

# Advantages of incumbency

## MP and senator entitlements in 2025

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*MPs receive \$1.2 million worth of entitlements each year, and Senators \$1.1 million. Over the course of an election cycle, these entitlements are worth at least \$3.6 million per MP and \$3.2 million per Senator. These resources can be used to boost re-election chances, creating barriers to entry for challengers that help explain why about 9 in 10 incumbents get re-elected.*

Discussion paper

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# Summary

MPs receive \$1.2 million worth of entitlements each year, and Senators \$1.1 million. Over the course of an election cycle, these entitlements are worth at least \$3.6 million per MP and \$3.2 million per Senator. These resources can be used to boost re-election chances, creating barriers to entry for challengers that help explain why about 9 in 10 incumbents get re-elected.

A parliamentarian likely uses most of these important publicly funded entitlements in the course of their work. However, these guaranteed funding advantages—elevated by the benefits of non-financial resources, such as information, research capacity, and exemptions from communication preference laws—give parliamentarians an inherent advantage in re-election campaigns.

Any challenger must mobilise within strict time constraints to as they compete against the office, staff and communications financial resources that the parliamentarian and their party (if any) will have built over the past term of Parliament. Additionally, parliamentarians continue to draw salary in an election period, while challengers may have to take leave or go without work, increasing the financial burden of running against an incumbent. Together these advantages of incumbency create a multimillion-dollar barrier to entry for challengers.

It is reasonable to assume that this barrier to entry contributes at least in part to the narrow chances of success challengers face against incumbents in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.

These barriers will be exacerbated by the Federal Government's changes to political finance law in 2025, including limiting the spending of independent challengers to \$800,000 – even though they will be running against major party MPs who have benefited from millions of dollars of incumbency advantages.

# Introduction

Parliamentarians receive extensive resources to communicate with the public, assist constituents, respond to inquiries, attend public events, play ceremonial roles, and consult and receive feedback. These resources include, but are not limited to, the parliamentarian's salary; office, printing and travel allowances; and electorate and personal staff. The provision of these resources is necessary and appropriate to facilitate the parliamentarian's duty to represent their constituents.

However, these resources are also available to parliamentarians during election campaigns. Together, these resources and advantages make it more difficult for challengers than incumbents to conduct a successful election campaign.

This research updates key figures and tables from the Australia Institute's 2023 *Advantages of incumbency* paper.<sup>1</sup>

New electoral laws were legislated in February this year, due to come into effect from July 2026. There is still time to reform these laws to be fairer to new entrants, given the incumbency advantages enjoyed by members of Parliament and larger political parties.

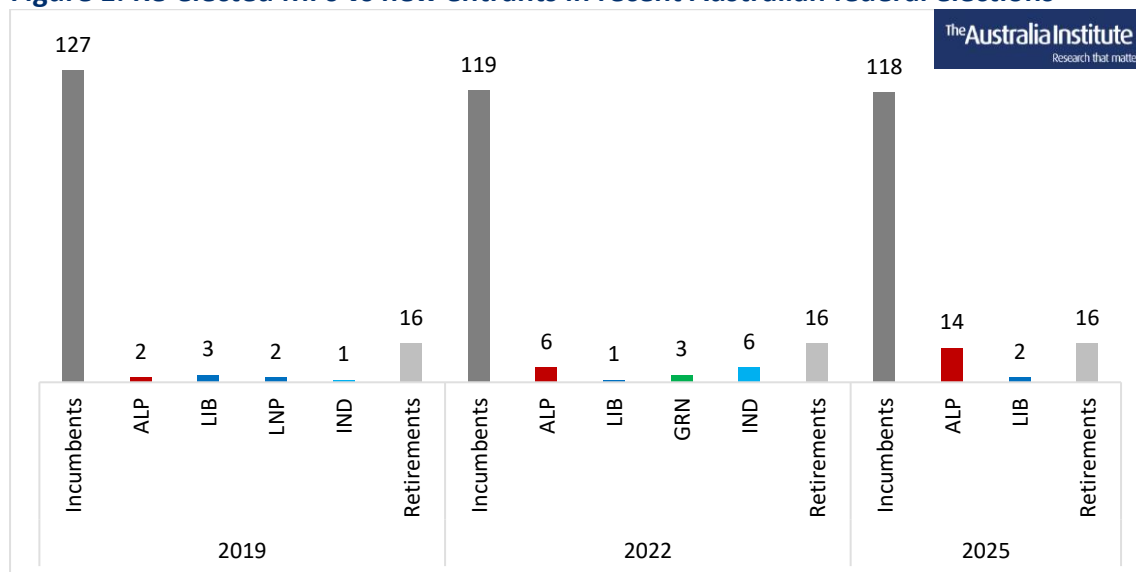
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<sup>1</sup> Morison & Browne (2023) *Advantages of incumbency*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/advantages-of-incumbency/>

# Incumbents are usually re-elected

In Australian elections, incumbents are usually re-elected. The vast majority of winning candidates in each of the last four Australian elections were incumbents who were returned in their electorates. Even in 2025, an election described as a “landslide” for Labor, only 17 re-contesting MPs were defeated (13% of all recontesting MPs).<sup>2</sup>

**Figure 1: Re-elected MPs vs new entrants in recent Australian federal elections**



Source: AEC (n.d.) *Results*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/>

One explanation for such a strong chance of re-election might be that incumbency comes with significant advantages. Parliamentarians receive benefits, allowances, salaries, and non-financial resources that can boost their chances of being returned.

<sup>2</sup> Beaumont (2025) *Labor wins surprise landslide, returned with a thumping majority*  
<https://theconversation.com/labor-wins-surprise-landslide-returned-with-a-thumping-majority-255518>

# Financial resources of sitting MPs

Members of Parliament receive substantial resources to assist them in carrying out their duties as a representative. Between their various entitlements, allowances and salaries, an MP or Senator has access to at least \$3 million in each election cycle.

**Table 1: Annual entitlements for an incumbent parliamentarian, as of 1 July 2025**

Entitlement Expenditure	Incumbency benefit	
	<i>Member of Parliament</i>	<i>Senator</i>
<b>Office expenses</b>	\$166,632 + \$1.243 per enrolled voter (smallest electorate is Clark in Tasmania with 74,315 enrolled voters, entitled to \$92,374; largest is Longman in Queensland with 142,810 enrolled voters, entitled to \$177,513) + office spaces ( <i>undisclosed</i> )	\$ 133,370 + office spaces ( <i>undisclosed</i> )
<b>Electorate allowance</b>	\$39,700–\$57,100 (depending on size of electorate)	\$39,700
<b>Private-plated vehicle or self-drive car</b>	Vehicle or \$19,500 additional electorate allowance + servicing, maintenance, insurance and fuel	Vehicle or \$19,500 additional electorate allowance + servicing, maintenance, insurance and fuel
<b>Transport in large electorates</b>	\$0–\$120,000 (depending on size of electorate)	\$0 (ACT) \$14,860–\$26,490 (states) \$65,760 (NT)
<b>Travel allowance</b>	\$318 standard travel allowance per night *72 nights of sitting weeks + ~10 additional nights (\$318–\$767 per night depending on location) (to a maximum of 120 nights total) = \$26,076–\$30,556 + Flights	\$318 standard travel allowance per night *72 nights of sitting weeks + ~10 additional nights (\$318–\$767 per night depending on location) (to a maximum of 120 nights total) = \$26,076–\$30,556 + Flights
<b>Nominated traveller</b>	\$308–\$823 standard travel allowance per night depending on location *120 nights = \$36,960–\$98,760 + Flights	\$308–\$823 standard travel allowance per night depending on location *120 nights = \$36,960–\$98,760 + Flights
<b>Minimum subtotal</b>	<b>\$381,242</b>	<b>\$255,605.98</b>
<b>Maximum subtotal</b>	<b>\$675,653</b>	<b>\$393,237.98</b>



**Table 1 Continued**

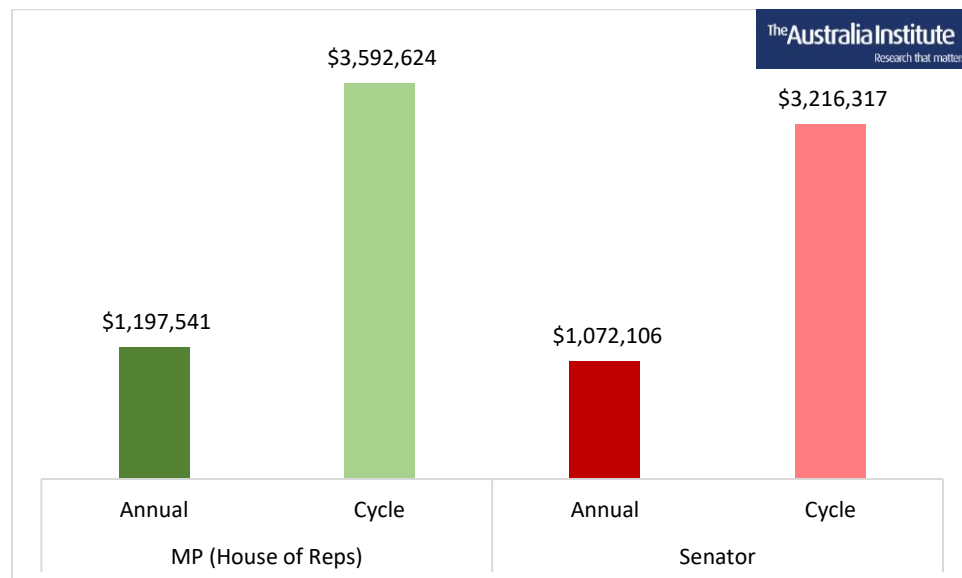
<b>Salaries and staff</b>	<b>Member of Parliament</b>	<b>Senator</b>
<b>Electorate staff</b>	\$382,177–\$617,669 (five staff) + \$134,676–\$153,252 (electorate staff allowance) 15.4% superannuation <i>MPs for larger electorates are entitled to more staff and a higher electoral staff allowance</i>	\$382,177–438,083 (five staff) + \$134,676 (electorate staff allowance) 15.4% superannuation
<b>Personal staff</b>	Allocated on a discretionary basis by the Prime Minister, on salaries of \$74,535–\$306,723 (plus \$28,763–\$37,364 personal staff allowance) 15.4% superannuation	Allocated on a discretionary basis by the Prime Minister, on salaries of \$74,535–\$306,723 (plus \$28,763–\$37,364 personal staff allowance) 15.4% superannuation
<b>Salary</b>	\$233,660 15.4% superannuation <i>Members with additional responsibilities receive higher salaries</i>	\$233,660 15.4% superannuation <i>Senators with additional responsibilities receive higher salaries</i>
<b>Electorate support budget</b>	\$34,180–\$46,012 for 110 nights of electorate staff travel allowances + transport (flights or car) <i>(or \$2,000–\$5,000 for electorates close to Canberra)</i> \$31,607–\$52,678 for 150–250 days of relief staffing 15.4% superannuation	\$34,380–\$42,880 for 110 nights of electorate staff travel allowances + transport (flights or car) <i>(or \$2,000–\$5,000 for electorates close to Canberra)</i> \$31,607 for 150 days of relief staffing 15.4% superannuation
<b>Minimum subtotal</b>	<b>\$816,300</b>	<b>\$816,500</b>
<b>Maximum subtotal</b>	<b>\$1,103,271</b>	<b>\$880,906</b>
	<b>Member of Parliament</b>	<b>Senator</b>
<b>Minimum total</b>	<b>\$1,197,541</b>	<b>\$1,072,106</b>
<b>Maximum total</b>	<b>\$1,778,924</b>	<b>\$1,274,144</b>

Note: Minimum and maximum totals are calculated for parliamentarians with no additional responsibilities or discretionary allowances.

Source: Ministerial and Parliamentary Services (n.d.) *Offices, resources and budgets*, <https://maps.finance.gov.au/offices-resources-and-budgets>; Ministerial and Parliamentary Services (n.d.) *Pay and employment*, <https://maps.finance.gov.au/pay-and-employment>; Independent Parliamentary Expenses Authority (n.d.) *Travel* <https://www.ipea.gov.au/travel>

Every year, an MP or Senator is entitled to at least \$1 million in allowances, entitlements, and salaries for them and their office. As a minimum, this figure is before the personal staff allotments that many parliamentarians receive from the Prime Minister and the allowances that come from additional offices – such as shadow minister, minister, or party leader.

**Figure 2: Minimum entitlements of an ordinary parliamentarian**



Source: see Tables 1 & 2.

Over an electoral cycle of three years, each parliamentarian is entitled to at least \$3 million in funding for them and their office, often much more. While much of that will go towards their work as a parliamentarian, it also allows them to raise their profile in the community and set the stage for successful re-election.

# Growing electorates contribute to expenses

At up to \$3.8 million per election cycle for a senator and up to \$5.3 million per cycle for a member of the House of Representatives, entitlements have increased by \$600,000 per MP per electoral cycle since the Australia Institute last examined this issue in 2023.<sup>3</sup> The federal entitlements are also significantly higher than those available to state-level representatives in either Victoria or NSW, where MLAs and MLCs have access to a minimum of \$1 to 2 million over their four-year electoral cycles.<sup>4</sup>

One explanation for why parliamentarians need multiple offices, several staff and large travel allowances is that they are responsible for larger electorates than ever before – both in terms of people to represent and, for regional and rural seats, sheer geographical size.

There are now an average of 120,659 voters per member of Parliament, over six thousand more than in 2022 and about five times as many as in 1903 when women gained the right to vote. That leaves politicians spread thinly, explaining why most Australians have never spoken to their local member. It also leads to a more shallow talent pool from which to choose committee heads and ministers.

With MPs spread more thinly, it is understandable that more taxpayer resources are needed – to provide offices and electorate staff to provide services to more constituents, to cover more travel and to cover personal staff for legislative and policy work. However, the effect is a dilution of democratic representation as the actual decision-maker, the MP, becomes less accessible and more remote.

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<sup>3</sup> Morison & Browne (2023) *Advantages of incumbency*

<sup>4</sup> Browne (2024) *Submission: Review of the 2023 NSW election*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/incumbent-nsw-mps-enjoy-2-million-in-incumbency-advantages-on-top-of-head-start-from-the-states-political-finance-laws/>; Morison and Browne (2023) *Submission: 2022 Victorian state election inquiry*

# Other advantages for sitting MPs

There are numerous other advantages of incumbency which, while less quantifiable than direct financial advantages, present significant potential benefits:

## Profile and outreach advantages

- A public profile by virtue of holding office
- Access to the electoral roll
- Exemption from the *Privacy Act 1988*, the *Do Not Call Register Act 2006*, and the *Spam Act 2003* – which enforce junk mail, spam, and other communications preferences – for registered political parties, and for parliamentarians and councillors when they are conducting activities related to an election, referendum, or other political process<sup>5</sup>
- For incumbents who have held seats for multiple election cycles, familiarity with the systems through which the advantages of incumbency are administered, and the institutional knowledge to maximise them.

## Financial advantages

- The ability to plan for the future according to guaranteed and predictable funding from the entitlements discussed in this report
- Political contributions made to secure access to parliamentarians, for example at dinners, or through business forum memberships
- Per-vote public funding based on performance at the last federal election
- The ability to receive tax-deductible political donations at any time in the political cycle. Challengers must become official candidates to achieve tax-deductibility status and accept campaign donations, which occurs only a matter of weeks before the election.<sup>6</sup> Independent challengers can register as a party, but it is a difficult process
- Assets built over time in nominated entities (which are not subject to donation caps when contributing to political parties), such as the Cormack Foundation Pty Ltd

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<sup>5</sup> Office of the Australian Information Commissioner (n.d.) *Political parties and elections*, <https://www.oaic.gov.au/privacy/your-privacy-rights/more-privacy-rights/political-parties-and-elections>

<sup>6</sup> Australian Taxation Office (n.d.) *Claiming political contributions and gifts*, <https://www.ato.gov.au/non-profit/gifts-and-fundraising/in-detail/fundraising/claiming-political-contributions-and-gifts/>; AEC (2022) *When elections are held*, <https://www.aec.gov.au/learn/election-timetable.htm>

(Liberal Party), Labor Services & Holdings Pty Ltd (Labor Party) and Pilliwinks Pty Ltd (National Party).<sup>7</sup>

## Policy advantages

- Use of the Parliamentary Budget Office and the Parliamentary Library
- Funding for parties with parliamentary party status to establish think tanks that produce research for use by parliamentarians from that party. These include: the Menzies Research Centre (Liberal Party of Australia), the Chifley Research Centre (Australian Labor Party), the Green Institute (the Greens), and Page Research Centre (the Nationals).

## Advantages of government MPs

Incumbents who are members of the government also hold further advantages that are not accessible to members of the opposition or the crossbench.

- The power to set the election date, allowing a head start on campaign planning, including booking advertising space
- The potential for misuse of government advertising to promote a party or policy<sup>8</sup>
- The chance to “pork barrel” strategic seats, by funding projects in those electorates<sup>9</sup>
- The opportunity to misuse grants announcements to promote their parliamentarians and candidates
- The use of public money to employ private consultants, whose findings Ministers can selectively release or hold back and
- The provision of advice and information to ministers from the departments that they administer.

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<sup>7</sup> Victorian Electoral Commission (2022) *Register of Nominated Entities*, <https://disclosures.vec.vic.gov.au/nominated-entities/>

<sup>8</sup> Browne (2022) *Bad impressions*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/bad-impressions-scrutiny-of-government-advertising/>

<sup>9</sup> See for example Melville-Rea, Seth-Purdie and Browne (2021) *Grants with Ministerial Discretion*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/grants-with-ministerial-discretion/>

# Advantages introduced by political finance changes

In early 2025, the Albanese Labor Government and Liberal–National Opposition voted together to increase taxpayer funding of political parties, cap political expenditure and limit private funding. The changes, the most significant in 40 years, were rushed through without public consultation or a parliamentary inquiry.

In practice, the changes further advantage incumbents (and particularly the major parties) over new entrants and independents, including:

- The **caps on political donations** are per “party” (or per independent candidate) but what Australians think of as political parties – like the Liberal, Labor, Greens and National parties – are actually groups of parties, each party in the group being able to receive donations up to the cap. This will limit the ability of independent candidates, new political parties, and political campaigners to fundraise, while leaving established parties much less constrained.
- The **nominated entity** exception to donation caps allows the major parties to continue to receive millions of dollars of payments every year, outside of donation caps.
- Further, the **nominated entity** exception may in practice allow a billionaire-funded minor party to escape donation limits.
- In exchange for having their fundraising limited, established parties and incumbent MPs will receive tens of millions of dollars more in **public funding**; in some cases, far more than the political donations that they are missing out on. Independent candidates, new parties, their candidates and political campaigners will receive nothing to compensate them for lost revenue.
- The laws limit **spending on election campaigns**. In practice, independent candidates will be far more limited in their spending than party candidates.<sup>10</sup>

These incumbency advantages are particularly insidious because they cannot even be counteracted by private funding. By limiting private funding to new entrants while expanding public funding of incumbents, they prevent new entrants from ever being able to fairly compete.

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<sup>10</sup> Browne and Black (2025) *Electoral Reform Bill analysis*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/electoral-reform-bill-analysis/>

# Conclusion

Dramatic changes to how Australian elections work were rushed through the Parliament earlier this year – without a parliamentary inquiry, consultation or modelling to determine how they will affect the competitiveness of different candidates.

The new laws advantage incumbents and major parties at the expense of fair and free competition in elections. These are compounded by the millions of dollars of incumbency advantages that each sitting MP and senator receives, which also sets them at an advantage when seeking re-election.

Integrity groups, including the Australia Institute, Centre for Public Integrity, Australian Democracy Network and Transparency International Australia, have called for six key reforms that would, in part, redress the unfairness in the new laws.<sup>11</sup>

There is still time to reform the Albanese Government's changes to election laws, in the light of incumbency advantages and other gaps in the legislation.

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<sup>11</sup> The Australia Institute (2025) *Six reforms to fix Australia's new, deeply flawed political finance regime*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/six-reforms-to-fix-australias-new-deeply-flawed-political-finance-regime/>