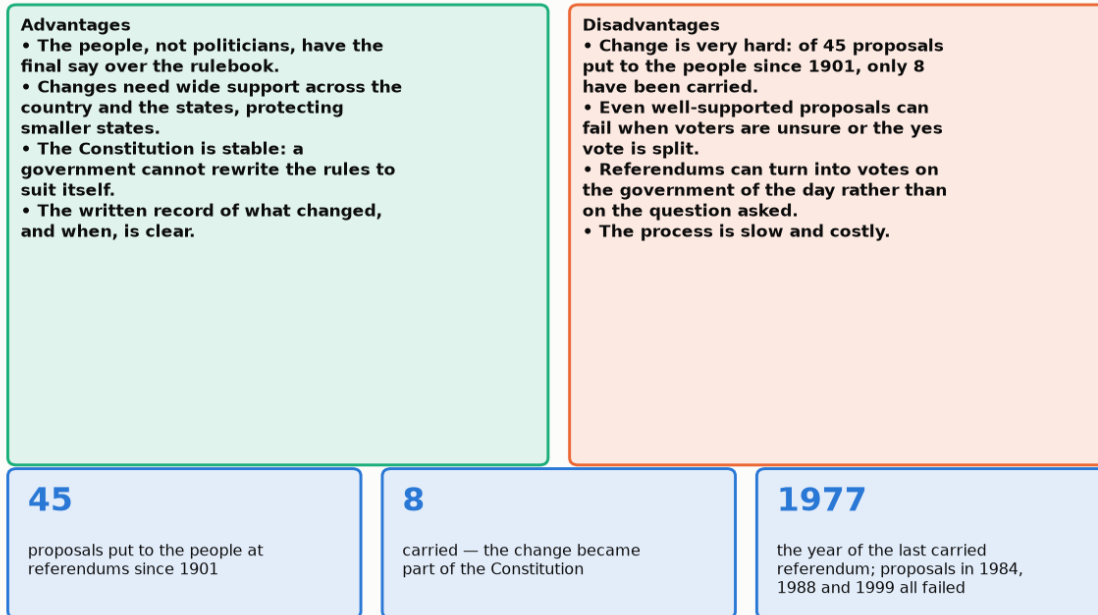
The double majority is popular sovereignty made into a rule: no parliament, however large its majority, can rewrite the Constitution — only the people can, and only when support is broad enough to win both legs.

Advantages and disadvantages of change by referendum only

Is it good design that the Constitution can be changed only by referendum? Both sides have strong cases, and the record gives both sides evidence (Figure 9).

Change by referendum only: the strongest case on each side

Is it good design that the Constitution can be changed only by referendum? Both sides have real arguments — and the record gives both sides evidence.



Record source: Australian Electoral Commission, referendum dates and results (retrieved 26 August 2026).

Two panels and a record strip. Advantages: the people, not politicians, have the final say over the rulebook; changes need wide support across the country and the states, protecting smaller states; the Constitution is stable, so a government cannot rewrite the rules to suit itself; the written record of what changed and when is clear. Disadvantages: change is very hard — of 45 proposals put to the people since 1901, only 8 have been carried; even well-supported proposals can fail when voters are unsure or the yes vote is split; referendums can turn into votes on the government of the day rather than on the question asked; the process is slow and costly. Record strip: 45 proposals put to referendums since 1901; 8 carried; no referendum has carried since 1977.

Figure 9. The strongest case on each side of change by referendum only (record: source on the figure).

The record behind those panels: since 1901, **45 proposed changes** have been put to the Australian people at referendums; **only 8 have been carried**, and **none since 1977**. Proposals in 1984, 1988 and 1999 all failed. Whether that record shows a useful protection or a broken mechanism is exactly what the next case study tests.

Case study: the republic referendum of 1999

Should Australia replace the monarch with an Australian head of state and become a republic? This question was put to the people at the referendum of **6 November 1999** — one of two questions that day, alongside a proposal to add a new preamble to the Constitution. The story of the proposal matters as much as the result (Figure 10).

The republic referendum of 6 November 1999, at a glance

Should Australia replace the monarch with an Australian head of state? One of two questions that day; the other proposed a new preamble for the Constitution.

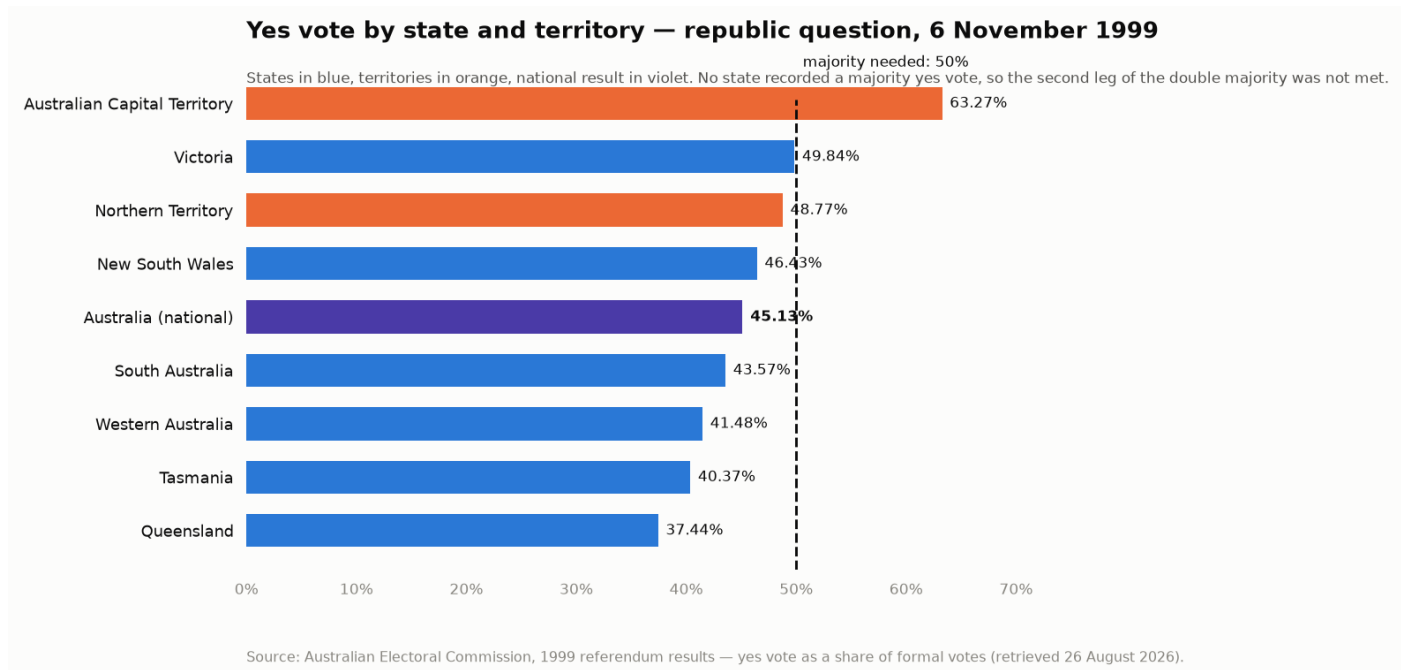
	The story of the proposal
Proposal	To alter the Constitution so Australia becomes a republic, with the Queen and Governor-General replaced by a President appointed by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Commonwealth Parliament.
How it began	The Constitutional Convention, Canberra, February 1998 — 154 delegates, half of them elected by voters — voted 73 to 57 that Australia should become a republic in principle, and recommended this model.
Through parliament	The Constitution Alteration (Establishment of Republic) 1999 passed both houses of the Commonwealth Parliament in August 1999, with support from the government and the opposition.
The vote	Held 6 November 1999, run by the Australian Electoral Commission. Voting compulsory for enrolled voters; every household posted the official yes and no pamphlet.
Result	45.13 per cent voted yes, 54.87 per cent no. No state voted yes. The Australian Capital Territory voted 63.27 per cent yes, the highest of any state or territory. Not carried: the Constitution was unchanged.

Sources: Australian Electoral Commission, 1999 referendum results; Constitutional Convention records, February 1998; Parliament of Australia, bill records (retrieved 26 August 2026).

A fact table for the republic referendum of 6 November 1999. Proposal: to alter the Constitution so Australia becomes a republic, with the Queen and Governor-General replaced by a President appointed by a two-thirds majority of the members of the Commonwealth Parliament. How it began: the Constitutional Convention in Canberra, February 1998 — 154 delegates, half elected — voted 73 to 57 that Australia should become a republic in principle and recommended this model. Through parliament: the Constitution Alteration (Establishment of Republic) 1999 passed both houses of the Commonwealth Parliament in August 1999 with support from the government and the opposition. The vote: 6 November 1999, run by the Australian Electoral Commission; voting compulsory for enrolled voters; the official yes and no pamphlet posted to every household. Result: 45.13 per cent voted yes, 54.87 per cent no; no state voted yes; the Australian Capital Territory voted 63.27 per cent yes, the highest of any state or territory. Not carried: the Constitution was unchanged.

Figure 10. The republic referendum of 6 November 1999 at a glance (sources on the figure).

The result by state is worth a close look (Figure 11), because it shows the double majority doing its work: the national yes vote fell short of a majority, and no single state voted yes either.



A horizontal bar chart of the yes vote at the republic referendum of 6 November 1999 by state and territory, with a line marked majority needed at 50 per cent. Australian Capital Territory 63.27 per cent yes. Victoria 49.84 per cent. New South Wales 46.43 per cent. South Australia 43.57 per cent. Western Australia 41.48 per cent. Tasmania 40.37 per cent. Queensland 37.44 per cent. Northern Territory 48.77 per cent. National result 45.13 per cent. No state recorded a majority yes vote, so the second leg of the double majority was not met.

Figure 11. Yes vote by state and territory, republic question, 6 November 1999 (source on the figure).

Why did it fail? The no vote brought together people with very different reasons, and the yes vote split:

- **Monarchists** argued the existing system works: the Governor-General stands above party politics, stability matters, and “don’t change what works”.
- **Some republicans voted no.** They wanted a president directly elected by the people, and rejected the 1999 model — chosen by a two-thirds vote of politicians — as not democratic enough. Their slogan captured it: vote no to get a better republic later.
- **Yes supporters** argued that Australia’s head of state should be an Australian citizen, chosen from among Australians, and that the model was a careful, workable first step.

Did the process work? Figure 12 weighs both sides and reaches a judgement — the same steelman pattern you will use again in section 5A.

A model assessment: did the referendum process work?

The steelman pattern used in this book: present the strongest case on each side, then judge — and say what the judgement turns on.

Strongest case that the process worked well

- The people had the final say, exactly as section 128 intends — popular sovereignty in action.
- Both sides accepted the result; the Constitution stayed settled.
- The double majority protected smaller states from being overruled by larger ones.
- Every household received the official yes and no cases before voting.

Strongest case that the process worked badly

- Change proved almost impossible: even a proposal backed by the government, the opposition and years of public debate failed.
- No referendum has carried since 1977, so the text cannot keep up with changing community views.
- The model question split the yes vote, and a determined minority was able to block change.
- A costly national vote produced no change to show.

Judgement

The referendum process is effective as a protection: it guarantees that only changes with broad support across the country and the states become law, and it keeps the final decision with the people. It is a poor tool for delivering change quickly, because the same demanding rule that protects the Constitution also defeats most proposals. Whether that is a strength or a weakness depends on what you think a constitution is for: to enable change, or to restrain it.

Assessment applies section 128 of the Australian Constitution to the referendum of 6 November 1999; results per the Australian Electoral Commission (retrieved 26 August 2026).

A model assessment in three panels. Strongest case that the process worked well: the people had the final say, exactly as section 128 intends — popular sovereignty in action; the result was accepted by both sides and the Constitution stayed settled; the double majority protected smaller states from being overruled by larger ones; every household received the official yes and no pamphlet before voting. Strongest case that the process worked badly: change proved almost impossible — even a proposal backed by the government, the opposition and years of public debate failed; no referendum has carried since 1977, so the Constitution cannot keep up with changing community views; the model question split the yes vote, and a minority of voters was able to block change; the cost and effort of a national vote was spent with no change to show. Judgement: the referendum process is effective as a protection — it guarantees that only changes with broad support across the country and the states become law, and it keeps the final decision with the people. It is a poor tool for delivering change quickly, because the same demanding rule that protects the Constitution also blocks most change, even when support is large. Whether that is a strength or a weakness depends on what you think a constitution is for.

Figure 12. A model assessment of the 1999 referendum process: steelman both sides, then judge.

Notice what the judgement rests on: not whether you support a republic, but whether the *process* did what section 128 designed it to do. The effectiveness of the decision itself — measured against a fuller set of questions — returns in section 5A.

Words to keep handy

Words to keep handy

Eight key terms from this section. Each is defined where it first appears in the text above.

constitution the basic rules for how a country is governed; Australia's is one written document in force since 1 January 1901	federal system a system that divides lawmaking power between a national parliament and state parliaments
specific powers the matters listed in section 51 that the Commonwealth may make laws about	residual powers the matters not listed, which stayed with the states
referendum a national vote on whether to approve a proposed change to the Constitution	double majority what a referendum needs to pass: a majority of all voters nationally AND a majority of voters in at least 4 of the 6 states
constitutional monarchy a system where the monarch is head of state but power is limited by the constitution and elected politicians govern	popular sovereignty the idea that the final authority over the Constitution belongs to the people

Each term is defined at first use in section 1A; definitions follow the Australian Constitution and this book's usage.

Eight term cards. *constitution* — the basic rules for how a country is governed; Australia's is one written document in force since 1 January 1901. *federal system* — a system that divides lawmaking power between a national parliament and state parliaments. *specific powers* — the matters listed in section 51 that the Commonwealth may make laws about. *residual powers* — the matters not listed, which stayed with the states. *referendum* — a national vote on whether to approve a proposed change to the Constitution. *double majority* — what a referendum needs to pass: a majority of all voters nationally AND a majority of voters in at least 4 of the 6 states. *constitutional monarchy* — a system where the monarch is head of state but power is limited by the constitution and elected politicians govern. *popular sovereignty* — the idea that the final authority over the Constitution belongs to the people.

Figure 13. Key words for this section, each defined where it first appears above.

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded (tracing a referendum through section 128)

Using Figure 6, trace the path of the republic proposal from idea to result. For each step, state the rule and what actually happened in 1998–99.

Reasoning	Comment
Step 1 — a proposal. The republic question had been debated for years; in February 1998, the Constitutional Convention in Canberra — 154 delegates, half of them	Referendums usually begin with a public question being worked into a specific proposal.

elected — voted 73 to 57 that Australia should become a republic in principle, and recommended a president appointed by a two-thirds vote of the Commonwealth Parliament.

Step 2 — through parliament. The *Constitution Alteration (Establishment of Republic) 1999* was introduced and passed both houses of the Commonwealth Parliament in August 1999, with support from the government and the opposition.

Step 3 — the vote is set. The referendum was held on 6 November 1999 — within the two-to-six-month window after the bill passed.

Step 4 — the AEC runs the vote. The AEC updated the roll, posted the official yes/no pamphlet to every household, ran polling places and counted the votes. Voting was compulsory for enrolled voters.

Step 5 — the double majority test. Nationally, 45.13 per cent voted yes — so the first leg failed. No state recorded a yes majority (Victoria came closest at 49.84 per cent) — so the second leg failed too.

Step 6 — the result. The proposal was not carried. The Constitution was unchanged.

Section 128 requires the bill to pass both houses; a constitution-change bill follows the same path through parliament as any other bill (section 1B shows that path), but ordinary passage is only the start here.

Section 128 sets that window.

The AEC is the independent body that keeps the machinery neutral.

Both legs must be met; here neither was.

A failed referendum changes nothing in the text — that is the rule everyone accepted in advance.

Example 2 — scaffolded (weighing the advantages and disadvantages)

Evaluate the claim: “*A Constitution that can be changed only by referendum is good design.*” Use Figure 9 and the referendum record.

The strongest case for. The rule keeps the final say with the people, not with whichever party holds government; it demands broad support across the country and the states; and it keeps the Constitution stable — no government can quietly rewrite the rules that constrain it.

The strongest case against. The rule makes change very hard: 45 proposals, only 8 carried, none since 1977. Even a proposal with the backing of both major parties — the 1999 republic question — failed. A determined minority, or a split yes vote, can block change most voters might accept.

Judgement. The rule is good at its main job — making sure the Constitution changes only when the people widely agree — but the price is that the Constitution is very hard to change. Whether the price is worth paying depends on whether you value stability or responsiveness more.

These are the popular sovereignty and stability arguments.

The record supplies the evidence on this side.

A fair evaluation states both sides at their strongest before judging, and says what the judgement turns on.

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Match each term to its definition. Terms: *referendum*, *double majority*, *residual powers*, *constitutional monarchy*, *popular sovereignty*. (a) Powers not listed in section 51, which stayed with the states. (b) A national vote on whether

to approve a proposed change to the Constitution. (c) The idea that the final authority over the Constitution belongs to the Australian people. (d) A system in which the monarch is head of state but power is limited by the constitution. (e) What a referendum needs to pass: a national majority of voters *and* a majority of voters in at least four of the six states.

Q2. The events of the 1890s are listed below out of order. Rewrite them in the correct order using Figure 2. *The Commonwealth of Australia begins; the colonies' voters approve the draft at referendums; the British Parliament passes the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act; the Australasian Federal Convention finalises the draft constitution.*

Q3. Using Figure 3: (a) how many members does the House of Representatives have, and how are its seats shared between the states? (b) how many senators does each original state have? (c) explain in one sentence why the smaller colonies insisted on this second rule.

Q4. Classify each matter as a Commonwealth *specific power* or a state *residual power*: (a) defence; (b) schools; (c) immigration; (d) hospitals; (e) currency; (f) roads. Then state which law prevails when a valid Commonwealth law and a state law clash on the same matter, and name the section that says so.

Q5. Using Figures 6 and 7: (a) what must happen in both houses of parliament before a referendum can be held? (b) name two jobs the AEC does at a referendum; (c) state the two legs of the double majority.

Q6. Using Figure 5, give one constitutional feature that protects (a) the interests of the states, and (b) the rights of individuals.

Unscaffolded

Q7. Explain why the authors of the Constitution needed to compromise, using one specific example of a compromise from this section.

Q8. The authors made the Constitution changeable only by referendum. Explain one advantage and one disadvantage of that choice, and give one piece of evidence from the referendum record that supports each side.

Q9. “The referendum process is an effective way to change the Constitution.” Present the strongest case for and the strongest case against this claim, using the 1999 republic referendum and the figures in Figures 10 and 11, then give your own reasoned judgement in a paragraph of six to eight lines.

Q10. Using Figure 5, judge how strongly the Constitution supports democratic institutions. Choose two rows of the table, and for each, explain one way the Constitution upholds the feature and one limit on that support.

Source-based inquiry

Read Source A, then answer parts (a) to (c).

Source A — Preamble to the *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900* (United Kingdom), which contains the Australian Constitution (retrieved 26 August 2026). “WHEREAS the people of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania, humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God, have agreed to unite in one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth under the Crown of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, and under the Constitution hereby established ...”

Gloss: *indissoluble* means “unable to be broken apart”.

Q11. (a) Identify two phrases in Source A that show the new nation’s authority was meant to come from its people, and two phrases that show the new system would be both federal and monarchical. (b) Source A lists five colonies, but there were six British colonies in Australia in 1900. Using Figure 2, suggest why one colony is missing from the list. (c) Evaluate Source A as evidence for popular sovereignty: give one reason it supports the idea that the Constitution rests on the people’s agreement, and one reason to be cautious about reading it that way, then give your own reasoned judgement.

Answers

Q1. (a) residual powers. (b) referendum. (c) popular sovereignty. (d) constitutional monarchy. (e) double majority.
Q2. The Australasian Federal Convention finalises the draft constitution; the colonies' voters approve the draft at referendums; the British Parliament passes the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act; the Commonwealth of Australia begins. **Q3.** (a) 151 members, with seats spread according to population, so larger states have more members. (b) 12 each. (c) So the smaller states could not simply be outvoted by the larger ones in every decision. **Q4.** Specific: defence, immigration, currency. Residual: schools, hospitals, roads. The Commonwealth law prevails; section 109. **Q5.** (a) The bill to alter the Constitution must pass both houses, each by an absolute majority (at least 76 of 151 in the House, 39 of 76 in the Senate). (b) Any two of: maintaining the electoral roll; posting the official yes/no pamphlet; running polling places and postal voting; counting and checking the votes; declaring and publishing the result. (c) A majority of all voters across Australia, and a majority of voters in at least four of the six states. **Q6.** (a) Any one of: 12 senators for every state regardless of size; sections 106–108 keeping state constitutions and parliaments; section 123 requiring a state's consent before its borders change; every state's voters having an equal say under section 128. (b) Any one of: section 41 (right to vote), section 51(xxxi) (property taken on just terms), section 80 (trial by jury), section 116 (freedom of religion), section 117 (no discrimination by state residence). **Q7.** See fully-worked solutions. **Q8.** See fully-worked solutions. **Q9.** See fully-worked solutions. **Q10.** See fully-worked solutions. **Q11.** (a) People: "the people ... have agreed to unite"; "under the Constitution hereby established" (agreed rules). Federal: "one indissoluble Federal Commonwealth". Monarchical: "under the Crown of the United Kingdom". (b) See fully-worked solutions. (c) See fully-worked solutions.

Fully-worked solutions

Q7. The authors had to hold two aims together that pull apart: a national government strong enough to handle defence, trade and foreign affairs, and colonies that wanted to keep their own parliaments, laws and identity. No agreement could pass the referendums unless both big and small colonies accepted it. The clearest example is the Parliament itself: the larger colonies wanted seats by population, which would give them control, while the smaller colonies refused to join if they could be outvoted in everything. The compromise was two houses — a House of Representatives with seats by population, and a Senate with equal numbers of senators for every original state — so each side got what mattered most to it. Other examples include the split of specific and residual powers, and the capital being placed in New South Wales but away from Sydney.

Q8. Advantage: the rule keeps the final decision with the people (popular sovereignty) and demands support that is broad across both the national vote and the states, so no government can rewrite the rules that limit it on its own majority. Evidence: all 45 proposals have been decided by the voters themselves, and the double majority has repeatedly stopped changes that lacked wide support. Disadvantage: the rule makes change extremely hard, so the Constitution can fall out of step with community views. Evidence: only 8 of 45 proposals have been carried, and no referendum has succeeded since 1977 — even the 1999 republic proposal, backed by both major parties, failed.

Q9. Model response. Strongest case for: the process put the final decision exactly where section 128 puts it — with the people. The AEC ran a neutral vote, every household received the official yes and no cases, voting was compulsory, and the result was accepted without dispute; the change did not proceed because it lacked the broad support the rule demands, which is the rule working as designed. Strongest case against: the process failed to deliver change even though the proposal had years of public debate, a national convention, and the support of the government and opposition. Nationally only 45.13 per cent voted yes, no state reached a majority (Victoria came closest at 49.84 per cent), and republicans who wanted a directly elected president split the yes vote — showing how a demanding rule plus a divided yes side can block change a future majority might want. Judgement: as a protection the process is effective — it guarantees stability and keeps sovereignty with the people. As a tool for change it is weak, because the same demanding test that protects the Constitution defeats most proposals: none has passed since 1977. Whether that balance is right depends on whether you think a constitution's first job is to enable change or to restrain it.

Q10. Model response. First row — the elected federal parliament. The Constitution upholds this: sections 7 and 24 require members of both houses to be "directly chosen by the people", and House elections must occur at least every three years, so the people regularly choose their lawmakers. The limit: the details of who may vote and how elections run are left to the parliament's own laws, which means parliament holds considerable power over the system that elects it — the High Court has had to step in to protect the vote (section 2B). Second row — protection of individual

rights. The Constitution upholds this in part: a handful of rights are written in, such as trial by jury for Commonwealth offences (section 80) and freedom of religion (section 116). The limit: there is no full bill of rights, so most rights depend on parliaments and the courts rather than on the Constitution itself. On balance, the Constitution upholds the institutions of democracy — elected parliaments, a federal structure, an independent court — more strongly than it upholds a complete list of individual rights.

Q11(b). Western Australia is missing because it voted later than the others. The British Act received Royal Assent on 9 July 1900, but Western Australia’s referendum was held on 31 July 1900, after the Act had already been passed. Its people approved union, and Western Australia joined as an original state under the Act’s provisions for later-joining colonies.

Q11(c). Supporting: the preamble’s opening words — “the people ... have agreed to unite” — ground the Constitution’s authority in the people’s own decision, made at the referendums of 1898–1900, which is exactly what popular sovereignty means in this section. Caution: the phrase records what voters in the colonies decided in 1898–1900, and not everyone living in those colonies had a vote then, so “the people” in 1900 was narrower than it is today; and the preamble is part of the British Act, not a numbered section of the Constitution, so it states an idea rather than a rule a court can enforce. Judgement: as evidence of the *idea* of popular sovereignty the preamble is strong — the Constitution was genuinely put to voters and could not exist without their yes votes. As evidence of a *legal power* held by the people, it is weaker, because the enforceable people’s power lives in section 128, not in the preamble’s words.

Sources (all retrieved 26 August 2026): Australian Electoral Commission, referendum dates and results and the role of the AEC at referendums (aec.gov.au); the Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act 1900 (United Kingdom) and the Constitution set out in it, including the preamble and sections 1, 7, 24, 41, 51, 80, 92, 106–109, 116, 117, 123, 125 and 128; Parliament of Australia, records of the Constitution Alteration (Establishment of Republic) 1999 and the Constitution Alteration (Referendums) 1977 (aph.gov.au); records of the Australasian Federal Convention 1897–98 and the Constitutional Convention, Canberra, February 1998.

How government policy is made and put into action

Curriculum link — VC2HC10K02

- VC2HC10K02.E01
- VC2HC10K02.E02
- VC2HC10K02.E03

You have already met the big idea in earlier levels: in Australia's democracy, citizens vote for a parliament, and the parliament makes the laws. This section follows **one real policy** — the national rule setting a minimum age for social media — from first idea to enacted law, and asks who shaped it and whether it can work.

Theory

What is a policy?

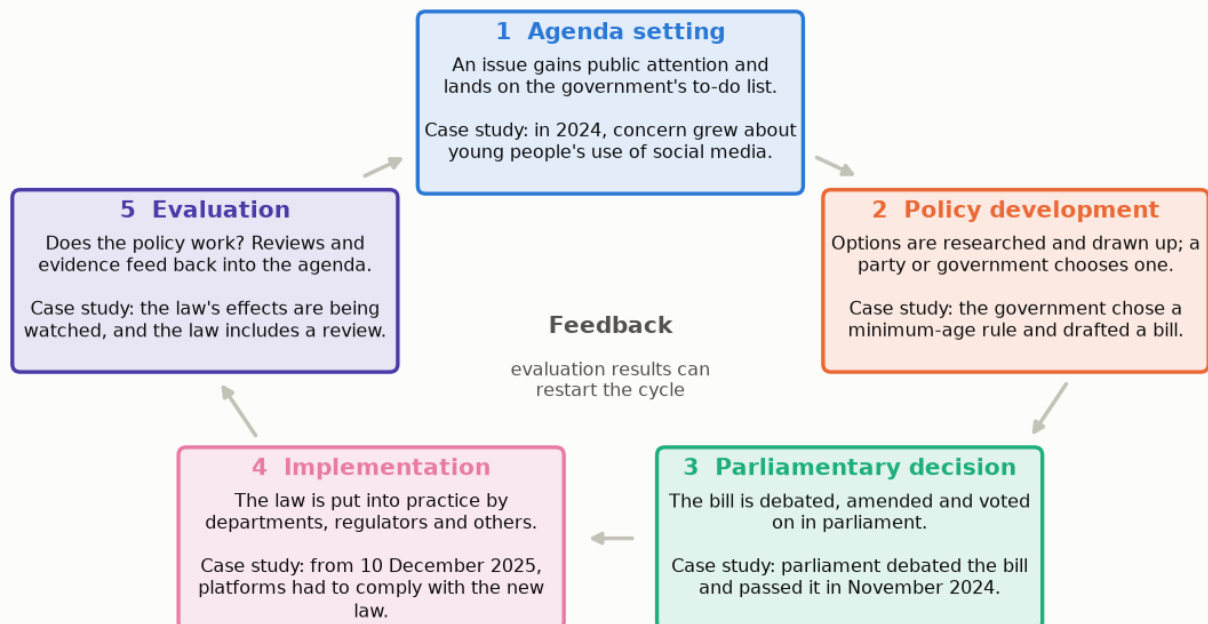
A **policy** is a plan of action a government chooses to deal with a problem or reach a goal. A policy is not the same thing as a law. Some policies are carried out with money and programs the government already controls; but when a policy needs new legal rules or new powers, it must be turned into a law — an **Act of Parliament** — passed by the parliament.

The policy cycle

Policy usually moves through five stages, and the last stage feeds back into the first. Figure 1 shows the cycle with our case study at each stage.

The policy cycle

Government policy usually moves through these stages in order — and the last stage feeds back into the first.



Case study: the social media minimum-age law, Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024 (Commonwealth).

The policy cycle: five stages arranged in a loop — agenda setting, policy development, parliamentary decision, implementation, and evaluation — with arrows showing the order and evaluation feeding back into the agenda; each stage box pairs the general idea with the matching step from the social media minimum-age case study.

Figure 1. The policy cycle, with the social media minimum-age case study at each stage.

Who shapes policy?

Governments do not decide alone. Four groups of actors matter most (Figure 2).

- A **political party** is a group that tries to win seats at elections and form government. The party (or team of parties) with the most seats in the lower house forms the **government**; the next largest group becomes the **opposition**, which questions the government and offers alternatives; smaller parties are called **minor parties**.
- An **interest group** is an organised group — a business body, a union, a charity, a professional body or a campaign group — that tries to influence government decisions without standing for election itself. Interest groups write **submissions** (formal written views) to parliamentary **inquiries**, run public campaigns, and meet with decision-makers. An inquiry is a public examination of a bill or an issue, usually run by a **committee** — a small group of members of parliament set up to look closely at one thing.
- **Media organisations** — news websites, television and radio news, newspapers — help set the agenda by choosing what to report and what to put on the front page. They also give their own views in **editorials** (the opinion of the news organisation itself, as distinct from its news reporting) and publish opinion pieces from many sides.
- **Citizens and communities** vote, sign **petitions** (formal written requests), write to their local member of parliament, join campaigns and protests, and give evidence at inquiries.

Who shapes government policy?

Many actors try to influence what the government decides to do. Four of the most important:

Political parties

- work out policies to offer voters at elections
- the party that forms government decides which policies to pursue
- opposition and minor parties question policy and offer alternatives

Interest groups

- organised groups speaking for members or a cause (businesses, unions, charities)
- write submissions to parliamentary inquiries
- run campaigns and meet with decision-makers

The media

- choose which issues to report, helping set the agenda
- report facts, and publish opinion pieces and editorials
- give a voice to different sides of a debate

Citizens and communities

- vote in elections
- sign petitions and write to their local member of parliament
- join campaigns, protests and public inquiries

Other actors matter too: public servants give advice, courts interpret the law, and international bodies can raise issues.

Four panels, one for each group that shapes policy — political parties, interest groups, media organisations, and citizens and communities — each listing three ways that group tries to influence what the government decides to do.

Figure 2. Four groups that shape government policy.

From policy to law: how a bill becomes an Act

When a policy needs new legal rules, the government writes it up as a **bill** — a proposed law placed before the parliament. Figure 3 shows the Commonwealth process; Victoria's is very similar.

How a bill becomes a law

The Commonwealth legislative process — state parliaments follow a similar one.

1 An issue reaches the agenda

A problem or idea gains attention — through voters, media coverage, interest groups, party policy or events.

2 The bill is drafted

The proposal is written out as a bill — a proposed law. Most bills are drafted by the government of the day.

3 House of Representatives

First reading: the bill is formally introduced.
Second reading: members debate the main ideas.
Consideration in detail: examined clause by clause.
Third reading: the House takes a final vote.

4 Senate

The same stages are repeated in the Senate. Senate committees often hold inquiries into bills, taking submissions from the public, experts and interest groups.

5 Both houses must agree

The House and the Senate must pass the bill in exactly the same form. Amendments may travel between the houses until they agree.

6 Royal Assent

The Governor-General (the King's representative) gives formal approval. The bill becomes an Act of Parliament — a law.

7 Commencement

The Act starts operating. Some laws commence later, to give people and organisations time to prepare.

8 Implementation

Government departments and regulators put the law into practice — guidance, monitoring and enforcement.

Victoria's Parliament follows a similar process with its own two houses.

A vertical flow chart of eight steps: an issue reaches the agenda; the bill is drafted; the bill passes through stages in the House of Representatives; the same stages repeat in the Senate; both houses must agree on exactly the same form; the Governor-General gives Royal Assent; the Act commences; and departments and regulators implement it.

Figure 3. How a bill becomes a law in the Commonwealth Parliament.

Three details matter for this section.

1. **Both houses must agree.** The Commonwealth Parliament has two houses: the House of Representatives (151 members) and the Senate (76 senators). A bill must pass both houses in exactly the same form, and amendments (changes to the bill) often travel between the houses until they agree. The Senate is called the **house of review** because it re-examines bills that the House has already passed.

2. **Royal Assent.** Once both houses agree, the Governor-General — the King’s representative in Australia — gives formal approval. This step is called **Royal Assent**, and it turns the bill into an Act of Parliament.
3. **Commencement.** An Act does not always start operating on the day of Royal Assent. The day it starts operating is its **commencement**, and a gap is often left so that people, businesses and regulators — the bodies that make sure rules are followed — can get ready.

Two parliaments can affect you

Australia’s federal system splits lawmaking between the Commonwealth Parliament and the state parliaments. Figure 4 compares the Commonwealth Parliament with Victoria’s.

Two parliaments, one process

Australia's federal system means two parliaments can make laws that affect you. Both have two houses, and most bills must pass both.

	Commonwealth Parliament	Victorian Parliament
Makes law for	the whole of Australia (matters like defence, immigration, online safety)	the state of Victoria (matters like schools, police, hospitals, public transport)
Lower house	House of Representatives — 151 members	Legislative Assembly — 88 members
Upper house (house of review)	Senate — 76 senators	Legislative Council — 40 members
Formal approval (assent) by	the Governor-General	the Governor of Victoria
Meets at	Parliament House, Canberra	Parliament House, Melbourne

Where the two disagree about who has power, the Australian Constitution decides (see section 1A).

A table comparing the Commonwealth Parliament and the Victorian Parliament: what each makes law for, the name and size of each lower and upper house, who gives formal approval (the Governor-General or the Governor of Victoria), and where each meets (Canberra or Melbourne).

Figure 4. The Commonwealth and Victorian parliaments compared.

Our case study is a **Commonwealth** law: the Australian Constitution gives the Commonwealth Parliament power over communications, which includes online services. A Victorian matter — a rule about e-scooters, for example — would instead travel through the Victorian Parliament in Melbourne. (The rule for who holds which power is the subject of section 1A.)

Can a policy effectively resolve an issue?

“Effectively” is a contested word. Two people can agree that a law passed and still disagree about whether it works, because they define “works” differently. A fair evaluation turns the question into testable parts (Figure 5) and applies the **steelman rule**: when a view is contested, present each side at its strongest before judging it.

Can policy effectively resolve an issue? Five questions to ask

'Effectively' is a contested word — define it before you judge. These five questions turn it into something you can test.

Question to ask	Applied to the minimum-age rule
1 Does it achieve its stated purpose?	The stated purpose is to reduce harms to under-16s from social media. Results can only be checked once the law has been operating — it commenced on 10 December 2025.
2 Can it be enforced?	Platforms must take 'reasonable steps' to stop under-16 accounts. Age-checking is technically hard; the eSafety Commissioner can seek large penalties for serious or repeated failures.
3 Do the benefits outweigh costs and unintended effects?	Possible unintended effects: teenagers shifting to unregulated platforms, privacy risks from age checks, and some young people losing supportive communities.
4 Is it based on good evidence?	Experts disagree about how strong the evidence is linking social media to harm. Australia was the first country to try this approach nationally, so there was no overseas model to copy.
5 Can it be reviewed and improved?	Yes — amendments secured a review of how the law works in practice, and the list of covered platforms can be updated as services change.

A policy that scores poorly on these questions may still be worth keeping — but the weaknesses must be said out loud, not ignored.

A table of five questions for judging whether a policy effectively resolves an issue — does it achieve its stated purpose, can it be enforced, do the benefits outweigh the costs and unintended effects, is it based on good evidence, and can it be reviewed and improved — with each question applied to the social media minimum-age rule.

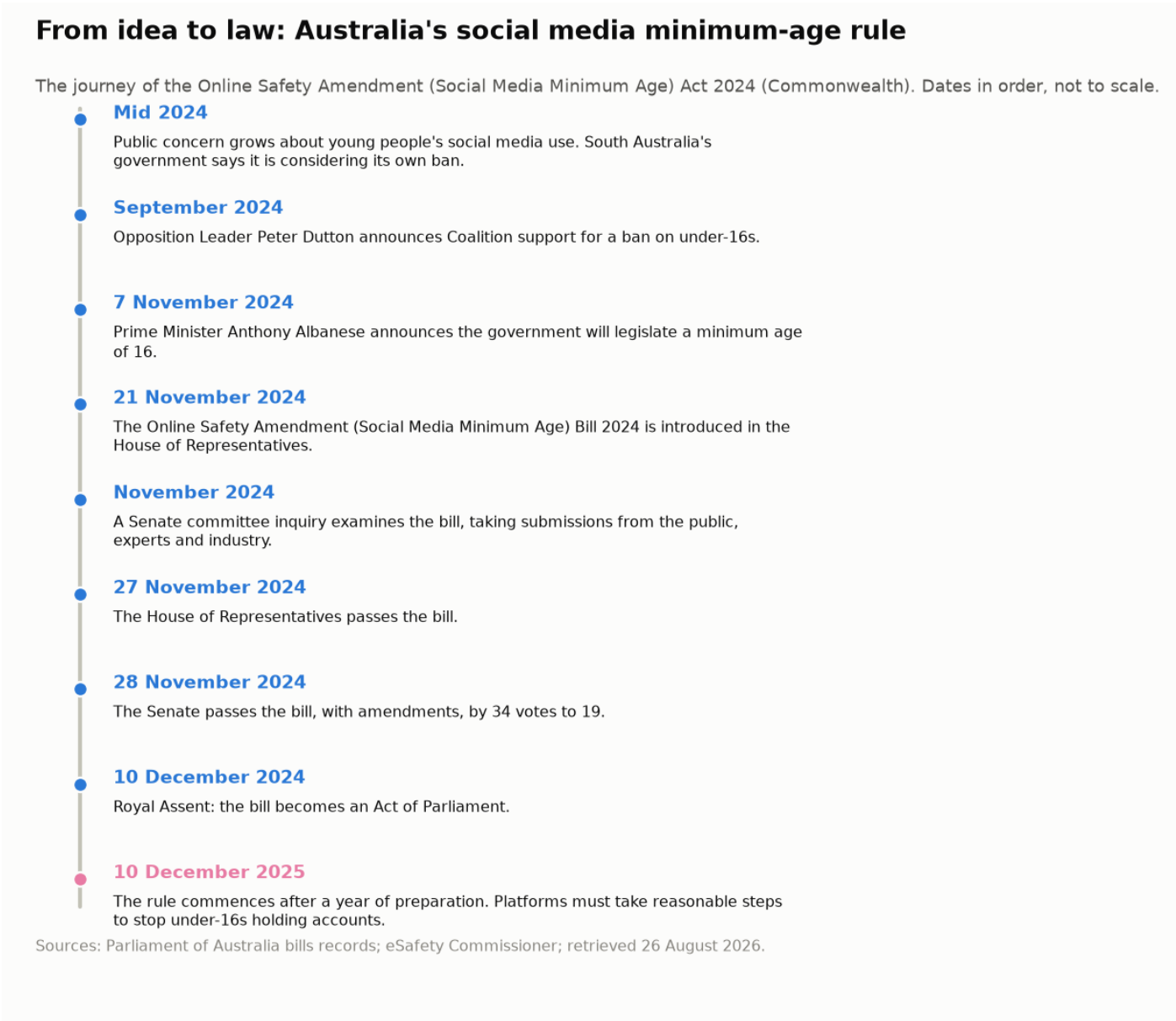
Figure 5. Five questions for evaluating whether a policy effectively resolves an issue.

A model evaluation. Those in favour argue that the rule delivers real protection: most parents support it, both major parties voted for it, and platforms earn money from keeping young users scrolling, so they will not fix the problem without a law. Those against argue that the rule cannot fully work: determined teenagers will move to less regulated apps, age checks raise privacy concerns, and some young people lose online communities that support them. Weighing both sides at their strongest: the law can reduce harm for many under-16s, but it cannot resolve the issue by itself — much depends on how well it is enforced, on what its review finds, and on other measures such as safer platform design. That is what a balanced evaluation looks like: a judgement, reached after the strongest case on each side has been heard.

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded (charting a policy from idea to law)

Using Figure 6, trace the social media minimum-age policy from first idea to passed law.



A vertical timeline of nine dated events from mid 2024 to 10 December 2025: growing public concern and South Australia considering its own ban; the Coalition announcing support for a ban; the Prime Minister announcing a minimum age of 16; the bill introduced in the House of Representatives; a Senate committee inquiry; the House passing the bill; the Senate passing it with amendments by 34 votes to 19; Royal Assent on 10 December 2024; and commencement on 10 December 2025.

Figure 6. The case study from idea to law (sources on the figure).

Reasoning	Comment
Stage 1 — agenda. Mid to late 2024: public concern about young people’s social media use grows; South Australia says it is considering its own ban.	An issue reaches the agenda when voters, media and governments keep returning to it.
Stage 2 — development. September 2024: the Coalition announces support for a ban. 7 November 2024: the Prime Minister announces the government will make a law setting the minimum age at 16. A bill is then drafted.	Policy development is where options are weighed and one is chosen — here, an age limit rather than, say, new design rules for platforms.

Stage 3 — the House of Representatives. The bill is introduced on 21 November 2024, debated, and passed on 27 November 2024.

The House is the house of government: the party with the most seats almost always carries its bills.

Stage 4 — the Senate. A Senate committee inquiry examines the bill and takes submissions; the Senate passes the bill **with amendments** on 28 November 2024, by 34 votes to 19 (Figure 7).

The Senate is the house of review: it re-examined the bill and changed it before agreeing.

Stage 5 — Royal Assent and commencement. Royal Assent on 10 December 2024 turns the bill into an Act. The rule commences a year later, on 10 December 2025.

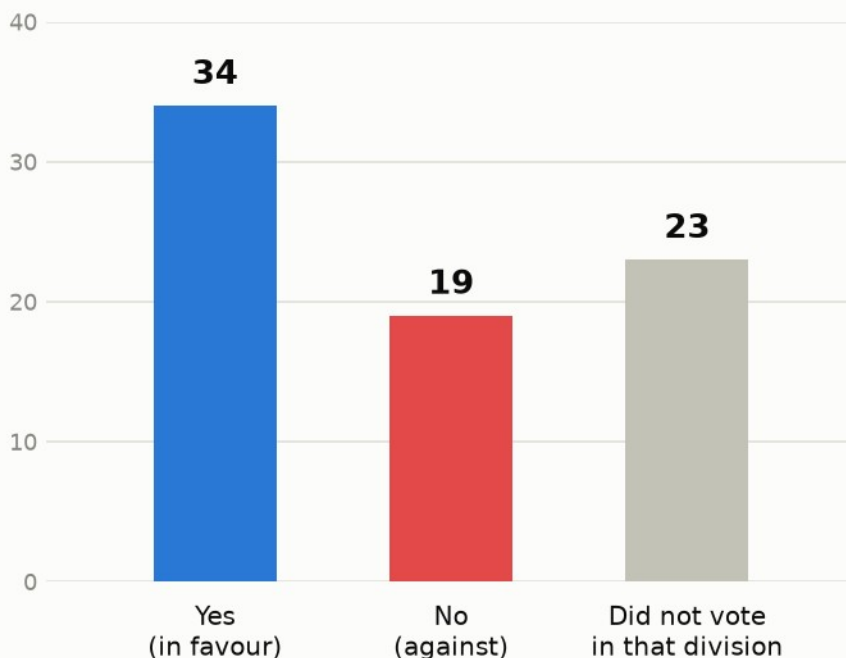
The one-year gap is the commencement period: platforms and the regulator needed time to prepare.

Stage 6 — the loop closes. The Act includes a review of how it works in practice; what it finds will feed back into the agenda (Figure 1, stage 5 to stage 1).

Charting a policy is not finished at Royal Assent — implementation and evaluation are part of the story too.

The Senate's vote on the bill, 28 November 2024

The Senate has 76 senators. A bill passes with more votes in favour than against.



Source: Parliament of Australia, Senate division records; retrieved 26 August 2026.

A bar chart of the Senate division of 28 November 2024: 34 senators voted yes in favour, 19 voted no against, and 23 did not vote in that division; the Senate has 76 senators and a bill passes with more votes in favour than against.

Figure 7. The Senate's vote on the bill, 28 November 2024 (source on the figure).

Example 2 — scaffolded (investigating public viewpoints)

Investigate the public viewpoints on this issue: who spoke, what position did they take, and what was their strongest reason? Use Figure 8.

Investigating viewpoints: who said what about the minimum-age rule?

Public positions on the issue in late 2024, when the law was debated. Each side's strongest reason is recorded (steelman rule: present each position at its strongest).

Actor type	Actor	Public viewpoint (late 2024)	Main reasons given
Political party (government)	Australian Labor Party	Supported — introduced the bill and pushed for its passage	Protecting young people's wellbeing; supporting families dealing with social media harms.
Political party (opposition)	Liberal-National Coalition	Supported — voted for the bill	Concern about children's safety online; the Coalition had already proposed its own version of a ban.
Political party	Australian Greens	Opposed — voted against in the Senate	Argued the law was rushed; wanted tougher rules on the platforms themselves, not only an age limit; raised the law's effects on young people's rights.
Interest group (regulator)	eSafety Commissioner	Supported the aim, with cautions	Told the Senate inquiry an age rule is only one part of keeping young people safe online; gave advice on how age checks should work.
Interest group (industry)	Meta and other platform companies	Disagreed with a ban, but said they would comply with the law	Warned that teenagers may move to less safe, unregulated parts of the internet.
Interest group (rights)	Digital Rights Watch; Amnesty International Australia	Opposed	Age checks raise privacy concerns; young people may lose access to information, support and community.
Media	Australian news organisations	Covered the issue heavily; editorial opinions were split	Some editorials backed the ban as common-sense protection; others warned it was an experiment with uncertain results.

Positions summarised from public statements, party materials and submissions to the Senate Inquiry (aph.gov.au); retrieved 26 August 2026.

A table of public positions on the minimum-age rule in late 2024: the Labor Party supported it (protecting young people's wellbeing, supporting families); the Liberal–National Coalition supported it (child safety, having proposed its own ban); the Greens opposed it (the law was rushed, platforms themselves should face tougher rules, rights concerns); the eSafety Commissioner supported the aim with cautions; Meta and other platforms disagreed but said they would comply; Digital Rights Watch and Amnesty International Australia opposed it (privacy, loss of support and community); and news organisations covered the issue heavily with editorials split for and against.

Figure 8. Public viewpoints on the issue, late 2024 (sources on the figure).

Reasoning	Comment
Parties. Labor (government) and the Coalition (opposition) both supported the bill, each with its own reasons; the Greens opposed it.	Both major parties backing a bill is unusual and shows how loud the public concern was — yet the bill was still debated and amended.
Interest groups. The eSafety Commissioner supported the aim with cautions; platform companies disagreed with the ban but said they would comply; rights groups (Digital Rights Watch, Amnesty International Australia) opposed it.	Interest groups did not line up simply “for” or “against”: the regulator warned that an age rule is only one part of keeping young people safe.
Media. News organisations covered the issue heavily, and their editorials split: some called the ban common-sense protection, others called it an experiment with uncertain results.	Media influence runs two ways: reporting helped put the issue on the agenda, and editorials then argued the case on both sides.
Conclusion about the range of views. Support was broad but not universal. The strongest opposing reasons were privacy risks from age checks, teenagers shifting to less regulated apps, and the loss of supportive online communities.	A good investigation records each position at its strongest (the steelman rule), even — especially — the positions you disagree with.

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Match each term to its definition. Terms: *policy*, *bill*, *Royal Assent*, *interest group*, *commencement*. (a) A proposed law placed before the parliament. (b) The day an Act starts operating. (c) A plan of action a government chooses to deal with a problem. (d) The formal approval, given by the Governor-General, that turns a bill into an Act. (e) An organised group that tries to influence government decisions without standing for election.

Q2. The five stages of the policy cycle are listed below out of order. Rewrite them in the correct order using Figure 1. *Evaluation*; *agenda setting*; *implementation*; *policy development*; *parliamentary decision*.

Q3. Using Figure 3: (a) name the house the social media bill entered first; (b) state what had to be true about the two houses before Royal Assent could be given; (c) name the person who gave Royal Assent, and the office they hold.

Q4. Using Figure 7: (a) how many senators voted in favour, and how many against? (b) show, in one line of working, that the bill passed. (c) explain why “did not vote in that division” is not the same as voting “no”.

Q5. Classify each actor as *political party*, *interest group*, *media organisation* or *citizens acting*: (a) the Australian Greens voting against the bill in the Senate; (b) a union writing a submission to the Senate inquiry; (c) a newspaper publishing an editorial backing the ban; (d) students organising a petition about the rule; (e) Meta warning that teenagers may move to less safe apps.

Q6. Using Figure 8, give one actor that supported the rule and one that opposed it, with the main reason each gave. Then state one way the media helped shape the debate.

Unscaffolded

Q7. Explain, using two dated examples from Figure 6, how interest groups and the media helped shape this policy before it became law.

Q8. The Senate passed the bill *with amendments*. Explain what this shows about the Senate’s role as the house of review, and what had to happen before the bill could receive Royal Assent.

Q9. Suppose Victoria wanted to make its own rule about a state matter, such as e-scooters. Using Figure 4, name the parliament that would make it, the two houses that would have to pass it, and the person who would give formal approval.

Q10. Evaluate the claim: “The minimum-age rule will effectively resolve the problem of social media harm to young people.” Use at least two of the five questions in Figure 5, present the strongest case on each side, and give your own reasoned judgement in a paragraph of six to eight lines.

Source-based inquiry

Read Source A, then answer parts (a) to (c).

Source A — *Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act 2024* (Commonwealth), effect summarised from the Act and eSafety Commissioner guidance; retrieved 26 August 2026. The Act requires providers of age-restricted social media platforms — including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok and X — to take **reasonable steps** to prevent Australians under 16 from holding accounts. It does not make it an offence for a child to hold an account: the duty sits on the platform. The eSafety Commissioner monitors compliance, and for serious or repeated failures can seek penalties of up to about \$49.5 million.

Q11. (a) In your own words, state who carries the duty under the Act, and what the duty is. (b) Suggest why parliament wrote “reasonable steps” rather than “must completely stop under-16s from holding accounts”. Think about question 2 in Figure 5. (c) Weigh the design: give one reason why “reasonable steps” makes the law stronger, and one reason why it makes the law weaker, then give your own reasoned judgement.

Answers

Q1. (a) bill. (b) commencement. (c) policy. (d) Royal Assent. (e) interest group. **Q2.** Agenda setting; policy development; parliamentary decision; implementation; evaluation. **Q3.** (a) The House of Representatives. (b) Both houses had to pass the bill in exactly the same form. (c) The Governor-General, the King's representative in Australia. **Q4.** (a) 34 in favour, 19 against. (b) $34 > 19$, so more voted for than against and the bill passed. (c) A senator who did not vote may have been absent or chosen not to take part; their position is not counted either way, whereas a "no" is a vote against. **Q5.** (a) political party; (b) interest group; (c) media organisation; (d) citizens acting; (e) interest group. **Q6.** Any correct pair, e.g. supported: Labor — protecting young people's wellbeing and supporting families; opposed: the Greens — the law was rushed and platforms themselves should face tougher rules (or Digital Rights Watch — privacy and loss of supportive communities). Media: heavy reporting put the issue on the agenda, and editorials argued the case on both sides. **Q7.** See fully-worked solutions. **Q8.** See fully-worked solutions. **Q9.** The Victorian Parliament; the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council; the Governor of Victoria. **Q10.** See fully-worked solutions. **Q11.** (a) The duty sits on the platform companies, not on children: they must take reasonable steps to stop under-16s from holding accounts. (b) A total stop cannot be guaranteed — age checks are technically hard and can be dodged — so parliament set a duty platforms can realistically meet and be judged against. (c) See fully-worked solutions.

Fully-worked solutions

Q7. Interest groups pushed the issue from both sides before the law was made: the eSafety Commissioner used the Senate inquiry to advise how age checks should work and to warn that an age rule is only one part of keeping young people safe, while platform companies such as Meta argued against the ban in their submissions. The media shaped the policy earlier still: through 2024, heavy news coverage of harm to young users kept the issue on the national agenda, and editorials — some calling the ban common-sense protection, others an experiment — put pressure on the government to act. Together, groups and media helped turn public concern (Figure 6, mid 2024) into a drafted bill (November 2024).

Q8. The Senate is the house of review: it re-examines bills the House has passed, often through committee inquiries that take public submissions. Passing the bill *with amendments* on 28 November 2024 shows that review doing real work — the Senate changed the bill (for example, amendments secured a review of how the law works in practice) rather than simply agreeing. Because both houses must pass a bill in exactly the same form, the amended bill then had to be agreed to by the House as well before Royal Assent could be given on 10 December 2024.

Q10. *Model response.* Measured against question 1 (does it achieve its stated purpose?), supporters argue the rule directly removes under-16s from the platforms where much of the harm occurs, with broad public backing; critics answer that the purpose — reducing harm — will not be achieved for determined teenagers, who will shift to less regulated apps. Measured against question 3 (do the benefits outweigh the unintended effects?), supporters point to the size of the harms the rule may prevent; critics point to privacy risks from age checks and the loss of supportive online communities for some young people. My judgement: the rule can reduce harm for many under-16s, so it is a real step; but "effectively resolve" overstates what one law can do — its value depends on enforcement, on the findings of its built-in review, and on parallel measures such as safer platform design.

Q11(c). Stronger: "reasonable steps" is enforceable — a clear, realistic duty that the eSafety Commissioner can monitor and that courts can judge against, backed by penalties of up to about \$49.5 million, so platforms must genuinely try. Weaker: it is not a guarantee — a platform can take some steps, still leave many under-16 accounts open, and argue it did what was reasonable, which may limit how much harm the rule actually removes. Judgement: on balance the design is sensible, because a duty that can be enforced beats a stricter duty that cannot — but the weaker side is exactly what the Act's review should measure.

Sources (all retrieved 26 August 2026): Parliament of Australia, bills records and Senate division records (aph.gov.au); eSafety Commissioner statements and guidance; public statements, party materials and inquiry submissions as summarised in Figure 8.

Comparing Australia’s system of government with another Asia-Pacific system

A note on the word “democracy” before we start. The Victorian Curriculum uses the word *democracy* but does not define it, and people do not all use it the same way. In this section, a country counts as a democracy if (1) its national leaders are chosen in regular elections, (2) more than one party is free to compete in those elections, and (3) voters can vote the leaders out of power. Other definitions exist and are not interchangeable with this one. For example, the government of China describes its own system as a kind of democracy and calls it “whole-process people’s democracy” — we meet that claim in part 3 of the theory and treat it as the government’s own description, not as a settled fact. Every question in this section can be answered using the definition given above.

Curriculum focus: VC2HC10K03; draws on VC2HC10K03.E01, VC2HC10K03.E03.

Theory

1. Australia’s system at a glance

Australia’s system of government is set out in a written constitution: the *Australian Constitution*, which came into force on 1 January 1901, when the six separate colonies agreed to join together as one nation. That joining together is called **federation** — a system in which power is shared between a national parliament and the parliaments of the states.

Three big ideas describe how the system works:

- **Constitutional monarchy.** Australia’s head of state is King Charles III, King of Australia. He is represented in Australia by the Governor-General (Sam Mostyn, since 1 July 2024). The King and the Governor-General act on the advice of elected ministers — their role is mostly formal and ceremonial.
- **Parliamentary democracy.** Citizens aged 18 and over vote for the members of the House of Representatives. The party (or group of parties) that holds the support of most members in that house forms the government, and its leader becomes the Prime Minister.
- **Separation of powers.** Power is spread across three branches so that no one group holds it all: the Parliament makes the laws, the **executive** (the Prime Minister, ministers and government departments) puts the laws into action, and the **judiciary** (the courts, headed by the High Court of Australia) interprets the laws and decides whether they are within the Constitution.

Australia’s elections are run by the independent Australian Electoral Commission (AEC). Voting is **compulsory** — every enrolled citizen aged 18 or over must vote, and there is a small fine for not doing so — and it is by **secret ballot**, which means nobody can see how you voted. Voters use **preferential voting**: instead of ticking one party, you number the candidates in order of preference, and your vote can flow to your next choice if your first choice cannot win. At the most recent federal election, on 3 May 2025, the Labor Party led by Anthony Albanese won a second term in government, and more than nine out of ten enrolled Australians voted (AEC, retrieved 26 August 2026).

Figure 1 lists the key features of the system and the value each one serves. Figure 2 shows how the parts fit together.

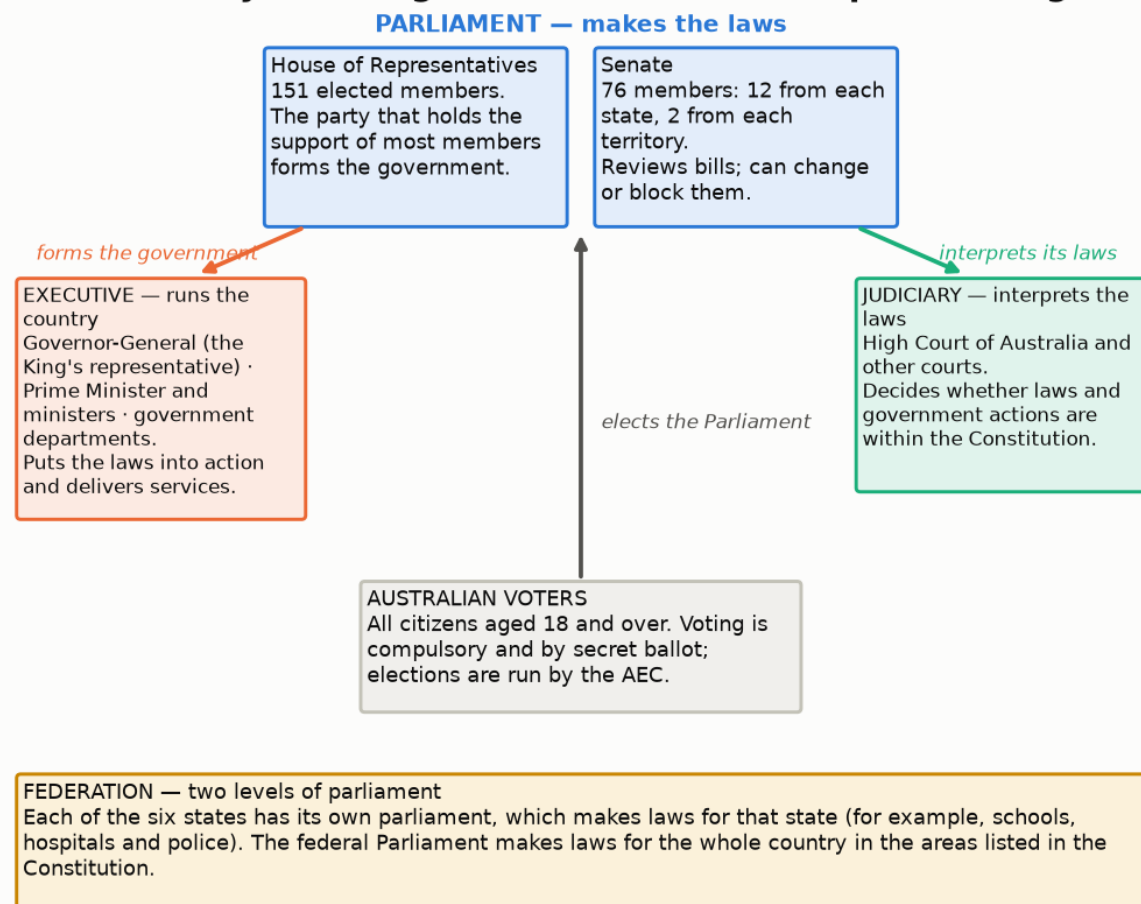
Australia's system of government — key features and the values behind them

Feature	What it means	Value it serves
Federation	Power is shared between the federal Parliament in Canberra and the parliaments of the six states.	Spreading power out
Constitutional monarchy	King Charles III is the head of state. His representative, the Governor-General, acts only on the advice of elected ministers.	Rule-bound government
Parliamentary democracy	Voters elect the House of Representatives. The party that can hold the support of most members forms the government.	Democracy
Two houses	The House of Representatives (151 members) proposes and passes laws. The Senate (76 members) reviews and can change or block them.	Checks on power
Separation of powers	Parliament makes the laws, the executive puts them into action, and the courts — headed by the High Court of Australia — interpret them.	Rule of law
Free and fair elections	Secret ballot, compulsory voting and preferential voting, run by the independent Australian Electoral Commission (AEC).	Fairness and participation
Multi-party system	Many parties may compete for seats, and any citizen who meets the rules can stand for parliament.	Freedom of choice

Prepared by ClassBasics from the Australian Constitution (1901) and Australian Electoral Commission material, retrieved 26 August 2026.

Table listing seven key features of Australia's system of government, what each feature means and the value it serves

Australia's system of government — how the parts fit together



Prepared by ClassBasics from the Australian Constitution (1901) and the Parliamentary Education Office (peo.gov.au), retrieved 26 August 2026.

Labelled diagram showing Australian voters electing the federal Parliament, the two houses making laws, the executive running the country, the courts interpreting the laws, and the six state parliaments under federation

2. Australia and New Zealand: same family, different design

New Zealand is Australia's closest neighbour and, in many ways, its closest political cousin. Both countries keep the same head of state (King Charles III, represented in each country by a Governor-General), both are parliamentary democracies, and both hold free and fair elections. But the design details differ a lot.

The biggest differences:

- **One house, not two.** New Zealand's Parliament has a single house of about 120 members. Australia has two: the House of Representatives (151 members) and the Senate (76 members). In New Zealand there is no second house to review bills, so checks on the government come mostly from the courts, the media and the voters at the next election.
- **A different voting system.** New Zealand uses **MMP** — mixed-member proportional voting. Each voter gets two votes: one for a local member and one for a party. A party's share of seats in Parliament closely matches its share of the party vote. In Australia, preferential voting usually gives one party a clear majority of seats.
- **Voting is voluntary.** In New Zealand you choose whether to vote; in Australia you must.
- **A different constitution.** Australia's Constitution is a single written document from 1901 that can only be changed by a national vote called a **referendum** (Section 1A of this book explains how referendums work).

New Zealand has no single constitutional document; its rules are spread across laws such as the Constitution Act 1986, which an ordinary parliamentary vote can change.

At New Zealand's most recent general election, on 14 October 2023, no party won a majority of the 120 seats. The National Party, as the largest party, formed a coalition government — a shared government — with the ACT Party and New Zealand First, and Christopher Luxon became Prime Minister (New Zealand Electoral Commission and New Zealand Parliament, retrieved 26 August 2026). The previous Labour-led government left office peacefully after the count. That peaceful swap is exactly what our definition of democracy at the top of this section asks for.

Two democracies, different designs — Australia and New Zealand

Feature	Australia	New Zealand
Head of state	King Charles III, represented by the Governor-General (Sam Mostyn since 2024)	King Charles III, represented by the Governor-General
Constitution	One written document (1901). It can be changed only by a referendum — a national vote of the people	No single document. The main rules sit in laws such as the Constitution Act 1986, and Parliament can change them with an ordinary vote
Parliament	Two houses: House of Representatives (151 members) and Senate (76 members)	One house: House of Representatives (120 members)
Voting	Compulsory. Preferential voting — voters number the candidates in order of choice	Voluntary. MMP voting — each voter gets a party vote and an electorate member vote
Forming government	The party (or parties) holding the support of most of the 151 members	The party (or parties) holding the support of most of the 120 members — often a coalition after negotiation
Term	Up to 3 years	3 years
Most recent election	3 May 2025 — the Labor Party, led by Anthony Albanese, won a second term	14 October 2023 — a coalition of the National, ACT and New Zealand First parties; Christopher Luxon became Prime Minister

Prepared by ClassBasics from the Australian Electoral Commission (aec.gov.au), the New Zealand Electoral Commission (elections.org.nz) and the New Zealand Parliament (parliament.nz), retrieved 26 August 2026.

Comparison table of Australia's and New Zealand's systems of government, covering the head of state, the constitution, the parliament, the voting system, how a government forms, the maximum term and each country's most recent election

3. Australia and China: a multi-party democracy and a one-party state

For a strong contrast, look north. China is the largest country in the Asia-Pacific by population — about 1.4 billion people — and it is not a democracy by the definition at the top of this section. It is a **one-party state**: a system in which one party, the Communist Party of China, holds power and other parties are not free to compete for it. Party leadership is written into the country's constitution — Article 1 of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982) was changed in 2018 to say that the Party's leadership is “the defining feature of socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

Some smaller parties exist in China, but they accept the leadership of the Communist Party and do not act as an opposition. The national law-making body, the National People's Congress, has about 2,977 members, but it meets in full session only for a short time once a year, and it does not remove the Party from power — no election in China can do that.

The strongest version of the other view. The Chinese government does not accept that its system is less democratic. Its official description is “whole-process people's democracy”: it argues that its leaders are chosen through careful selection and testing, that government responds to people's needs between elections, and that its system has delivered stability, long-term planning and the lifting of hundreds of millions of people out of poverty since the late 1970s. Supporters of this view say that fierce competition between parties would divide a country of 1.4 billion people rather than serve it.

The democratic reply. Under the definition used in this section — regular elections in which parties are free to compete and voters can remove their leaders — China does not qualify as a democracy. Without competing parties, independent courts and a free press, citizens have no peaceful way to vote their leaders out, and public disagreement with the government can be punished.

You are not asked to settle this debate here. What matters for assessment is that you can present both positions in a fair way and reason with evidence.

No system is without critics of its own, and Australia's is no exception: critics say that three-year terms encourage short-term thinking, and some argue that compulsory voting forces participation rather than inspiring it. You will weigh that second claim in the source inquiry at the end of this section.

A multi-party democracy and a one-party state compared

Feature	Multi-party democracy — Australia	One-party state — China
Parties that can compete	Many parties may stand. Any group of citizens can register a party with the AEC if it meets the rules.	The Communist Party of China (CPC) holds power. The Constitution names CPC leadership as the defining feature of China's system (Article 1, amended 2018).
Who can stand for parliament	Any citizen who meets the rules can nominate, including people who oppose the government.	Candidates are vetted. Most deputies are CPC members or are approved by the CPC.
What the parliament does	Debates, changes and passes laws. Ministers must answer questions from all members.	The National People's Congress (about 2,977 deputies) meets briefly each year and mostly approves decisions already made by party leaders.
Changing the government	Voters can keep or remove the government at an election. In May 2025 Australians re-elected the Labor government for a second term.	Leaders are chosen inside the party. Voters cannot swap the party out of power.
Opposition and disagreement	An official opposition questions the government, and media and courts operate independently of the government.	Open opposition is not allowed. The party leads the state and society (Article 1).

Prepared by ClassBasics from the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982, Article 1 amended 2018), the Australian Constitution (1901) and AEC material, retrieved 26 August 2026.

Comparison table of a multi-party democracy (Australia) and a one-party state (China) across five features: whether parties compete, who can stand for parliament, what the national parliament does, how government can change, and the role of opposition and disagreement

4. Democracy takes different forms across the Asia-Pacific

The Asia-Pacific region shows that democracy is not one fixed design — it comes in different expressions (VC2HC10K03.E03). A quick survey:

- **India** is the world's largest democracy by population — about 1.4 billion people. Its lower house, the Lok Sabha, has 543 members. In the 2024 general election, held in seven phases from 19 April to 1 June 2024 and run by the Election Commission of India, the coalition led by the Bharatiya Janata Party won, and Narendra Modi began a third term as Prime Minister (Election Commission of India, retrieved 26 August 2026).
- **Japan** is a constitutional monarchy like Australia, but its monarch — Emperor Naruhito — is described in Japan's constitution as “the symbol of the State” and has no reserve of formal power like the King's representative in Australia. Japan's parliament has two houses, and its Liberal Democratic Party has won most elections since 1955, which shows that a multi-party system can be dominated by one party for decades while voters remain free to choose otherwise.
- **Indonesia**, the region's most populous country with about 280 million people, is a republic: its president is elected directly by the people, not chosen by the parliament. At the election on 14 February 2024, Prabowo Subianto won the presidency and was sworn in on 20 October 2024; the national parliament, the DPR, has 580 members (KPU, the Indonesia election commission, retrieved 26 August 2026).
- **China, Vietnam and Laos** sit at the other end of the spectrum as one-party states. In Vietnam, Article 4 of the 2013 constitution gives the Communist Party of Vietnam the leading role in the state; Laos is led by the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.

Figures 5, 6 and 7 put the region side by side: the systems at a glance, the size of each country's law-making house, and the maximum time between elections.

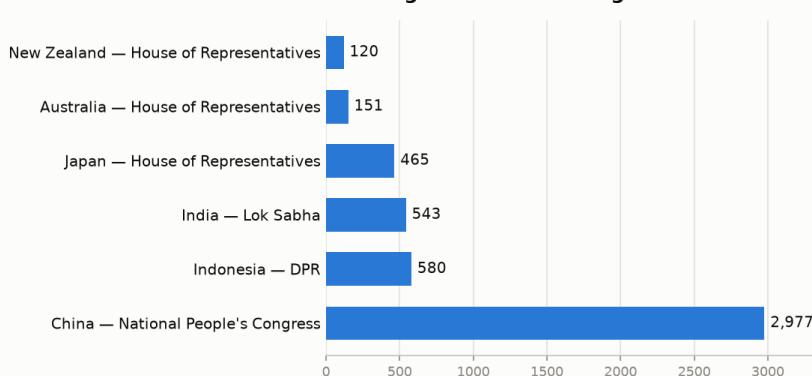
Different systems of government across the Asia-Pacific region

Country	System of government	What stands out
Australia	Multi-party parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy, federation	Written constitution changeable only by referendum; compulsory preferential voting
New Zealand	Multi-party parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy	One house; MMP voting; no single written constitution document
India	Multi-party parliamentary republic	The world's largest democracy by population (about 1.4 billion people); 543-member lower house (Lok Sabha)
Japan	Multi-party parliamentary democracy, constitutional monarchy	The Emperor is the symbol of the state; one party (the LDP) has led the government for most of the post-war era
Indonesia	Multi-party presidential republic	The president is elected directly by the people; the 580-member house (DPR) is elected on the same day
China	One-party state	CPC leadership written into Article 1 of the Constitution; the National People's Congress is the legislature
Vietnam	One-party state	The Communist Party of Vietnam is the only party; the National Assembly meets under party leadership
Laos	One-party state	The Lao People's Revolutionary Party is the only legal party

Prepared by ClassBasics from official parliament and election-commission material cited in this section, retrieved 26 August 2026. Blue rows: systems where multiple parties compete for power. Orange rows: one-party systems.

Table of eight Asia-Pacific countries — Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan, Indonesia, China, Vietnam and Laos — showing each country's system of government and what stands out about it, with multi-party democracies in blue and one-party states in orange

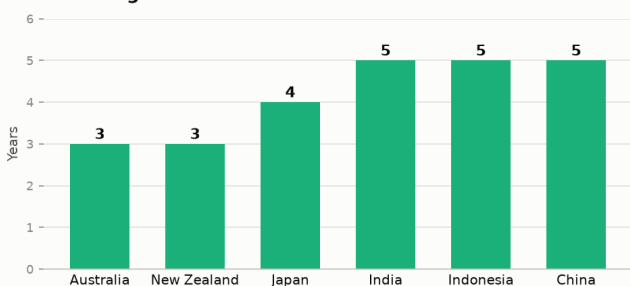
How big is the law-making house? Members of the lower or only house, 2026



China's National People's Congress is far larger than the others, but it meets in full session only briefly each year; a much smaller standing body does most of the law-making between sessions. Source: prepared by ClassBasics from the parliaments' own publications and election-commission material cited in this section, retrieved 26 August 2026.

Bar chart comparing the number of members in the lower or only house of the national parliaments of New Zealand, Australia, Japan, India, Indonesia and China

How long between elections? Maximum term of the main house, in years



Australia's House of Representatives runs for 3 years from its first meeting; in practice elections are usually called a little sooner. Japan's lower house can also be dissolved early. China's National People's Congress serves a 5-year term. Source: prepared by ClassBasics from each country's constitution and election-commission material cited in this section, retrieved 26 August 2026.

Bar chart comparing the maximum term, in years, of the main house of parliament in Australia, New Zealand, Japan, India, Indonesia and China

Notice what these figures do — and do not — tell you. A bigger parliament is not automatically a more democratic one: China's National People's Congress is by far the largest, yet it is the one body in this list that cannot vote its government out. Size, terms and seat numbers describe the machinery; whether citizens can choose and change their leaders is what decides whether the machinery is democratic.

5. How to compare two systems yourself

When the curriculum asks you to compare Australia's system with another system, use the same set of features every time so the comparison is even. The grid in Figure 8 is your tool — copy it for any two countries.

Steps:

1. Pick two countries.
2. Fill in each feature row for both countries, using reliable sources (a parliament's own website, an electoral commission, or the constitution itself).
3. State the similarities and the differences in full sentences — do not just repeat the grid.
4. Judge which differences matter most for the values in Figure 1 (democracy, fairness, checks on power, freedom of choice) and say why.

Comparison grid — compare any two systems in the Asia-Pacific region

Feature to compare	Country 1:	Country 2:
Head of state — who is it, and how do they get the role?		
Head of government — who is it, and how do they get the role?		
Parliament — how many houses, and how many members?		
Voting — who can vote, and is voting compulsory?		
Parties — which parties are free to compete for power?		
Constitution — is there one written document, and how can it be changed?		
Checks on power — what stops any one person or group from holding all the power?		

The rows are the features this section uses. Fill the grid from your research, then write one sentence saying which difference matters most and why.

Blank comparison grid with seven feature rows — head of state, head of government, number of houses and members, voting and whether it is compulsory, whether parties are free to compete, how the constitution is written and changed, and checks on power — and two empty country columns

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded

Task: Compare how a government is formed after an election in Australia and in New Zealand. Use the elections of 2025 and 2023.

Working

Comment

Australia, 3 May 2025. Voters elect all 151 members of the House of Representatives. The Labor Party wins a majority of seats, so it can govern on its own and Anthony Albanese remains Prime Minister.

Under preferential voting, one party usually wins a majority of seats, so one party usually forms the government alone.

New Zealand, 14 October 2023. Voters elect about 120

Under MMP, seats follow the party vote closely, so one

Working	Comment
members under MMP. No party wins a majority, so parties must talk to each other after the election.	party rarely wins a majority by itself.
The National Party, the largest party, forms a coalition with the ACT Party and New Zealand First. Together the three parties hold a majority, and Christopher Luxon becomes Prime Minister.	In New Zealand, forming a government usually means building a coalition after the election — the voters choose the Parliament, and the Parliament’s parties choose the combination that governs.
Comparison. In both countries the voters choose the Parliament and the government must hold the support of a majority of the lower or only house. The difference is timing and shape: in Australia a single party usually wins that majority directly at the election, while in New Zealand a majority is usually built afterwards, by negotiation between parties.	A good comparison names the similarity first, then the difference, and explains <i>why</i> the difference exists (here, the voting system).

Example 2 — unscaffolded

Task: Using Figure 4, explain in three or four sentences why Australia is classified as a multi-party democracy and China as a one-party state.

How to approach it. Find the rows in Figure 4 where the two systems diverge most — who may stand for parliament, whether parties are free to compete, and how a government can change. Pick the two differences that matter most, state each one for both countries, and tie them back to the definition of democracy at the top of this section. Avoid listing every row of the figure; an explanation chooses evidence, it does not copy the table. A model response is in the Model responses section at the end.

Practice questions

Scaffolded

- Q1.** Name the two houses of the Australian federal Parliament and state how many members each has. (Use Figure 1 or Figure 2.)
- Q2.** Look at Figure 1. (a) Which feature of Australia’s system serves the value “fairness and participation”? (b) Which feature spreads power between the national parliament in Canberra and the six state parliaments?
- Q3.** Using Figure 3, list two differences between the Australian and New Zealand parliaments.
- Q4.** In your own words, explain what compulsory voting means for an Australian citizen who turns 18.
- Q5.** Look at Figure 5. (a) Name two one-party states in the Asia-Pacific region. (b) Name two multi-party democracies in the region that keep a king or emperor as head of state.
- Q6.** Look at Figure 7. Which countries in the chart have the shortest maximum time between elections, and how long is it?

Unscaffolded

- Q7.** “Australia and New Zealand have the same head of state but different systems of government.” Explain how this statement can be true.
- Q8.** Using Figure 4, describe two differences between Australia and China in how political power can change hands.
- Q9.** Figure 6 shows that China’s National People’s Congress has about 2,977 members, while Australia’s House of Representatives has 151. Does a bigger parliament mean a more democratic one? Answer using the definition of democracy given at the start of this section.

Q10. The maximum term of Japan's lower house is four years; Australia's House of Representatives runs for a maximum of three years (Figure 7). Give one advantage and one disadvantage of the shorter term.

Source inquiry

Source 1.1 — Two recent elections, side by side

	Australia	New Zealand
Election date	3 May 2025	14 October 2023
Seats in the lower or only house	151	about 120
Voting system	Preferential voting	MMP (two votes per voter)
Is voting compulsory?	Yes	No
Turnout	More than 9 out of 10 enrolled voters voted	Not stated here
Result	The Labor Party won a majority of seats and formed government on its own	No party won a majority; National, ACT and New Zealand First formed a coalition government

Compiled by ClassBasics from the Australian Electoral Commission (aec.gov.au), the New Zealand Electoral Commission (elections.org.nz) and the New Zealand Parliament (parliament.nz), retrieved 26 August 2026.

Q11. (a) Using Source 1.1, identify one similarity and one difference between how the Australian and New Zealand elections were run. (b) Which country needed a coalition to form its government? How can you tell from the source? (c) Some people argue that compulsory voting makes a democracy fairer, because governments must listen to all voters, not just the ones who choose to turn up. Others argue that it is wrong to force people to vote, because a real choice must be made without force — including the choice not to take part. State each of these two views in its strongest form, then say which you find more convincing and why. You will be marked on the quality of your reasoning, not on which side you take.

Answers

Q1. The House of Representatives, with 151 members, and the Senate, with 76 members.

Q2. (a) Free and fair elections. (b) Federation.

Q3. Any two of: Australia has two houses while New Zealand has one; Australia has 151 members in its lower house while New Zealand has about 120 in its single house; Australia uses preferential voting while New Zealand uses MMP; voting is compulsory in Australia but voluntary in New Zealand.

Q4. Once an Australian citizen turns 18 and enrolls, they must vote at elections — voting is not optional, and there is a small fine for not voting. Their vote is still secret.

Q5. (a) Any two of China, Vietnam, Laos. (b) Australia and New Zealand (Japan's emperor is also a valid answer for (b) — three correct countries are listed in Figure 5).

Q6. Australia and New Zealand, with a maximum of three years.

Q7. The shared head of state is King Charles III, represented in each country by a separate Governor-General, because both countries are constitutional monarchies. The systems still differ in other ways — for example, Australia has two houses and compulsory preferential voting, while New Zealand has one house and voluntary MMP voting. The head of state is only one part of a system of government.

Q8. Any two of: in Australia, many parties are free to compete while in China the Communist Party leads and other parties are not free to take power; in Australia, voters can remove the government at an election while in China no election can remove the Communist Party; in Australia, any citizen who meets the rules can stand for parliament, while in China candidates must accept the leadership of the Communist Party.

Q9. See Model responses.

Q10. See Model responses.

Q11. (a) Similarity — any one of: both elections elected a lower or only house; both used a secret vote; both produced a government that holds a majority of seats. Difference — any one of: voting is compulsory in Australia but not in New Zealand; Australia uses preferential voting while New Zealand uses MMP; Australia's election produced a single-party government while New Zealand's produced a coalition. (b) New Zealand — the source says no party won a majority and that three parties formed a coalition.

Model responses

Example 2. Australia is a multi-party democracy because many parties are free to compete for seats, any citizen who meets the rules can stand, and voters can remove the government at the next election — as they have done many times since 1901. China is a one-party state because the Communist Party's leadership is written into the constitution, other parties cannot compete for power, and no election can vote the Party out. Under the definition at the start of this section — competitive elections in which voters can remove their leaders — Australia qualifies as a democracy and China does not.

Q9. A bigger parliament does not automatically mean a more democratic one. Under the definition used in this section, a democracy needs regular elections in which more than one party is free to compete and voters can remove their leaders. Australia's 151-member House of Representatives meets those tests, even though it is small. China's National People's Congress is nearly twenty times larger, but it meets for a short time each year, no competing party can take power through it, and it cannot vote the Communist Party out. Size tells you about the machinery; the power to choose and change the government is what makes the machinery democratic.

Q10. An advantage of Australia's shorter three-year term is that voters get to judge their government more often, so leaders must stay responsive to the people. A disadvantage is that governments have less guaranteed time for long-term plans — such as large infrastructure or energy projects — because an election may arrive before the plan bears fruit, which can encourage short-term thinking.

Q11 (c). The strongest case for compulsory voting is that it makes the result reflect the whole population, not just the people who are motivated or organised to vote. When more than 9 out of 10 enrolled Australians vote, as they did on 3 May 2025, parties must appeal to the middle of the community, and the winning government can claim to represent almost everyone. The strongest case against is that voting is an expression of choice, and a choice that is forced is not fully free; forcing attendance does not force informed interest, and it may add large numbers of donkey votes to the count. On balance, the compulsory case is stronger because the duty is small — enrol, attend, number the boxes — and the secret ballot still protects what the voter actually chooses, since no one can see how they vote; but a well-reasoned answer on either side can earn full marks, because the marking rewards the reasoning, not the conclusion.

Sources for this section

All sources retrieved 26 August 2026. Real-world facts in this section come from: the *Australian Constitution* (1901); the Australian Electoral Commission (aec.gov.au) for the 2025 federal election and voting rules; the Parliamentary Education Office (peo.gov.au) for the structure of the federal Parliament; the New Zealand Electoral Commission (elections.org.nz) and the New Zealand Parliament (parliament.nz) for MMP, the 2023 general election and seat numbers; the Constitution of the People's Republic of China (1982), Article 1 as changed in 2018; the Election Commission of India (eci.gov.in) for the 2024 general election; KPU, the Indonesia election commission, for the 2024 elections; the parliaments of Japan, India and Indonesia for seat numbers and terms; and the constitutions of Vietnam (2013, Article 4) and Laos for one-party provisions.

The Australian Government in the Asia-Pacific and the world: roles and responsibilities

Curriculum link: VC2HC10K04; draws on VC2HC10K04.E01, VC2HC10K04.E02, VC2HC10K04.E03 and, in part, VC2HC10K04.E04.

Theory

The big question of this section. “What does the Australian Government actually do beyond Australia’s borders?” A *role* is a job a government takes on; a *responsibility* is something it owes to others — to its own citizens, to its neighbours, and to partners further away. This section looks at both, at two scales: the region (the Asia-Pacific) and the globe.

Key term — diplomacy. *Diplomacy* is the work of managing relations between countries by talking, negotiating and making agreements, rather than by force. *Diplomatic relations in the Asia-Pacific region* means that work done with and in our part of the world.

1. Two circles of action

Where the Australian Government acts

Two circles of action named in VC2HC10K04: the regional level and the global level



Three rings: Australia and the Australian Government at the centre, a regional level ring named the Asia-Pacific, and a global level ring named the whole world, each with named examples

The curriculum names two levels. The **regional level** is our neighbourhood: the Pacific islands, Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific. The **global level** is the whole world, most often worked through the United Nations.

Key terms — bilateral and multilateral. *Bilateral* means two countries working directly with each other. *Multilateral* means many countries working through a shared body or agreement. Most of this section is about multilateral work, because that is where a country of Australia’s size gets most of its voice.

2. Who does the work: DFAT, and the middle-power idea

DFAT: the department that does the day-to-day work

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (formed 1987) runs Australia's 116 overseas posts - embassies, high commissions and consulates-general

DFAT's job	What that means in plain words
Foreign policy and international relations	Deciding Australia's positions on world issues, and talking and negotiating with other governments - that is diplomacy.
Development aid	Spending the aid budget on health, education and disaster readiness in partner countries, mostly in our region.
Consular services	Helping Australians in trouble overseas, from lost passports to arrests and emergencies.
Overseas trade	Negotiating trade agreements so Australian goods and services can be sold abroad, and imports can come in.
Foreign investment	Overseeing money that flows into Australia from overseas businesses, and Australian money invested abroad.

The Minister for Foreign Affairs leads DFAT; aid decisions are made with the Minister for International Development. Roles: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2026.

A two-column table of DFAT's five jobs — foreign policy and international relations, development aid, consular services, overseas trade, foreign investment — each with a plain-language meaning

Day to day, the work is run by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), formed on 24 July 1987, led by the Minister for Foreign Affairs (in 2026, Senator Penny Wong). DFAT's **posts** — its embassies, high commissions and consulates-general overseas — are where diplomacy happens face to face. (A high commission is the name for an embassy between Commonwealth countries.)

Key term — middle power. Australia is not a great power like the United States or China, and it is not a small state like Tuvalu. Analysts and Australian governments have long described Australia as a **middle power**: a country with enough size, wealth and skill to matter in world affairs, but not enough to force outcomes on its own. For a middle power, working with others is not a choice; it is the only way to be heard. That idea runs through everything below.

3. Six ways Australia participates (VC2HC10K04 . E01)

Six ways Australia participates - each with a named case

The curriculum names these six forms of participation; the right-hand column gives a real, dated Australian example of each

Way of participating	A named Australian case	When
Exchange programs	New Colombo Plan - Australian undergraduates study and do internships across the Indo-Pacific; over 1,300 took part in the first year alone	Started 2014
Peacekeeping	Australia's first UN peacekeeping role: military observers sent to Indonesia under the UN Consular Commission; contributions have continued ever since	Since 1947
Election monitoring and regional stability	RAMSI - the Australian-led regional mission that helped the Solomon Islands restore policing and governance after armed conflict; reinforced after the troubled 2006 election	2003-2017
Development aid	Australia's aid budget supports health, education and disaster readiness, mostly in the Pacific and Southeast Asia; about \$4.96 billion in 2024-25	2024-25
Health programs	Australia gave US\$159.1 million to COVAX, the worldwide program that shared out COVID-19 vaccines in a fair way, including to countries in our region	2021-2023
Disaster management	After the Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai volcano erupted, the first Australian aid planes landed in Tonga within five days of the main blast	January 2022

Sources: New Colombo Plan (2014, first-year figures); Australia and the United Nations (first peacekeeping role, 1947); RAMSI (2003, ended 30 June 2017); Australian aid budget 2024-25 (about A\$4.96 billion); COVAX donor table (US\$159.1 million); 2022 Hunga Tonga-Hunga Ha'apai eruption (aid planes arrived 20 January 2022). All retrieved 26 August 2026.

A table of six ways of participating — exchange programs, development aid, peacekeeping, health programs, election monitoring and regional stability, and disaster management — each matched to a named, dated Australian case

The curriculum's named ways countries participate run from membership of international organisations to exchange programs, development aid, peacekeeping, health programs, election monitoring and disaster management. The figure matches each one to a real Australian case. Two cases are worth slowing down on:

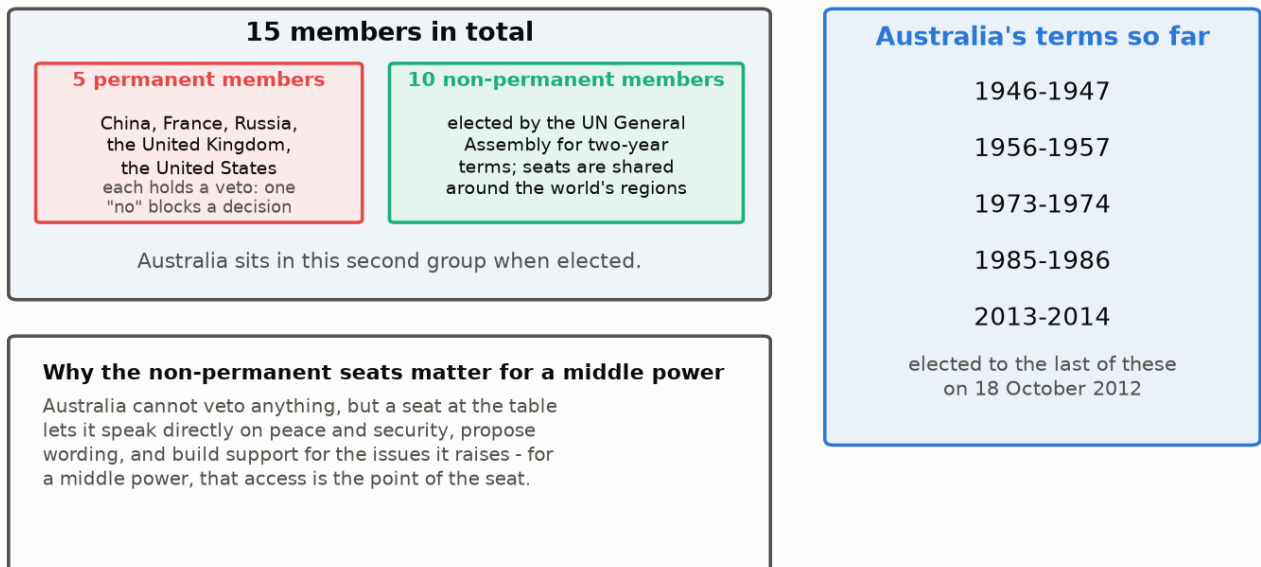
- **Peacekeeping since 1947.** Australia's first United Nations peacekeeping role was sending military observers to Indonesia in 1947, and Australians have served in peace operations ever since. Peacekeeping is a responsibility taken on with other countries: helping a nearby place stay stable keeps the whole region safer.
- **RAMSI, 2003–2017.** The Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands was an Australian-led **multilateral** mission, with police and troops from across the Pacific, that restored policing and governance after armed conflict, and stayed on to help after the troubled 2006 election. Australia's role was a regional responsibility acted on with neighbours, not alone.

Membership matters too. Australia was a **founding member of the United Nations** in 1945 — the UN came into being on 24 October 1945 and Australia's membership began on 1 November 1945 — and it helped write the UN Charter. In our region, Australia is a member of the **Pacific Islands Forum**, formed in 1971, whose 18 members meet as the Pacific family to set shared priorities.

4. The United Nations Security Council (VC2HC10K04 . E01)

The United Nations Security Council - and Australia's place in it

The Council's job is maintaining international peace and security



Structure: 5 permanent members with veto power over substantive resolutions; 10 non-permanent members elected for two-year terms. Australian terms and the 18 October 2012 election: Australia and the United Nations, retrieved 26 August 2026.

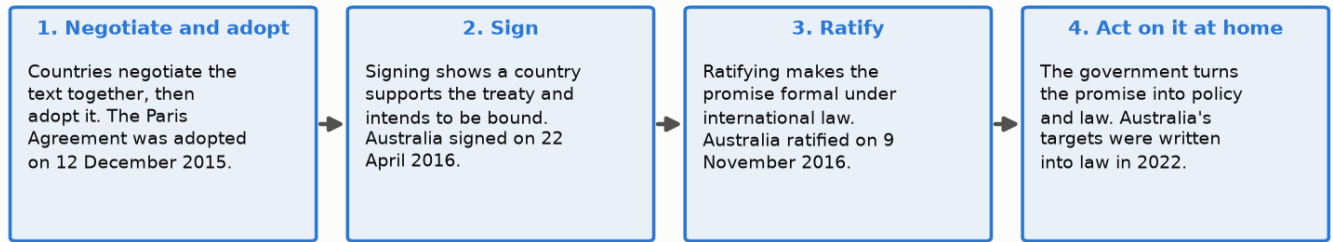
A diagram of the Security Council's 15 members — 5 permanent members with a veto and 10 non-permanent members elected for two-year terms — beside a panel listing Australia's five terms, most recently 2013–2014, and a note on why non-permanent seats matter for a middle power

The Security Council carries the UN's heaviest responsibility: maintaining international peace and security. Its five permanent members each hold a **veto** — one "no" can block a decision — which Australia cannot match. What Australia can do is win one of the ten elected seats, as it has five times, most recently for 2013–2014 after being elected on 18 October 2012. An elected seat gives a middle power a voice at the top table: raising issues, proposing wording, building support. That is a role; using it well is the responsibility that comes with it.

5. Treaties and agendas (VC2HC10K04.E02)

From negotiation to Australian law: how a treaty commitment works

Traced through the Paris Agreement on climate change



Two key terms

A treaty is a formal, written agreement between countries, governed by international law. To ratify a treaty is to make a formal commitment to be bound by it - in Australia, ratification is an act of the executive, while making domestic law to give a treaty effect at home requires Parliament.

Paris Agreement adopted 12 December 2015; Australia signed 22 April 2016 and ratified 9 November 2016; Australian targets written into law in 2022 (43% cut by 2030, net zero by 2050). Retrieved 26 August 2026.

A four-step flow: negotiate and adopt, sign, ratify, act on it at home, traced with dated examples from the Paris Agreement, above a definitions box for treaty and ratify

Key terms — treaty and ratify. A *treaty* is a formal, written agreement between countries, governed by international law. To *ratify* a treaty is to make the formal commitment to be bound by it. In Australia, ratifying is an act of the **executive** — the Prime Minister, Ministers and their departments — but if a treaty needs to change Australian law, only the Parliament can pass that law. That split is the hinge of Worked Example 1.

Two of the curriculum's named examples, dated:

- **The UN Sustainable Development Agenda.** In September 2015, UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda: 17 Sustainable Development Goals, from no poverty to climate action, with most targets set for 2030. It is an agenda, not a treaty: a shared to-do list that gives countries a common scorecard.
- **The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).** A *convention* is a treaty that sets up a framework for later, more detailed agreements. Australia signed the UNFCCC on 4 June 1992, the day it opened; it entered into force on 21 March 1994. The Paris Agreement of 2015 was made under it.

The UN Sustainable Development Goals: the 2030 Agenda in 17 goals

Adopted in September 2015 by United Nations member states; most targets are set for 2030. Goals 13 and 17 are shaded: they lead straight into this section's case study.

1. No poverty	2. Zero hunger	3. Good health and well-being
4. Quality education	5. Gender equality	6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy	8. Decent work and economic growth	9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities	11. Sustainable cities and communities	12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action	14. Life below water	15. Life on land
16. Peace, justice and strong institutions	17. Partnerships for the goals	

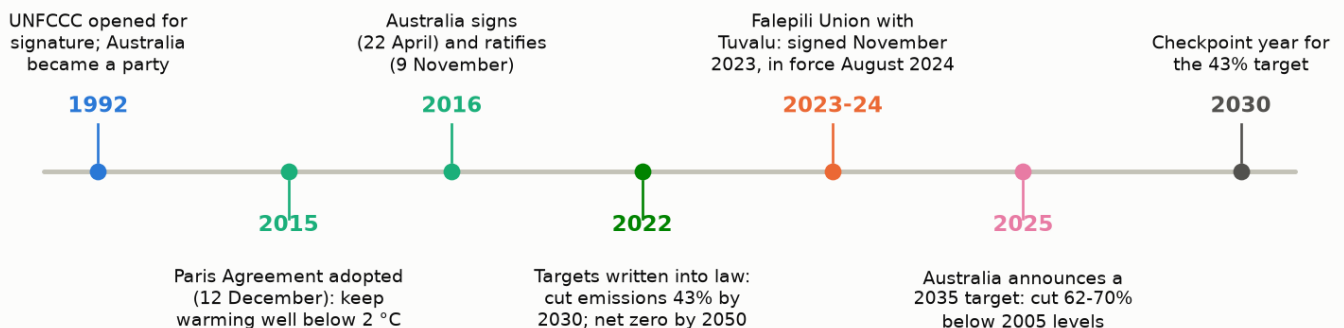
Goal 13 (climate action) connects to the Paris Agreement; Goal 17 (partnerships) is the whole point of working through organisations like the United Nations and the Pacific Islands Forum.

17 goals adopted in September 2015 for the 2030 Agenda; most targets set for 2030. Retrieved 26 August 2026.

The 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals in a grid, with goals 13 (climate action) and 17 (partnerships) shaded, and a note linking them to the Paris Agreement and to working through organisations

Australia's climate commitments, 1992 to 2030

Treaty commitments first, then national targets written into law



UNFCCC opened for signature 4 June 1992 (Australia a party from 1992; in force 21 March 1994); Paris Agreement adopted 12 December 2015; Australia signed 22 April 2016, ratified 9 November 2016; national targets legislated 2022 (43% by 2030, net zero 2050); 2035 target of 62-70% announced September 2025; Falepili Union signed 9 November 2023, in force 28 August 2024. Retrieved 26 August 2026.

A timeline from 1992 to 2030: UNFCCC opened for signature 1992; Paris Agreement adopted 2015; Australia signs and ratifies 2016; targets written into law 2022; Falepili Union 2023–24; 2035 target announced 2025; 2030 checkpoint

6. Reasons for participating, and judging effectiveness (VC2HC10K04.E03)

Why does Australia take on these roles? Four reasons recur:

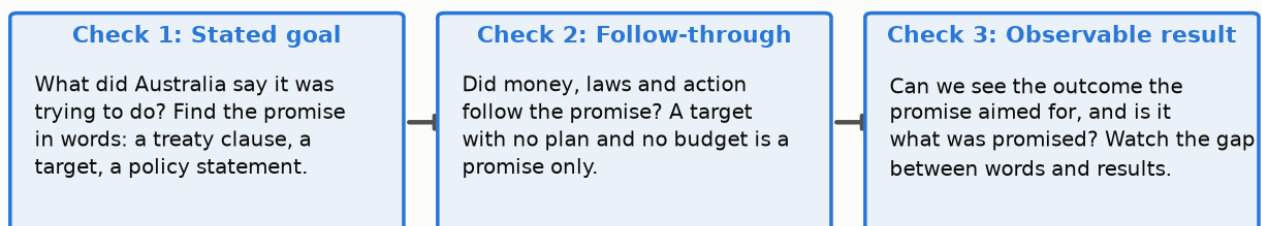
- **Security.** A stable region is safer for Australians; peacekeeping and missions like RAMSI are in part self-defence by other means.

- **Prosperity.** Trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP, in force for Australia from 1 January 2022) open markets Australian jobs depend on.
- **Influence.** A seat at the table — the Security Council, the Pacific Islands Forum — lets Australia shape rules it will have to live with anyway.
- **Values.** Governments also act on ideas of what Australia ought to do: helping neighbours after a disaster, or sharing out vaccines through COVAX, the world program Australia supported with US\$159.1 million.

But participation is not automatically **effective**, and “effective” is a **contested** word here — people reasonably disagree about it. So this section uses one working definition, from the figure below: participation is effective to the extent that it achieves what it said it would. Run the three checks, then place the case on the scale.

Judging effectiveness: three checks, then place it on the scale

“Effective” is contested - this section uses one working definition so the question can be answered



After the three checks, place the case on the scale - and say which check moved your answer.



Working definition used in this section: effective = the participation achieves what it said it would, judged by stated goals, follow-through and observable results. Other definitions exist.

Three checks — stated goal, follow-through, observable result — feeding into a three-point scale from highly effective to not effective

7. A global issue up close: climate, two strong positions (VC2HC10K04 .E03)

Climate change is the curriculum’s suggested global issue, and it tests Australia’s regional and global roles at once. The positions below are argued in good faith by real Australians.

Key term — steelman. To *steelman* a position is to state it in its strongest, fairest form, the way its own supporters would state it — the opposite of setting up a weak version to knock down. The figure steelmans both sides.

One issue, two steelmanned positions: Australia's climate effort

Both positions are held by real Australians; weigh each against the evidence before judging

Do more, faster

- Pacific island neighbours face sea-level rise now; Australia's regional credibility depends on acting.
- Australia's emissions per person are among the world's highest, and Australia exports large amounts of coal and gas.
- Cutting faster drives new industries - renewable energy, batteries, green metals - and the jobs that come with them.

Held by many climate scientists, Pacific leaders, environmental groups and many younger voters.

Mind the pace and cost

- Australia produces about 1% of global emissions, so cuts here alone cannot stop climate change; global agreement matters more.
- Moving too fast risks jobs and prices in mining, manufacturing and farming regions, and reliability of electricity supply.
- Australia should keep exporting coal and gas while buyers need them, and invest in technology rather than forced closures.

Held by many industry groups, some unions, some regional communities and some economists.

Steelman rule: each side is stated as its own advocates would recognise it. Judging the issue means testing both sides against the same evidence, not picking a side first.

Two columns steelmanning the climate debate: “Do more, faster” (Pacific neighbours facing sea-level rise, high per-person emissions, new industries) and “Mind the pace and cost” (Australia’s small share of global emissions, jobs and prices, technology over forced closures), each with the groups who hold it

Reasons and effectiveness join here. Both sides agree Australia should participate; they disagree about pace. Judging Australia’s effectiveness on climate means testing each side against the same dated evidence — the timeline in part 5 — not picking a team first.

8. Coming home: impacts (VC2HC10K04.E04, in part)

Coming home: how regional and global issues affect Australia

The three impacts named in VC2HC10K04.E04, each with examples

Impact on...	What it looks like	Examples
Australia's identity	How Australians see the country's place in the world	A Pacific country with a multicultural population; a middle-power self-image: pulling weight in peacekeeping, aid and the UN
Government policies	Laws, budgets and programs shaped by international commitments	Climate targets written into law in 2022; aid budget priorities in the Pacific and Southeast Asia; disaster and health readiness
Choices to act for the global interest	Everyday decisions people make with the wider world in mind	Donating to or volunteering for aid and disaster appeals; choosing products and energy use with impact in mind; writing to members of parliament

Acting in the global interest = making choices that consider people beyond Australia's borders, as well as people inside them.

A three-row table of the impacts named in the curriculum: on Australia's identity, on government policies, and on the choices people make to act for the global interest, each with examples

Regional and global work does not stay offshore. The curriculum names three impacts to trace:

- **Identity.** Australians have come to see their country as a Pacific nation with a multicultural population, and as a middle power that pulls its weight — in peacekeeping, aid, and UN work. That self-image is a real impact of decades of regional and global participation.
- **Government policies.** International commitments become domestic law and budgets: the 2022 climate targets are the Paris promise written into Australian law; the aid budget's Pacific and Southeast Asian priorities are the region shaping the Commonwealth's spending.
- **Choices to act for the global interest.** The *global interest* means the interests of people beyond Australia's borders as well as inside them. Donating to disaster appeals, volunteering, choosing products and energy use with their wider impact in mind, and writing to members of parliament are all ways citizens act in the global interest.

9. Making your judgement

Return to the scale in part 6. For any case of Australian participation, run the three checks, steelman the critics and the supporters, and place it on the scale. Two students can place the same case differently and both reason well — what earns the marks is the reasoning: terms defined, dated evidence on both sides, limits of the evidence admitted, and a conclusion that follows.

Worked examples

Example 1 — scaffolded (VC2HC10K04.E02)

Trace one promise from treaty to Australian law, then judge follow-through.

Step	Working	Comment
1	12 December 2015: countries at the	Multilateral negotiation: no single

Step	Working	Comment
	UN climate conference adopt the Paris Agreement, with the goal of holding warming well below 2 °C.	country could write this alone.
2	22 April 2016: Australia signs the Agreement.	Signing shows support and intent; it is not yet the full commitment.
3	9 November 2016: Australia ratifies the Agreement (it had entered into force globally on 4 November 2016).	Ratification binds Australia under international law — an act of the executive.
4	2022: the Parliament passes the Climate Change Act 2022, a Commonwealth law writing the targets into Australian law: cut emissions 43% below 2005 levels by 2030, net zero by 2050.	A treaty is not domestic law by itself; only Parliament can make it Australian law.
5	September 2025: Australia announces its next target, a cut of 62 –70% below 2005 levels by 2035.	Follow-through is observable: new promises build on old ones, and the 2030 checkpoint will test them.

Judging effectiveness. Stated goal: clear and dated (steps 1 and 4). Follow-through: real — ratification, then an Act of Parliament with numbers in it (steps 3 and 4). Observable result: still running — the 2030 checkpoint has not arrived, and critics on both sides of the part 7 debate point to the gap so far. A fair judgement: **effective in part**, strong on goal and follow-through, with the result still to be proven — and a good answer says exactly which check produces that placement.

Example 2 — unscaffolded (VC2HC10K04.E01, VC2HC10K04.E03)

The Falepili Union between Australia and Tuvalu was signed on 9 November 2023 and entered into force on 28 August 2024. It promises climate and disaster cooperation and a special migration pathway of 280 places a year for Tuvaluan citizens. Is it an effective piece of regional participation by the Australian Government?

Model reasoning. First, the form: this is **bilateral** participation — two countries, one treaty — sitting inside Australia’s wider regional role as a Pacific partner. Second, the reasons: for Australia, a stable, partnered Pacific is the security and influence reason from part 6; for Tuvalu, climate change is a threat to the country’s very existence, so the treaty answers a responsibility Australia cannot refuse without losing its standing as a Pacific nation. Third, the three checks. Stated goal: clear and public — climate cooperation, disaster support, and 280 places a year. Follow-through: the treaty is in force and the pathway is running, which is more than a promise. Observable result: early — a pathway of 280 a year is small next to Tuvalu’s whole population, and critics in Tuvalu argued at signing that the treaty gave Australia too much say over Tuvalu’s security choices, while supporters answered that partnership with a bigger neighbour is how a small state stays secure. **Placement:** effective in part — strong on goal and follow-through, contested and early on result — with the steelmanned criticism on both sides cited. That chain, not the placement, is what earns the marks.

Practice questions

Scaffolded

Q1. Match each case to the way of participating it best shows: (a) Australian students on internships in Vietnam through the New Colombo Plan; (b) Australian police helping restore order in the Solomon Islands from 2003; (c) Australian aid planes reaching Tonga within five days of the January 2022 eruption; (d) Australia’s US\$159.1 million contribution to sharing out vaccines.

Q2. From the Security Council figure: (a) how many members hold a veto? (b) which group does Australia sit in when elected? (c) in one sentence, why does an elected seat matter for a middle power?

Q3. Put these Paris Agreement events in order: (a) Australia ratifies; (b) the Agreement is adopted; (c) Australia’s targets are written into Australian law; (d) Australia signs.

Q4. From the climate timeline: (a) in what year did Australia sign the UNFCCC? (b) what changed in 2022, and which body made that change? (c) which items on the timeline are treaties, and which are Australian law?

Q5. From the Sustainable Development Goals figure: (a) name the two shaded goals; (b) why is goal 17 (“partnerships”) the point of this whole section in one sentence?

Q6. From the two-positions figure: (a) give the strongest single point of the “do more, faster” side; (b) the strongest single point of the “mind the pace and cost” side; (c) which named groups hold each side?

Unscaffolded

Q7. Choose **one** of the six ways of participating from part 3. Explain two reasons Australia takes part in it (from part 6) and one responsibility it meets, using the named, dated case from the figure.

Q8. Using the three checks, judge how effective Australia’s participation in the Paris Agreement has been so far. Place your answer on the scale and say which check decided it.

Q9. Someone says: “Australia is only a middle power, so what it does at the United Nations cannot matter.” Identify what this claim assumes, give one dated piece of evidence that supports it and one that challenges it, and reach your own reasoned conclusion.

Q10. Choose one citizens’ choice from the third row of the impacts table. Explain how it acts in the global interest, and one limit on how much it can achieve on its own.

Source inquiry

Source A — The Falepili Union between Australia and Tuvalu, signed 9 November 2023, in force 28 August 2024, in plain words: *(1) Australia and Tuvalu will work together on climate change, disaster response and security; (2) Australia creates a special pathway of 280 places a year for Tuvaluan citizens to live, work and study in Australia; (3) Tuvalu agrees to act with Australia’s agreement on major security matters — which supporters call sensible partnership and critics call too much say for Australia.*

S1. Which two of the six ways of participating from part 3 does Source A show?

S2. Is the Falepili Union bilateral or multilateral? Give your reason from the source.

S3. A student claims: “This treaty benefits only Tuvalu, so it cannot be one of Australia’s responsibilities.” List two things this claim assumes, and say whether Source A supports or challenges each one.

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

Answers

Q1. (a) exchange programs; (b) peacekeeping and regional stability; (c) disaster management; (d) health programs.
Q2. (a) five; (b) the ten non-permanent, elected members; (c) it gives a middle power a voice at the top table to raise issues and build support. **Q3.** b, d, a, c. **Q4.** (a) 1992; (b) the climate targets were written into Australian law, by the Parliament; (c) treaties: the UNFCCC and the Paris Agreement (and the Falepili Union); Australian law: the 2022 targets. **Q5.** (a) goal 13 (climate action) and goal 17 (partnerships); (b) because a middle power achieves goals like 13 only by working with others. **Q6.** (a) Pacific neighbours face sea-level rise now, so Australia's standing depends on acting; (b) Australia produces about 1% of global emissions, so cuts here cannot stop climate change alone; (c) "do more": many climate scientists, Pacific leaders, environmental groups, many younger voters; "mind the pace": many industry groups, some unions, some regional communities, some economists. **Q7.** Any way with two reasons and one responsibility tied to the dated case (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q8.** A reasoned placement, best supported at "effective in part" (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q9.** The assumptions and evidence are open; the conclusion must follow (see Fully-worked solutions). **Q10.** A choice, a global-interest explanation, and one limit (see Fully-worked solutions). **S1.** Disaster management and (through the migration pathway and security cooperation) bilateral diplomacy; development aid also acceptable. **S2.** Bilateral: two countries, one treaty. **S3.** Example assumptions: that a responsibility must benefit only the giver to count; that Australia gets nothing — Source A challenges the second (security partnership is Australia's benefit) and the first is a claim about values, not shown by the source. **S4.** Any two of: the signed treaty text published by the Australian Government; DFAT's pages on Tuvalu and the Falepili Union; dated news reports from November 2023 and August 2024.

Fully-worked solutions

Marking guide. For the open questions, marks are awarded for the reasoning steps, not for the conclusion: terms defined; assumptions surfaced; dated 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. Full marks require: the way of participating named with its dated case; two distinct reasons from part 6 (for example, security and influence for the RAMSI case); one responsibility stated as something owed to others (for example, helping a neighbour stay stable keeps the region safer for everyone).

Q8. Accept placements from "highly effective" to "effective in part" with evidence; the treaty-to-law chain (adopted 2015, ratified 2016, Climate Change Act 2022) is the follow-through evidence, and the 2030 checkpoint still to come is the honest limit on the result check. A placement with no check named earns little.

Q9. The assumption to make visible: that influence equals force — that a country matters only if it can compel outcomes. Supporting evidence: Australia holds no veto and has sat on the Security Council only five times. Challenging evidence: elected seats let Australia raise issues and shape wording (2013–2014 term), and middle-power work like RAMSI changed a neighbour's security in ways great powers did not deliver. Any reasoned conclusion that follows from the student's evidence earns full marks.

Q10. Example: donating to a disaster appeal acts in the global interest because it moves help to people beyond Australia's borders after events like the January 2022 Tonga eruption; the limit is that voluntary giving cannot replace government aid budgets or treaty commitments, which are where the large, reliable money sits.

S3. Assumptions to surface: that responsibilities are only burdens (the source shows Australia gaining a security partner — a benefit, so the source challenges the claim); and that a treaty's value is measured only for one side (a claim the source cannot settle, since it states commitments, not outcomes). A student who names either assumption and reads the source against it earns the mark.

All real-world facts in this section are real, named and dated (D9): United Nations Charter (Australia a founding member, membership from 1 November 1945); UN Security Council structure (5 permanent members with veto, 10 elected for two years) and Australia's terms 1946–47, 1956–57, 1973–74, 1985–86, 2013–14 (elected 18 October 2012); first Australian UN peacekeeping role, Indonesia, 1947; Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands,

2003, ended 30 June 2017; New Colombo Plan, from 2014; Australian aid budget 2024–25, about A\$4.96 billion; COVAX, Australian contribution US\$159.1 million; Hunga Tonga–Hunga Ha’apai eruption, 15 January 2022, first Australian aid planes 20 January 2022; Pacific Islands Forum, formed 1971, 18 members; UNFCCC, opened for signature 4 June 1992, in force 21 March 1994; Paris Agreement, adopted 12 December 2015, in force 4 November 2016, Australia signed 22 April 2016 and ratified 9 November 2016; UN Sustainable Development Goals, adopted September 2015; Climate Change Act 2022, a Commonwealth law (43% by 2030, net zero by 2050); 2035 target of 62–70% below 2005 levels, announced September 2025; RCEP in force for Australia 1 January 2022; Falepili Union, signed 9 November 2023, in force 28 August 2024; Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, formed 24 July 1987, 116 overseas posts. Retrieved 26 August 2026.