

Australian democracy in 2025

Submission to the inquiry into the 2025 federal election

Australia is a thriving, inventive democracy, but measured reforms would strengthen and protect political institutions.

Submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters

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Summary and recommendations

Australia Institute research touches on most of the terms of reference for the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM) inquiry into the 2025 federal election. This submission examines recent political finance changes; the state of political communications; the Commonwealth Parliament's size, tenure, and composition; and public participation in the political process.

Political finance changes

The *Electoral Reform Act* passed by the major parties earlier this year is unfair, undemocratic and fails to serve its stated objectives. It was rushed and may well be unconstitutional.

Integrity groups have identified six immediate reforms that would go some way to undoing the damage done, but broader reforms are needed to level the playing field in Australian elections.

Political communications

With misleading advertising presenting serious problems at recent elections, it is time for Parliament to legislate truth in political advertising laws like those that have worked in South Australia for 40 years.

The largest source of complaints at election time is the way political parties insert themselves into the postal voting application process. This is unnecessary and damages public trust in both the electoral system and the Australian Electoral Commission. Reforms at the state level prove political parties can be removed from this process.

Political parties are reportedly sharing voters' personal information with third parties. This is made possible by the special exemptions they receive from the *Privacy Act* and *Spam Act*.

Parliamentary size, length and composition

Australia's population has grown by 11 million people since there was last an increase in the number of parliamentarians. This means few Australians meet or interact with their local member; regional and rural electorates grow ever-larger; the talent pool for ministers and committee chairs is shallower than it could be; and legislation and inquiries do not receive proper attention.

Perversely, political staff numbers *have* increased in line with population, so there are proportionally as many people employed in politics – just not as local members.

As well as an across-the-board increase in political representation, an increase in territory senator numbers specifically is warranted. Relative to Tasmania, the Australian Capital Territory and Northern Territory are underrepresented in terms of the number of senators that they elect. Increasing the number of senators to at least four per territory would go some way to correcting this imbalance. It would also guarantee that both major parties are represented among each territory's cohort.

Having a fixed term for the House of Representatives, similar to the practice in some states and territories, would help with legislation planning. However, four-year terms are impossible without a referendum, something that the Prime Minister has ruled out, and so discussion of lengthening the term of Parliament is a distraction from the large volume of unfinished democratic reform.

In the 2025 election, one-third of Australians cast a first preference vote for an independent or minor party candidate – but this is not reflected in the distribution of members elected to the House of Representatives. Multi-member electorates would be more representative. Major parties would also benefit from proportional representation, by avoiding electoral 'wipeouts', being able to preselect quality candidates wherever they live and having party rooms that better reflect the geographical distribution of the party's voters.

Political participation

Compulsory voting helps maintain high voter turnout in Australia's elections. However, in the 2025 election, over one-in-four of the voting-age population in Australia did not cast a vote that was counted. This has multiple causes, including how difficult it is to become an Australian citizen.

There is a strong case for lowering the minimum voting age to 16.

The 2025 election saw a historic low in the proportion of votes cast on election day, as early voting is becoming increasingly popular. This diminishes election day as a celebration of democracy and a coming-together of the community, and means voters miss out on information that arises in the last days of the campaign.

Because it has not changed since the 1980s, the deterrent effect from the fine for not voting is reduced. The maxim that 'If you don't vote, you don't count' suggests that the disadvantaged and disengaged suffer most when turnout is low.

Recommendations

On electoral reform:

- Prioritise the six key reforms identified by integrity groups, including to aggregate donations; to lower national spending caps and increase per-seat spending caps; to establish a technical review process; to end the special treatment of nominated entities; to require all cash-for-access and corporate donations be disclosed; and to create fit-for-purpose rules for charities.
- Consider the broader political finance recommendations in the Australia Institute's *Electoral Reform Bill analysis*.

On political communications:

- The Parliament adopt truth in political advertising laws, based on the South Australian model.
- Change the law to forbid political parties, candidates and third parties from co-opting the postal vote process.
- Certain exemptions for political parties to the *Spam Act* and the *Privacy Act* be removed, so that access for parties and candidates to voter information is more limited, and unsolicited text message communications be strictly limited.

On parliamentary size, length and composition:

- Increase the number of parliamentarians, including the number of territory senators, in this term. If a 50% increase in the total number of parliamentarians is not feasible in this term, make progress towards that target.
- JSCEM consider the issue of proportional representation in voting for the House of Representatives, particularly a Hare-Clark system with multi-member electorates.

On political participation:

- Lower the voting age to 16, on a voluntary basis or with a nominal fine for not voting until age 18.
- JSCEM consider how to encourage voting on election day, for example by further shortening the early voting period or requiring those voting early to give a reason.
- Increase the fine for not voting and peg it to penalty units.

Introduction

The Australia Institute welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' inquiry into the 2022 election.

The Australia Institute's Democracy & Accountability Program was founded in 2021 to improve the quality of Australian governance and heighten public trust in politics and democracy. Although the program is relatively new, the Australia Institute has written about democracy and accountability issues since it was founded in 1994.

Democracy around the world is receding. There are fewer liberal democratic countries today than there were in 1991, when Eastern European societies were undergoing democratic transition. The number of people living in liberal democracies has declined by about 200 million since 2012, and more than twice as many countries are "autocratising" as are "democratising".¹

In the face of global democratic decline, Australian democracy remains strong – but by no means perfect. The major parties voted just this year to skew the electoral system in their favour, a move that integrity experts have likened to "cartel" politics.²

The Australia Institute's submission makes practical but ambitious recommendations for how Australia can strengthen, cultivate and protect its democratic institutions and norms in the face of global decline.

Two priorities of our submission are political finance reform and truth in political advertising. Fair political finance reform is needed for democratic contests and to maintain public confidence in the electoral system. Democracy also depends on a shared understanding of the world and agreement on facts. Effective truth in political advertising legislation would strengthen democracy.

It has been too long since the last increase in the number of parliamentarians. The longer governments delay, the greater the increase needed.

¹ Herre (2022, updated in July 2025) *The world has recently become less democratic*, <https://ourworldindata.org/less-democratic>

² Partlett (2025) *Why the rise of 'cartel parties' in Australia threatens our democracy*, <http://theconversation.com/why-the-rise-of-cartel-parties-in-australia-threatens-our-democracy-265471>

Political finance changes

The inquiry examines “the implementation and operation of the electoral reform passed by the 47th Parliament, particularly regarding the use of money or capital in the most recent election”.

Earlier this year, The Australia Institute described the effect of the Electoral Reform Bill (as it then was) based on the 2022 federal election. With the bill amended and passed and the 2025 federal election now complete, these figures can be updated.

The Australia Institute’s analysis of the effect of these changes remains the most thorough to have been published, because there was no JSCEM inquiry into the bill and the government has published little information.

Among the concerns with the changes are:

- The **extreme haste** shown by the government in introducing and passing the bill. Four in five Australians (81%) agree that major changes to electoral law should be reviewed by a multi-party committee, which has not happened.
- 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 is able to receive donations up to the cap. The effect is to 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 intended for the major parties in practice may allow a billionaire-funded minor party to escape spending limits.
- In exchange for having their fundraising limited, established parties and incumbent members of parliament (MPs) would 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 would receive nothing to compensate them for lost revenue.
- The changes limit **spending on election campaigns**. In practice, independent candidates will be far more limited in their spending than party candidates.³

³ Browne (2025) “Stitch up” Labor and Coalition Deal on Electoral Reform, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/stich-up-labor-and-coalition-deal-on-electoral-reform/>; Browne & Black (2025) *Electoral Reform Bill: Analysis*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/electoral-reform-bill-analysis/>

There are fairer alternatives to public funding — like the democracy voucher model used in the City of Seattle — and ways that the donation and spending caps could be tweaked to make them at the very least less unfair.

This analysis updates the Australia Institute’s *Electoral Reform Bill analysis* paper where applicable, but the analysis and recommendations in that paper remain relevant.

LEGISLATIVE PROCESS

The original bill was written and passed by the lower house in extreme haste. The process was ultimately worse in the Senate on 12 February 2025. The major parties approved the bill without even circulating to minor parties and crossbenchers the amendments that they had agreed to make.⁴

Minister Don Farrell claimed that this reform had been the most transparent electoral reform “ever”.⁵

In fact, only very broad principles were considered by the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters in 2022 and 2023, the draft bill itself was never considered by JSCEM and the bill was rammed through a few months before the election.

This is a very different approach from previous rounds of electoral reform. The Whitlam Government took electoral reforms to three elections (and won two of them), including a double dissolution. The Hawke Government had its electoral reforms drafted by a special-purpose Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters (JSCEM), whose recommendations formed the basis of the government’s legislation.⁶ The Hawke Government also accepted more than 50 amendments, including ten advanced by the bipartisan Senate Standing Committee for the Scrutiny of Bills.⁷

⁴ Waters (2025) *Senate Official Hansard*, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Hansard/Hansard_Display?bid=chamber/hansards/28694/&sid=0327

⁵ Farrell (2025) *Doorstop interview*, <https://www.trademinister.gov.au/minister/don-farrell/transcript/doorstop-canberra>

⁶ Commonwealth of Australia (1983) *Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform, First Report*, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/House_of_Representatives_Committees/CommitteeList/ReportsByCommittee?id=150

⁷ Beazley (1983) *House of Representatives Official Hansard*, <https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F1983-12-06%2F0130%22>

In 2025, the Scrutiny of Bills Committee was scarcely given the chance to review the Albanese Government’s revised Electoral Reform Bill and JSCEM was not given *any* opportunity to do so.⁸

Australia Institute polling research confirms that most Australians believe that “Any major change to electoral law should be reviewed by a multi-party committee of parliamentarians to consider its design and impacts”, with four in five agreeing (81%) and only 5% disagreeing.⁹

DONATION CAPS

Negotiations between the Labor Party and the Liberal–National Coalition raised the proposed donation cap from \$20,000 to \$50,000 per-donor, per-recipient, per-year.¹⁰

This means that the effective donations cap per-donor for political parties would look as follows.

Table 1: Effective donation caps per-donor by political party

“Party”	Registered parties	Calendar year cap	Election cycle cap
Labor	9	\$450,000	\$1,800,000
Liberal	8	\$400,000	\$1,600,000
Country Liberal Party	1	\$50,000	\$200,000
Nationals	5	\$250,000	\$1,000,000
Greens	5	\$250,000	\$1,000,000

Independent candidates and MPs would be capped at \$50,000 per donor per year, or \$200,000 per donor over each election cycle.

The amendments undermine the Act’s stated objective of preventing elections from being “unfairly skewed by organisations or individuals with large amounts of money”.¹¹

A donor will be able to give more than \$1.5 million to each major party, and \$1 million to the Greens and Nationals respectively, during each election cycle.

⁸ Senate Standing Committee for the Scrutiny of Bills (2025) *Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024*,
https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Scrutiny_of_Bills/Bill_assessments/assessments/r7280

⁹ The Australia Institute (2024) *Polling – Parliamentary scrutiny of electoral law changes*,
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/polling-parliamentary-scrutiny-of-electoral-law-changes/>

¹⁰ McIlroy (2025) *Crossbench shut out of political donations overhaul*,
<https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/crossbench-shut-out-of-political-donations-overhaul-20250212-p5lbf7>

¹¹ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), s. 302C(1)(a)

And whereas the original bill prevented an individual donor from giving more than \$640,000 in total per year (\$2.56 million over one election cycle), the revised cap allows a single donor to give up to \$1.6 million in total every year (or \$6.4 million over one election cycle).¹²

A carve-out for peak bodies means the Business Council of Australia, the Minerals Council of Australia and other lobby groups for vested interests can take up to \$250,000 per year from each member organisation,¹³ five times the \$50,000 at which an actual Australian voter is capped in giving to a particular recipient.

SPENDING CAPS

The electoral changes introduce multiple types of federal electoral spending caps.

An independent candidate's electoral expenditure counts towards their \$800,000 cap¹⁴ while a party's only counts towards the seat cap if it is "targeted" at the seat – a much higher threshold.¹⁵

Moreover, major parties and incumbent parliamentarians start with a significant financial advantage over new challengers. Over each parliamentary term, lower house MPs enjoy over \$3 million in incumbency advantages as much of their administrative costs are publicly funded, as well as considerable name recognition and media coverage.¹⁶

Parties can also run multiple campaigns from a single office, produce generic electoral material for national distribution and redeploy resources in response to new information. They can also target their resources at heavily contested seats while spending relatively little defending 'safe' seats.

The Albanese Government's changes to electoral laws would effectively cap independent candidates more strictly than party candidates, allowing the major parties to continue "piling in" to target seats.¹⁷

¹² Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), ss. 302B, 302CI

¹³ Crowley (2025) *Labor and Coalition strike electoral reform deal*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-02-12/labor-coalition-strike-electoral-reform-deal/104928032>

¹⁴ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), s. 302ANA

¹⁵ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), s. 302ALC

¹⁶ Predavec and Browne (2025) *Advantages of incumbency*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/advantages-of-incumbency-2/>

¹⁷ Black and Browne (2025) *The major parties, not the independents are the big spenders at election time*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/the-major-parties-not-the-independents-are-the-big-spenders-at-election-time/>

Parties named after candidates

Since independents are treated so unfairly by the *Electoral Reform Act*, a would-be independent candidate may be tempted to form a political party.

The difference is significant: a political party can spend \$90 million compared to just \$800,000 for an independent candidate (for a House of Representatives seat).

And there is precedent for independent candidates forming political parties to overcome the unfair treatment of independents in the electoral system: independent Senator David Pocock registered a political party in 2022 to overcome the barriers against independents under the Senate voting system.

However, the Act is designed in such a way that any party named after a candidate is further restricted. This affects not just David Pocock for the ACT, but also the Jacqui Lambie Network, Katter's Australian Party and Pauline Hanson's One Nation, among others:

The relevant section states a party that expressly mentioned the name of a candidate or an image or likeness is stuck with the state or territory spending cap, which is \$600,000 for the ACT.¹⁸

Pocock's rivals, including the Liberal Party, can spend millions of dollars provided they do not name the candidate (and they can still spend \$600,000 naming Pocock's specific rival).

But it gets even more perverse for parties named after a candidate. For example, Pauline Hanson runs for the Senate in Queensland while she also runs candidates in House of Representatives races. Jacqui Lambie, Bob Katter and Clive Palmer have done or considered doing something similar.

But under the *Electoral Reform Act*, material for House of Representatives candidates for Pauline Hanson's One Nation will expressly mention the name of a Senate candidate – Pauline Hanson.¹⁹ In Queensland, all these advertisements will presumably therefore count against Pauline Hanson's Senate cap, of \$6 million.

If the Jacqui Lambie Network ran lower house candidates while Jacqui Lambie ran in the Senate,²⁰ the problem would be worse because the Tasmanian state cap is \$1 million.

Meanwhile, other political parties would not have to count House of Representatives ad campaigns against their Senate cap.

¹⁸ Giannini (2025) *Electoral donations cap to be raised under draft deal*, <https://thenightly.com.au/politics/draft-electoral-donations-cap-to-be-raised-after-talks-c-17672188>; see also Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), s. 302ALC(3)

¹⁹ Expected in 2028.

²⁰ Expected in 2031.

Associated entities

Associated entities are those organisations that are controlled by or operated for the benefit of a party or parties. However, the *Electoral Reform Act* does not count donations to an associated entity of a political party as donations to that political party.

Since the Liberal and Labor Parties have dozens of associated entities each, and other parties could have any number of associated entities, the effect is that a donor can split their donations and therefore escape transparency or donation caps.

Most associated entities do not count towards a political parties' spending caps either. They have a separate cap of \$11.25 million each. Again, with dozens of associated entities for each major party, the effect is that hundreds of millions of dollars can still be spent on election campaigns by entities controlled by or operating on behalf of a political party, without that money counting towards a political party's expenditure cap.

Here as well the advantages accrue to political parties rather than independents. Associated entities are limited to spending no more than \$100,000 on material naming a particular electorate or local candidate.²¹ So while a Liberal-affiliated associated entity could spend \$11.25 million in the seat of Wentworth promoting the Liberal Party in general, a third party supporting an independent candidate in Wentworth could not spend more than \$100,000.

As with the Super Political Action Committees (Super PACs) that dominate American political finance, Australia's associated entities may become disproportionately powerful vehicles for election spending. The electoral laws already recognised associated entities as partisan organisations with a stake in the fortunes of a political party or parties. The revised laws give them scope to raise and spend money on behalf of their political party without coming up against shared, aggregated caps on either side of the ledger.

Major parties are the big election spenders

Proponents of the Albanese Government's reform to electoral laws have used the supposedly large campaigns run by community independents to justify the rushed changes, placing significant restrictions on independent candidates.²²

However, the data reveals that million-dollar campaigns were not uncommon before the 2022 election and major parties are the bigger spenders overall, not independents.

²¹ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), s. 302APB

²² Fletcher (2024) *Speech to The Sydney Institute*, <https://www.paulfletcher.com.au/other-speeches/speech-sydney-institute-why-majority-government-national-interest-and-teals-are-not>; Godsell (2024) *'Anointed by the billionaires': Farrell hits back at Teals*, <https://www.skynews.com.au/australia-news/politics/special-minister-of-state-don-farrell-slams-billionaire-influence-on-teal-mps-as-he-pushes-electoral-reform/news-story/e40c83b26ac170b0b6504aefa20787ec>

Former Senator Kim Carr claimed that Labor spent \$1 million on the 2018 Batman by-election campaign in the hope of preventing a once-safe seat from falling to the Greens.²³ In the same year, the Liberal Party reportedly spent \$1 million on its Wentworth by-election campaign, which was won by independent Dr Kerry Phelp. Her campaign cost \$145,265.²⁴

Even since the 2022 election, both Labor and the Liberal Party have had million-dollar seat campaigns. The Labor Party spent \$1 million on its campaign for the competitive Dunkley by-election in March 2024, and national secretary Paul Erikson predicted the Coalition had ‘easily matched this’.²⁵ The Liberal Party spent “roughly” \$1 million in Bradfield in the 2025 federal election.²⁶

In fact, community independents appear to have spent less per seat than the major parties at the 2022 federal election (electoral expenditure data for the 2025 federal election is yet to be released).

The misapprehension that independent candidates spent more appears to be product of how expenditure is reported. While each independent candidate discloses their expenditure separately, parties report only aggregate expenditure for the year. Therefore, major parties do not have to disclose how much each spent trying to win a specific marginal seat. But it is possible to calculate how much is spent, on average, per electorate.

For example, the Labor Party spent just under \$116 million for 151 House of Representatives candidates in 2022, compared to \$131 million for 155 candidates from the Liberal and National parties. The 22 community independents spent a combined \$14 million.²⁷

On this measure, Labor and the Coalition spent \$112,000 and \$189,000 (respectively) more per candidate than the community independents for the 2022 federal election.

²³ Carr (2024) *A long march*, Monash University Publishing, p. 202

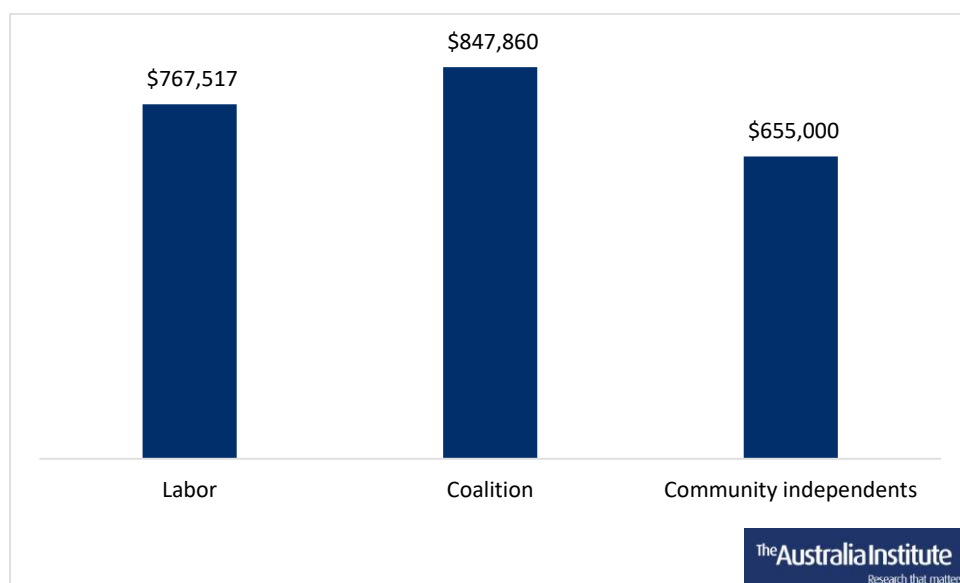
²⁴ Davies (2018) ‘After a chaotic campaign comes the day of reckoning in Wentworth’, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2018/oct/20/wentworth-byelection-after-a-chaotic-campaign-comes-the-day-of-reckoning>

²⁵ Grattan (2024) ‘The voters of Dunkley have government and opposition in a guessing game’, *The Conversation*, <https://theconversation.com/grattan-on-friday-the-voters-of-dunkley-have-government-and-opposition-in-a-guessing-game-224732>

²⁶ Robin (2025) ‘It shows you everything that’s wrong with the Liberal party,’ <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/it-shows-you-everything-that-s-wrong-with-the-liberal-party-20250801-p5mjm0>

²⁷ For community independents, AEC (2022) *Candidate and Senate group returns*, <https://transparency.aec.gov.au/CandidateSenateGroup>; for major parties, AEC (2023) *Political party returns*, <https://transparency.aec.gov.au/AnnualPoliticalParty>

Figure 1: Average spending per House of Representatives candidate



Source: For community independents, AEC (2022) *Candidate and Senate group returns*, <https://transparency.aec.gov.au/CandidateSenateGroup>; for major parties, AEC (2023) *Political party returns*, <https://transparency.aec.gov.au/AnnualPoliticalParty>

There are limitations to this approach. The data available for the major parties does not distinguish state campaigns from federal campaigns. Nor does the data tell us how much was spent on party administration rather than electioneering per se, nor do we know how much was spent in certain seats. After all, we know that competitive races are likely to be much higher than the average figure.

A measure that does give a sense of spending in competitive races is digital advertising expenditure on Google and Meta ads. In the six electorates that community independents won in 2022, there was no clear pattern of independents outspending the incumbent major party, the Liberals.²⁸

Changes to electoral laws have been justified by an unfounded premise – that spending by independent candidates is a more serious threat than spending by political parties.

In fact, from the limited data available, community independents actually spent less on average than their major party rivals.

²⁸ Black and Browne (2025) *The major parties, not the independents are the big spenders at election time*

PUBLIC FUNDING

After each federal election, political parties and candidates are reimbursed about \$3.30 for every vote they won, up to the level of proved electoral expenditure. Voters cast two votes – one for the House of Representatives and one for the Senate – so at every federal election, each voter decides how about \$6.60 of taxpayer money is distributed.²⁹

Because parties and candidates receive their per-vote entitlement after the votes are counted, it exclusively benefits those who are contesting subsequent elections.

The *Electoral Reform Act* means per-vote election funding will increase to \$5 per vote,³⁰ and there will be a new form of public funding called “administrative funding” which is paid per parliamentarian.

The increase in election funding will cost another \$43 million or so per three-year election cycle, with about three-quarters (\$32 million) going to major parties. That figure rises to about 9-in-10 if the Greens are included as a major party.

Administrative funding

The changes introduce quarterly administrative assistance funding for political parties with MPs and senators and for independent members of the House of Representatives and Senators. This is payable at rate of \$7,500 per quarter for a member of the House of Representatives (\$90,000 per election cycle) and \$3,750 per quarter for a senator (\$45,000 per election cycle) (indexed annually).

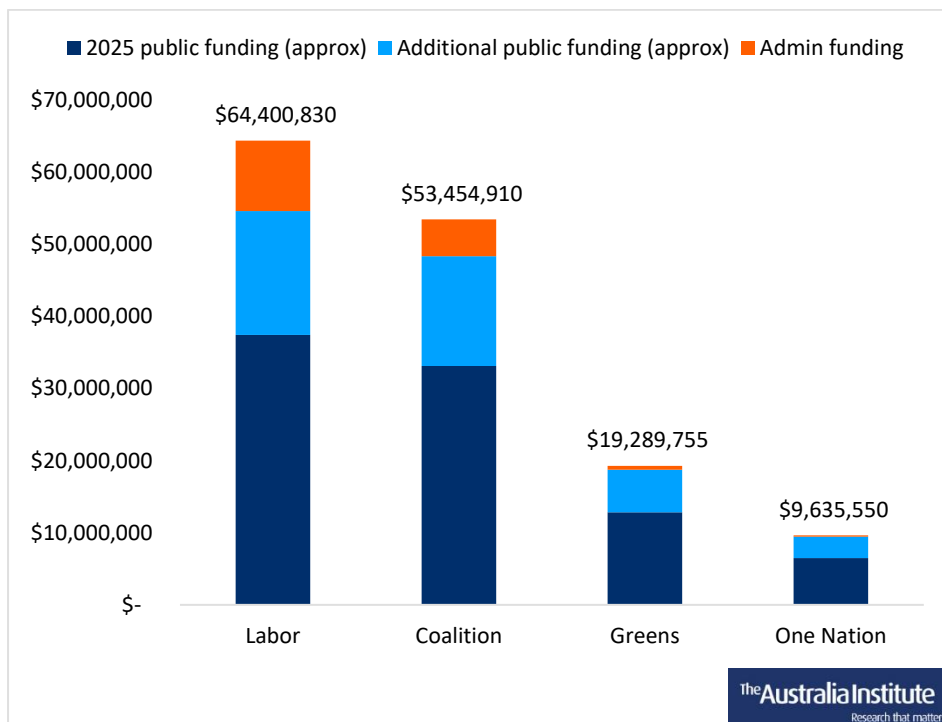
This equates to \$17 million in new administrative funding per election cycle. If this funding were in place for the whole term, it would be worth \$9.7 million for Labor, \$3.6 million for the Liberals, \$1.5 million for the Nationals and \$0.5 million for the Greens between 2025 and 2028.

²⁹ AEC (2025) *Election funding rates*,

https://www.aec.gov.au/Parties_and_Representatives/public_funding/Current_Funding_Rate.htm

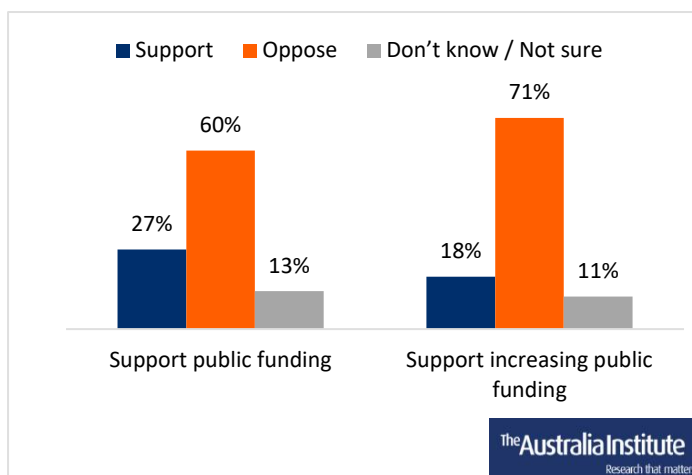
³⁰ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), p. 158

Figure 2: Per-vote and per-MP public funding, using 2025 votes



Australia Institute polling research finds 71% of Australians oppose increased public funding.

Figure 3: Total support for public funding and increased public funding, August 2024



Source: Australia Institute (2024) *Polling – Public funding for political parties and candidates*,
<https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/polling-public-funding-for-political-parties-and-candidates/>

Problems with public funding

Increased per-vote public funding is unfair to new entrants. Per-vote and per-MP public funding disadvantages new entrants, who by definition cannot receive either until after their campaigns have concluded, if at all.

Increasing public funding will increase political advertising – which in the absence of truth in political advertising laws could mean more misinformation and disinformation.

Increased administrative funding is unfair to new entrants, minor parties and senators.

The changes introduce considerable compliance costs. Providing administrative funding to account for these additional costs makes sense, but providing funding per MP is not fit for purpose. New parties and candidates, and parties without parliamentary representation, get nothing.

Per-MP public funding is wasteful. Much of the costs of running a political party are fixed costs, so there is no justification for paying the same amount per-MP. It does not cost twice as much to run a political party with 60 MPs as it does a party with 30 MPs.

Providing double the admin funding to lower house MPs as to senators is unfair to minor parties, who are represented in greater numbers in the Senate than in the House of Representatives, and unfair to independent senators.

Advance funding should not be left to regulation. The allocation of advance funding is a question appropriate for the Parliament, not a minister belonging to a particular political party. Advance funding provisions are problematic:

- New entrants would not be eligible for advance funding. This is unlike the advance funding provisions in South Australia, which are still skewed towards existing parties but do provide some advance funding for new entrants.³¹
- If a political party or candidate receives more advance funding than their “entitlement” (based on votes at the subsequent election), they would owe the remainder to the Commonwealth as a debt.³² Concern about a similar provision in the South Australian bill was partially addressed by amendments.³³
- Election funding is *already* effectively an advance payment for incumbents, since it is received after each general election. It is unclear why advance funding would also be needed; it amounts to a one-off double dip.

³¹ Browne (2024) *South Australian political finance changes*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/south-australian-political-finance-changes/>

³² Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), s. 298J(7)

³³ Browne (2024) *South Australian political finance changes*

The “reimbursement” model is unfair. A party or candidate will have fewer expenses than its public funding entitlement if:

1. They are growing in popularity over time,
2. They run a lean campaign that is nonetheless appealing to voters, or
3. Their supporters are numerous but are too poor to donate large sums.

Why should these parties and candidates receive less public funding than a wealthy party or candidate who spends a lot of money per vote received?

A reimbursement model hinders a breakout success from consolidating at subsequent elections and stops a growing party from raising funds at one election to spend against the next.

POLITICAL DISCLOSURES

The Act sets the disclosure threshold at \$5,000 rather than \$1,000 as proposed in the original bill.³⁴

Although this represents an improvement on current donation disclosure rules, it significantly waters down the original bill’s chief virtue, which was that it would improve transparency.

The lower disclosure threshold of \$1,000 would have revealed cash-for-access payments from lobbyists and corporate interests. Since the Albanese Government normally charges between \$1,500 and \$5,000 for privileged access to ministers,³⁵ it seems unlikely that cash-for-access payments will be captured under the amended threshold. A lobbyist would have to be a repeat customer to have their cash-for-access payments revealed.

To address this while still maintaining the privacy of smaller donors, the Australia Institute has recommended keeping the threshold at \$5,000 for most contributions but requiring *all* contributions from corporations and all cash-for-access payments to be disclosed, regardless of size.³⁶

³⁴ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth); Browne & Black (2025) *Electoral Reform Bill: Analysis*

³⁵ Massola (2024) *Leaked emails reveal how much it costs to dine with Albanese and senior MPs*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/three-course-cabinet-what-it-costs-to-dine-with-a-labor-minister-20241018-p5kjio.html>

³⁶ Browne & Walters (2023) *Securing transparency and diversity in political finance*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/securing-transparency-and-diversity-in-political-finance/>

RECOMMENDATIONS

Six key reforms

With other integrity groups, the Australia Institute identified six key reforms to redress the unfairness created by the Commonwealth's new political finance laws and make real progress on combatting the influence of vested interests on the exercise of public power.³⁷

Aggregation of donations for the purposes of both the gift cap and disclosure

The failure of the Act to aggregate donations to different party branches for the purposes of the gift cap and disclosure means that wealthy interests will be able to continue to access the political process in a way the average Australian can't. This is inequitable.

In respect of associated entities, when such an entity is controlled by, or operates solely or to a significant extent to the benefit of one or more political parties, donations to that associated entity should be aggregated with donations to the party for the purpose of the disclosure threshold and donation cap.

Spending caps: lower national cap, higher per seat cap and 'anti-piling in provision'

The national cap of \$90 million will be able to be used by parties to flood key races and will do nothing to alleviate the arms race for funding. The setting of the per seat cap also disadvantages new entrants and independents. Our solution is three-pronged:

- An "anti-piling in" provision to require all electoral expenditure to count against seat caps, according to how that spending is distributed
- Allowing a higher per seat spend of \$1,200,000 to allow new entrants to compete; and
- Lowering the national cap to \$60 million.

Establish an independent, technical review process

Establish an independent, expert Commission in the style of Queensland's former Electoral and Administrative Review Commission. This Commission would report pre-implementation on the setting of relevant caps and public funding arrangements, as well as conduct statutory reviews in line with the JSCEM review process the Act establishes, and 'own-motion' investigations as required.

³⁷ The Australia Institute, The Centre for Public Integrity, the Australian Democracy Network and Transparency International Australia (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/>

Abolition of the special treatment of nominated entities

Some associated entities can receive special treatment by being named as nominated entities. This will mean that parties with substantial assets can spend vastly more than those without.

Nominated entities should be able to spend and donate just like any other associated entity, but they should not be exempt from any of the limitations applying to those entities.

Requirement that all cash-for-access and corporate donations be disclosed, regardless of size

The \$5,000 disclosure cap means that millions of dollars will remain hidden and is too high to capture most cash-for-access payments.

All cash-for-access and corporate donations should be disclosed, regardless of size.

Ensure charities can continue to have a voice in election debates by having fit-for-purpose rules and regulation, instead of treating them like political parties

Charities need to be able to draw on general donations for electoral advocacy as they previously have done, whilst being subject to the new gift caps, spending caps, and disclosure requirements.

The definition of electoral expenditure should remain limited to material that has the dominant purpose of influencing how people vote, otherwise it will be too broad and capture non-electoral advocacy.

More substantial changes to level the playing field

The Australia Institute's *Electoral Reform Bill analysis* paper explains in great detail what reforms are needed to increase fairness in Australian elections. Those recommendations are reproduced here (amended to reflect the bill's passage in February).

Administrative funding

- There should be no per-MP administrative funding.
- Administrative funding could be based on the number of members a political party has, with a flat rate for independent MPs.
- If per-MP administrative funding is retained, the same rate ought to apply for members of the House of Representatives as for senators.
- If per-MP administrative funding is retained, the total a party can receive should be tapered or capped at a reasonable level. In South Australia (71 parliamentarians), the cap applies after 10 parliamentarians. The equivalent for the Commonwealth (226 parliamentarians) would be capping after 32 parliamentarians.

Election funding

- Consider capping a party's per-vote public funding for a seat at House of Representatives votes or Senate votes in that seat, whichever is higher.
- While there is a case for public funding, it should be in a form that is available to new entrants – like the democracy voucher system that operates in the City of Seattle.

Spending caps

- The spending caps should be amended to become a mega-donor cap.
- If spending caps are not amended in this way,
 - independent Senate campaigns should have the same or higher cap as party campaigns, not one that is between one-sixth and one-half of the party cap.
 - new entrants should have a higher cap than incumbents, to account for the MP's communication allowance and other incumbency advantages.
 - electoral expenditure spent in or for a seat should count against the seat cap, regardless of whether it mentions the candidate or seat.

Gift caps

- If a gift cap is retained, it should be set based on the electoral cycle rather than by year. The effect is the same for existing political parties, but provides a level playing field for new entrants.
- References to nominated entities should be removed. All associated entities should be subject to the same rules.
- Incorporate JSCM's recommendation that "charities registered under the Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission be exempt from the donation caps".³⁸ Electoral reform should seek to limit the influence of 'big money' in politics (including cash-for-access contributions), but without creating perverse outcomes for third parties such as charities and not-for-profit organisations.³⁹

³⁸ JSCM (2023) *Conduct of the 2022 federal election and other matters: Final report*, p. xv, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/~/_link.aspx?_id=B0EB44BCE6544D4488F8F90E44E0AA37&_z=z

³⁹ Browne and Shields (2022) *Fortifying Australian democracy: submission to the inquiry into the 2022 election*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/fortifying-australian-democracy/>

Worked example of electoral unfairness

Independents and minor parties are entitled to run for election, and Australians have the right to vote for them if they wish. But the effect of Australia's election laws is to make it much harder for most independents and minor parties than it is for major party candidates.

What follows is a worked example of an independent candidate, Dr Lee, running as an independent for the House of Representatives in the 2028 federal election. Dr Lee faces a very unfair fight.

Incumbency advantages

One or other of the major parties is likely to be the incumbent in the seat, meaning that its sitting MP has benefited from taxpayer-funded offices, staff, travel and communications worth millions of dollars.

Both major party candidates will have the benefit of a "duty senator" belonging to their party, who can bring their time and taxpayer-funded entitlements to bear on the election.

The major parties will also have received millions of dollars in administrative funding. While this funding can only partly be used for election campaigning,⁴⁰ the remainder can still free up other money that could then be redirected to election campaigning.

By contrast, Dr Lee must raise money for offices, staff, travel and communications through private sources.

Alternative funding sources

Major parties have many sources of funding, most of which do not involve political donations:

- Public funding (discussed below)
- Tens of millions of dollars of assets accumulated over decades
- The "tithe" or "levy" that parties may charge sitting MPs and their staff
- Affiliation fees and cash-for-access payments from business
- Donations from "nominated entities" (associated entities exempt from caps).

⁴⁰ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Reform) Bill 2024 (Cth), s. 292FA(5), Note 3

By contrast, an independent candidate has two main sources of funding:

- Private donations
- Their personal wealth.

The major parties can *also* raise money these ways, on top of their other sources of revenue.

Funding sources

Dr Lee can receive donations up to the cap of \$50,000 from any one donor, just as their major party rivals can.

But even here, the major parties have the advantage. Political parties can collect \$50,000 *per year* from any one donor, for a total of \$200,000 every three years.⁴¹ Technically Dr Lee could do the same, but in practice independent candidates emerge closer to the election date while the major parties operate – and fundraise – throughout the election cycle.

In addition, each branch of a major party is technically a separate party. A wealthy donor could only give once to Dr Lee, but could give eight times to a major party opposing Dr Lee. Even if Dr Lee is running in NSW, money donated to the Tasmanian or NT branch of a major party could fund party ads in NSW.

And if Dr Lee is running against two parties that are in a coalition, a donor could give twice to Dr Lee's opponents: once to the senior coalition partner and once to the junior coalition partner, for a total of \$100,000 to be deployed against Dr Lee.

Taxpayer funding for established players only

In a catch-22, Dr Lee's campaign will not receive the money it needs to win votes until after it has already won the votes. That is because public funding is only awarded after the election is over, based on the number of votes received and actual money spent.

In addition, the "reimbursement" model means that if Dr Lee runs a cheap campaign and still gets many votes, Dr Lee will get less public funding than a major party candidate who runs an expensive campaign and wins the same number of votes.

The candidates running against Dr Lee will have public funding banked from the last federal election – typically over \$200,000 per major party candidate (the figure is effectively doubled because the parties "double dip" with Senate votes, which Dr Lee is ineligible to receive).

⁴¹ The cap resets in an election year, providing four opportunities in a three-year cycle.

Spending caps

Dr Lee might be comforted that at least independent candidates and party candidates have the same spending cap: no more than \$800,000 in a seat.

However, Dr Lee's campaign will soon find that major party spending often does not count towards the cap.

That is because the cap for independents applies to *all* their "particular electoral expenditure". But the parties' electoral expenditure only counts if it is *targeted* at a particular seat.

For example, to the best of the authors' understanding:

- If Dr Lee puts out a radio ad criticising a major party's record on health, the cost of the ad *counts* towards the cap.
- If the major party puts out a radio ad promoting its record on health, the cost of the ad *does not* count towards the party's seat cap.
- If Dr Lee puts out a flyer promoting Dr Lee and half a dozen other independents, the cost of the ad *counts* towards Dr Lee's seat cap.
- If the major party puts out a flyer promoting its ministers, even if one of the ministers is running against Dr Lee, it *does not* count towards the party's seat cap.
- If the major party puts out a flyer promoting its candidate on one side and its Senate team on the other, because only half the flyer is about an electorate, it *counts half* towards the party's seat cap.

In practice, Dr Lee's major party rivals can each spend millions of dollars on advertising exclusively targeted at the one seat, including at least \$1.6 million specifically naming its candidate, while Dr Lee is strictly capped at \$800,000.

Associated entities and third parties

Even entities that are closely tied to a party or candidate are subject to their own separate donation and spending caps. While technically a candidate can have an associated entity, in practice they are almost exclusively used by the major parties.

These entities can run their own campaigns against Dr Lee, as can third parties that have their own gripes against Dr Lee – for example, if Dr Lee is proposing public health regulation of a particular harmful industry.

Overall effect

In total, Dr Lee would face an unlevel playing field – one specifically designed by the major parties to deter competition:

- No incumbency advantages, versus potentially millions of dollars of such advantages.
- No public funding, versus hundreds of thousands of dollars of public funding.
- No funding source except private donations, which are now capped.
 - Loopholes to the donation cap, like nominated entities, multiple branches and splitting donations across years, are available mostly to established political parties.
- A strict spending cap of \$800,000, versus the ability to spend millions of dollars campaigning in a single seat.
- No associated entities, versus dozens of associated entities with their own caps.

This is deeply unfair, and denies Australians a competitive election where each candidate has equal chance to make their case to voters.

Political communications

The inquiry's terms of references include "the suitability of the current authorisation framework and requirements, having regard to the evolution of communication methods and technology".

There are three reforms that would address this term: truth in political advertising laws; removing political parties from the postal vote process; and removing preferential treatment for political parties under the *Privacy Act* and *Spam Act*.

TRUTH IN POLITICAL ADVERTISING LAWS

Recent elections have given rise to an increasing volume of complaints across the political spectrum about misinformation and misleading advertising.⁴² Seven in ten Australians were concerned about lies and misinformation on social media during the 2023 Indigenous Voice to Parliament referendum campaign.⁴³

Truth in political advertising laws have existed in South Australia since the 1980s. These laws prohibit electoral advertisements that are materially inaccurate and misleading, and allow the SA Electoral Commission to request withdrawal and retraction of such material.⁴⁴ In 2020, the ACT Legislative Assembly unanimously passed similar laws.⁴⁵

Truth in political advertising laws are consistently popular. In 2016, when The Australia Institute first surveyed the public about the idea, nearly nine in ten respondents (87%) said that the Senate should pass such a law.⁴⁶ In a 2023 poll, the same proportion (87%) said that the reforms should be in place for the next federal election.⁴⁷

⁴² Browne (2022) *Democracy Agenda for the 47th Parliament of Australia*, p. 31, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/democracy-agenda-for-the-47th-parliament-of-australia/>

⁴³ Australia Institute (2023) *Polling – Misinformation and the referendum*, p. 1, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/misinformation-and-the-referendum/>

⁴⁴ Browne (2019) *We can handle the truth: Opportunities for truth in political advertising*, p. 7, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/we-can-handle-the-truth-opportunities-for-truth-in-political-advertising/>

⁴⁵ Elections ACT (2021) *Changes to ACT Legislative Assembly campaign finance and truth in political advertising laws commence today, 1 July 2021*, <https://www.elections.act.gov.au/news/2021/changes-to-campaign-finance-and-truth-in-political-advertising-laws-to-commence-from-1-july-2021>

⁴⁶ Australia Institute (2016) *Truth in political advertising*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/truth-in-political-advertising/>

⁴⁷ Australia Institute (2023) *Polling – Misinformation and the referendum*, p. 1, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/misinformation-and-the-referendum/>

Monash University legal scholar Associate Professor Yee-Fui Ng has conducted a detailed analysis of truth in political advertising laws. She found that existing laws in South Australia had been largely effective and enjoyed widespread support from participants in the political process.⁴⁸

In 2023, the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters proposed truth in political advertising laws and a new division of the AEC to administer them.⁴⁹

In November 2024 Special Minister of State Don Farrell introduced a bill that would bring this kind of law into effect.⁵⁰ The bill innovates on the South Australian model by placing responsibility for decision-making with a trusted former judge. It also covers one form of Artificial Intelligence-based deception, that being deepfakes of candidates, through a restriction on visual depictions “purporting to be a factual visual depiction”.

Exposure to misinformation during the campaign

Australia Institute polling research in late April 2025 – the final days of the 2025 federal election campaign – found that 72% of voters saw political advertisements that they knew to be misleading, including 42% who came across such content daily.⁵¹

Recommendation: The Parliament adopt truth in political advertising laws, based on the South Australian model.

⁴⁸ Ng (2024) *Truth in political advertising laws: design, operation, effectiveness and recommendations for reform*, pp. 5–6, 40, <https://www.susanmckinnon.org.au/research-resources/truth-in-political-advertising-laws-operation-and-effectiveness-final-report/>

⁴⁹ JSCEM (2023) *Conduct of the 2022 federal election and other matters: Interim report*, pp. 106–107, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/2022federalection/Interim_Report

⁵⁰ Dhanji (2025) *Crossbenchers urge Labor to act immediately on deepfakes and misinformation before next election*, <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/jan/23/crossbenchers-david-pocock-kate-chaney-deepfakes-urge-labor-to-act-misinformation-deepfakes-aec-warning>

⁵¹ Browne (2025) *Polling – Misleading advertising*, Australia Institute, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/more-than-70-of-australians-saw-misleading-ads-during-the-election-campaign-poll/>

THE POSTAL VOTE PROCESS

The major political parties ran postal vote campaigns, where they bundle the application form for a postal vote with party advertising material. The form goes back to the party, who are suspected of harvesting the data, before going to the AEC.⁵²

The AEC has criticised the practice, saying it is the number one source of complaints during election campaigns.⁵³

In the last term of Parliament, JSCEM recommended stopping this practice by:

- banning postal vote forms from being bundled with other material and
- requiring that “postal vote applications must be sent directly to the Australian Electoral Commission’s nominated addresses”.⁵⁴

Victoria and Western Australia have already restricted political party interference in the postal vote process.⁵⁵ The NSW JSCEM recommended similar reforms in 2024, with the Minns Labor Government in 2025 accepting these recommendations and committing to introduce a bill to give effect to them.⁵⁶

In the 2023 South Australian election, the Labor and Liberal parties “set up and promoted websites with generic but official-sounding names and addresses” that were “confusing and misleading” and threatened public confidence in “the impartiality of the [electoral] commission”. The parties mishandled the process, meaning some voters with disabilities were unable to vote. Subsequently, the Electoral Commission of South Australia recommended that electors only be able to apply for postal votes through the commission’s website and that it be an offense for other entities to distribute postal vote applications.⁵⁷

⁵² Hair (2025) *Unsolicited email from Liberal Party directed voter to data harvesting operation when they clicked unsubscribe*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-04-17/liberals-unsubscribe-postal-vote-email/105178892>

⁵³ AEC (2025) *AEC warning on third-party postal vote applications*, <https://www.aec.gov.au/media/2025/03-31a.htm>

⁵⁴ JSCEM (2023) *Conduct of the 2022 federal election and other matters: Final report*, p. xvi

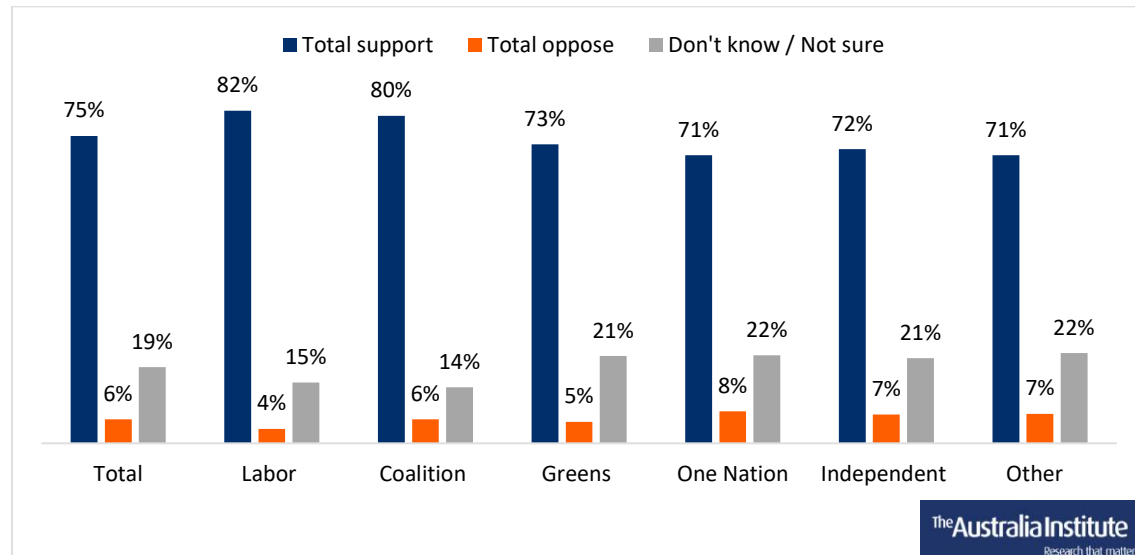
⁵⁵ Cook (2023) *Cook Government delivers fair and transparent electoral system*, <https://www.wa.gov.au/government/media-statements/Cook-Labor-Government/Cook-Government-delivers-fair-and-transparent-electoral-system-20231128>; Varga (2022) *Andrews government moves to ban political parties distributing postal votes*, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/nation/politics/andrews-government-moves-to-ban-political-parties-distributing-postal-votes/news-story/c70072a7af8cb5370ecd08200285a7a3>; *Electoral Act 2002* (Vic), s. 101(2)(c)

⁵⁶ Graham (2025) *Government Response to Report No. 1/58*, <https://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/lc/tabledpapers/Pages/tabled-paper-details.aspx?pk=190831&houseCode=lc>

⁵⁷ ECSA (2022) *State and by-election reports*, pp. 57–59, <https://www.ecsa.sa.gov.au/state-and-by-election-reports>

The Australia Institute’s polling research in July 2025 found that a clear majority of the public (75%) would support amending the law to require all postal vote applications to be sent directly to the AEC, and that is true across all voting intentions.⁵⁸

Figure 4: Requiring all postal vote applications to be sent directly to the AEC



Recommendation: Change the law to forbid political parties, candidates and third parties from co-opting the postal vote process.

SPAM AND SHARING OF PERSONAL INFORMATION

Political parties, members of Parliament and (in some cases) candidates get special exemptions to the *Spam Act* (which restricts unsolicited communications) and the *Privacy Act* (which restricts the sharing and use of personal information). Parties and candidates also get exclusive access to the electoral roll. The roll has the names, dates of birth, addresses and some other details of almost every adult citizen living in the country.

It is these exemptions and special access that allowed the Liberal Party to share its cache of voter information with the Exclusive Brethren, a secretive religious sect that reportedly “made nearly a million [phone] calls on behalf of the [Liberal–National] Coalition”.⁵⁹

Similarly, it is *Spam Act* exemptions that allowed the Trumpet of Patriots to send vast numbers of unsolicited text messages promoting the party and its candidates.⁶⁰ Text

⁵⁸ Browne (2025) *Polling – Postal voting*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/polling-postal-voting/>

⁵⁹ Maddison and Sakkal (2025) *Exclusive Brethren made nearly a million calls for the Liberal Party*, <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/exclusive-brethren-made-nearly-a-million-calls-for-the-liberal-party-20250508-p5lxml.html>

⁶⁰ Cohen (2025) *Why am I getting Trumpet of Patriots ‘spam’ text messages? Are they legal – and can I stop them?* <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2025/may/02/trumpet-of-patriots-spam-text-messages-are-they-legal-federal-election>

message spam is not unique to one party; both the Liberal Party and Labor Party have in past elections sent out last-minute election text messages, when it is too late for them to be fact checked and challenged.

Independent MP Kate Chaney has proposed amending the acts to remove certain exemptions that political parties enjoy – including sending unsolicited text messages.⁶¹ In 2022, the Attorney-General's Department proposed more limited exemptions.⁶²

Recommendation: Certain exemptions for political parties to the *Spam Act* and the *Privacy Act* be removed, so that access for parties and candidates to voter information is more limited, and unsolicited text message communications be strictly limited.

⁶¹ Cheney (2023) *Additional comments, Conduct of the 2022 federal election and other matters: Final Report*, https://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Joint/Electoral_Matters/2022federalelection/Interim_Report/Additional_comments_by_Kate_Chaney_MP

⁶² Attorney-General's Department (2022) *Privacy Act Review: Report 2022*, pp. 7, <https://www.ag.gov.au/rights-and-protections/publications/privacy-act-review-report>

Parliament's composition

The Terms of Reference include that the inquiry consider “the composition of the Parliament as a whole, including: the length of the parliamentary term; the potential for fixed terms; and the number of elected representatives relative to the growth in population and the electorate”.

INCREASING THE NUMBER OF PARLIAMENTARIANS

In the 40 years since Australia last expanded the parliament, the population increased by 11 million – from under 16 million to over 27 million – without Australians getting any more MPs or senators to represent them.

The Australia Institute has previously proposed expanding the lower house by 50% to 225 seats.⁶³ This would bring Australia's representation more in line with comparable democracies, as well as the states and territories.

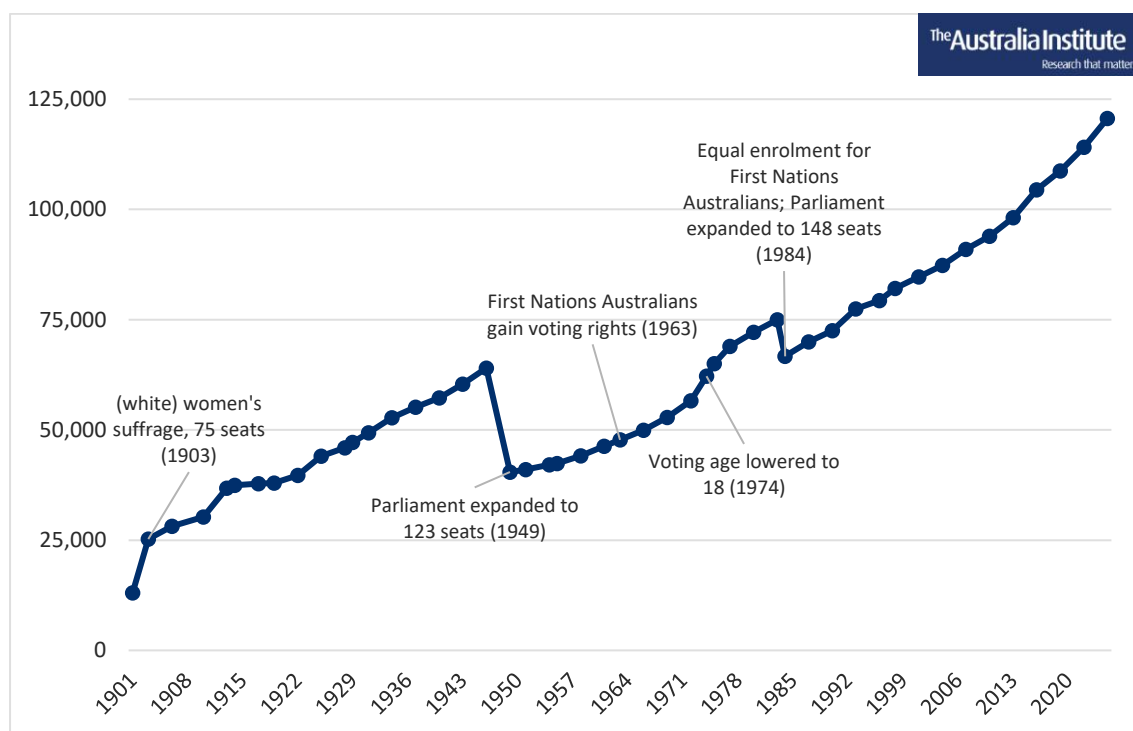
After the 2025 election, each of Australia's 150 members of Parliament must split their attention between more constituents than ever before. There are now 120,659 voters per MP on average, over 6,000 more than in 2022.

By contrast, in 1903 (the first election where most women could vote), there were just 25,000 voters per MP.

In the intervening 122 years, the federal parliament has significantly expanded twice: from 74 to 121 seats in 1949, and from 125 to 148 in 1984. Both times, the number of people per seat sat at a record high: 64,000 and 75,000 respectively.

⁶³ Browne (2018) *It's time ... for more politicians*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/its-time-for-more-politicians/>; (2020) *Comes with the territory: ensuring fair political representation for Northern Territorians - and all Australians*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/comes-with-the-territory-ensuring-fair-political-representation-for-northern-territorians-and-all-australians/>

Figure 5: Average number of voters in each House of Representatives seat



Source: Australia Institute analysis of AEC enrolment data; Predavec (2025) *Australia has a politician problem: not too many, but too few*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/australia-has-a-politician-problem-not-too-many-but-too-few/>

Voting rights have also expanded: women's suffrage came in 1903 (though not for all women), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voting rights took until 1963, and the voting age was lowered from 21 to 18 in 1974.

But while there are nine times as many registered voters today as in 1903, the number of electorates has only doubled.

Representation issues

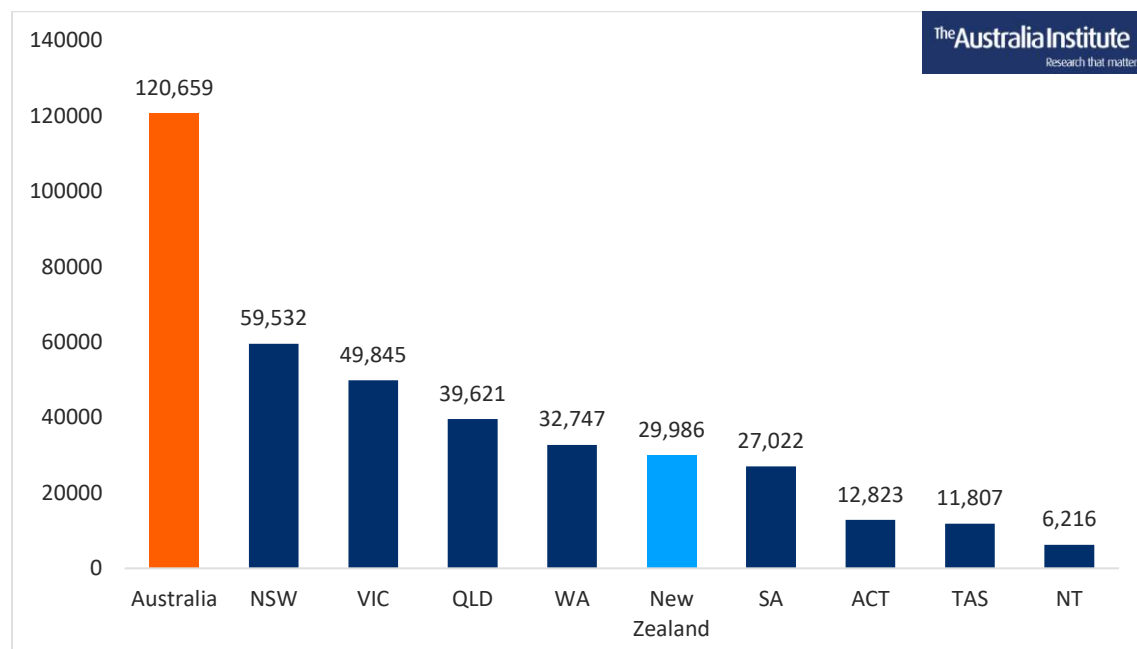
As the number of voters per MP grows, the access any individual voter will have to their member necessarily decreases. Australia Institute polling research in 2022 found that only 15% of Australians had ever spoken to their local MP (and only 36% knew their name).⁶⁴

The more voters there are in an electorate, the larger a campaign needs to be to make any difference to the result, raising the hurdle for communities to kick out an unrepresentative or under-performing MP.

⁶⁴ Browne and Shields (2022) *Fortifying Australian democracy: submission to the inquiry into the 2022 election*, pp. 64–65

As highlighted by Shane Wright in the Sydney Morning Herald, the growing size of regional electorates also presents safety concerns for representatives and their staff. It forces MPs to drive or fly long distances to effectively represent their voters, leading to “far too many near misses” on long drives or flights in small planes.⁶⁵

Figure 6: Average number of voters in each lower house seat



Source: Australia Institute analysis of AEC enrolment data, Predavec (2025) *Australia has a politician problem: not too many, but too few*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/australia-has-a-politician-problem-not-too-many-but-too-few/>

Australia has far fewer representatives per person on a federal level than in states and territories. Each member of NSW’s Legislative Assembly represents just under 60,000 voters, half as many as a federal MP. Each Northern Territory MLA represents just 6,000 people. Tasmania has recently expanded its parliament, reducing the number of voters per seat from almost 16,000 to under 12,000.

Australians think state and territory governments better reflect the interests and needs of the community than the Commonwealth.⁶⁶ Perhaps part of the reason for this is that they have far more local representation at that level of government, allowing MPs to be more responsive to their concerns.

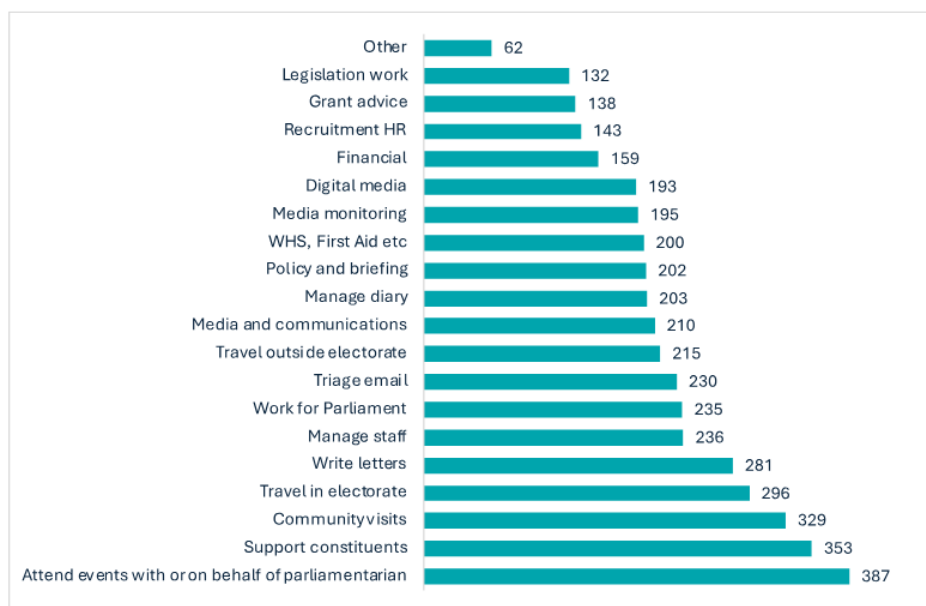
⁶⁵ Wright (2025) *Australian federal MPs: Should the number of politicians be increased?*
<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/past-the-knee-jerk-reaction-there-are-good-reasons-australia-needs-more-politicians-20250903-p5mrzr.html>

⁶⁶ Centre for Policy Development (2025) *2025 Purpose of government pulse*, p. 18,
<https://cpd.org.au/work/2025-purpose-of-government-pulse/>

Australia's MP-voter ratio is also low by international standards. Canada, the UK, France and Germany all have more representation than Australia in their national parliaments. New Zealand has one MP for every 30,000 voters: four times Australia's ratio.⁶⁷

There is further evidence that MPs are now over-stretched. According to the Parliamentary Workplace Support Service's 2025 survey of parliamentarians and staff, the single most common activity undertaken by electorate staff was not supporting constituents, which came second, but rather attending events with or on behalf of a parliamentarian. Fewer than half of staffers did policy and briefing work, and even fewer did legislation work.⁶⁸

Figure 7: Activities of an office (483 respondents)



Source: PWSS (2025) *The independent review of resourcing in parliamentary offices*, p. 79, <https://www.pwss.gov.au/the-independent-review-of-resourcing-in-parliamentarian-offices>

⁶⁷ Predavec (2025) *Australia has a politician problem: not too many, but too few*; Calculated by dividing number of enrolled voters by number of seats in the lower house (or only house in the case of unicameral parliaments) at the most recent election. For New Zealand in 2023, see Electoral Commission New Zealand (2023) *2023 General Election: Voter turnout statistics*, <https://elections.nz/democracy-in-nz/historical-events/2023-general-election/voter-turnout-statistics/>

⁶⁸ PWSS (2025) *The independent review of resourcing in parliamentary offices*, p. 79, <https://www.pwss.gov.au/the-independent-review-of-resourcing-in-parliamentarian-offices>

Burden on resources

The growing size of electorates has contributed to increases in expenses available to parliamentary MPs. Population growth has generally been highest in Australia's capital cities,⁶⁹ meaning that regional electorates have gradually taken in larger land areas over the last 40 years. The Western NSW electorate of Parkes, for example, has more than doubled in size since its re-creation in 1984.⁷⁰

Australia Institute research in 2025 found that entitlements had grown to \$3.8 million for senators and \$5.3 million for MPs per election cycle, \$600,000 higher than when the Australia Institute last examined the issue in 2023.⁷¹

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.

Increasing the number of MPs could reduce the pressures that have led to a greater number of electorate staff.

⁶⁹ Centre for Population (2024) *Regional Population, 2022-23*, <https://population.gov.au/data-and-forecasts/key-data-releases/regional-population-2022-23>

⁷⁰ Parliamentary Handbook (2025) *Parkes*, <https://handbook.aph.gov.au/electorates/New%20South%20Wales/Parkes>

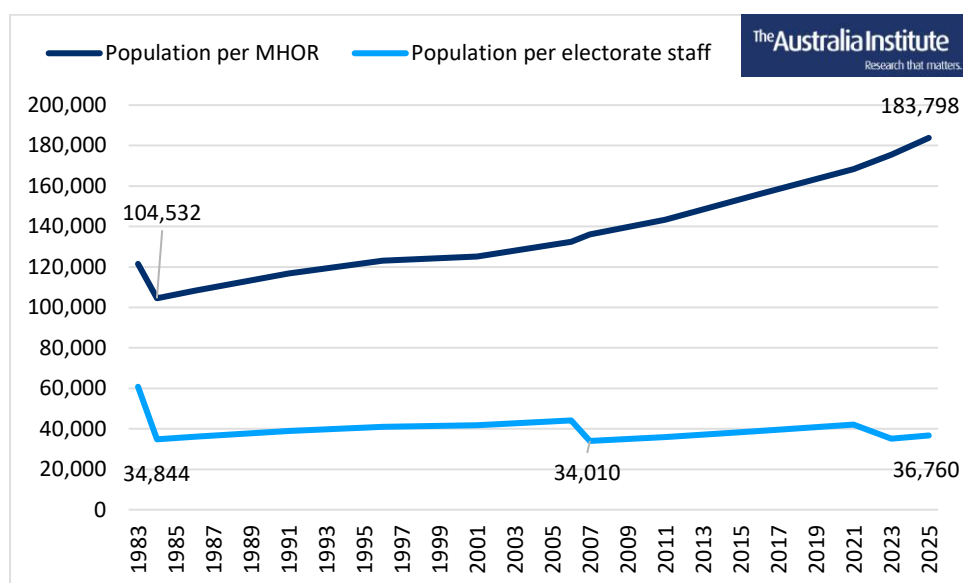
⁷¹ Predavec and Browne (2025) *Advantages of incumbency*, p. 7

Electorate staffer numbers have increased dramatically

While the number of local members (members of the House of Representatives) has been frozen for over forty years, the number of electorate staff has grown dramatically over that time: from two staff per MP in 1983 to three in 1984, four in 2007 and five in 2023.⁷²

Each increase in electorate staff has brought the population per electorate back to 35–36,000 per staffer. The effect, as shown in Figure 8, is that “population per electorate staffer” has remained roughly level even as the local members themselves become harder to access or displace.

Figure 8: Population per member of the House of Representatives and electorate staffer



Sources: Australian censuses (population numbers smoothed between census years); PWSS (2025) *The independent review of resourcing in parliamentary offices*, pp. 58–59

In June 2024, the Parliamentary Budget Office estimated for Liberal MP James Stevens the cost of increasing the size of Parliament by 40 (16 new senators, 24 new members of the House of Representatives). In the first full year, this would cost \$75 million, or a little under \$2 million per parliamentarian – including staff, offices and entitlements.⁷³

However, this assumes that the cost of supplying an MP remains the same. The growth in electorate staff in line with population suggests that these roles are needed only because electorates have grown so populous.

⁷² PWSS (2025) *The independent review of resourcing in parliamentary offices*, pp. 58–59

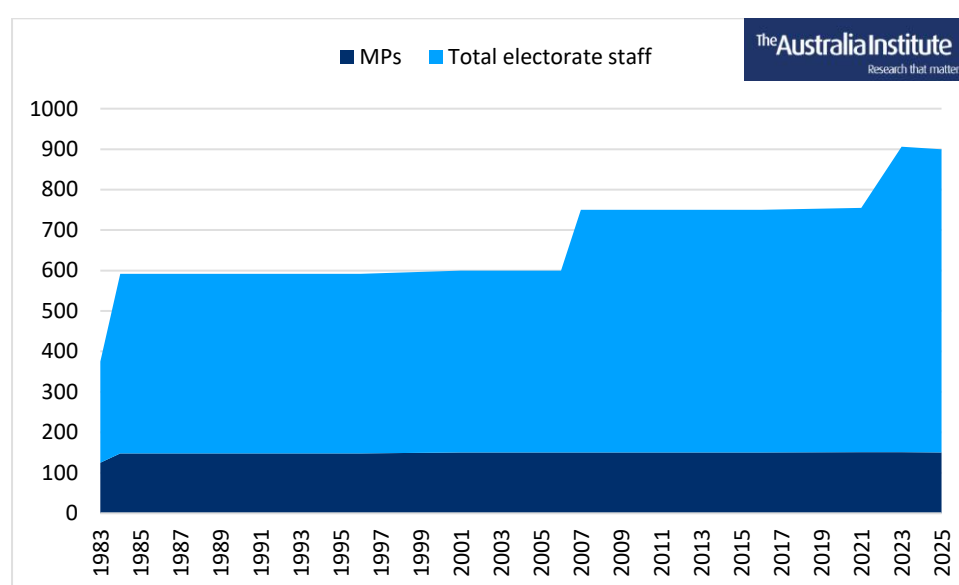
⁷³ Parliamentary Budget Office (2024) *Increasing the size of Federal Parliament*, <https://www.pbo.gov.au/publications-and-data/publications/costings/increasing-size-federal-parliament>

If the number of MPs were increased by 50%, as the Australia Institute has recommended, but the number of electorate staff per MP were cut from five to three, there would be no net change in the total number of MPs plus electorate staff.

As Figure 9 shows, there are currently 900 members of the House of Representatives (MHORs) and electoral staff; having about 225 MHORs (a 50% increase from current level) and three staff members per MP would keep the total at 900.

Of course, the cost of an additional MP is greater than the cost of hiring a single additional electorate staffer, but the total cost of an increase in the number of MPs does not need to be as large as it first appears.

Figure 9: Total number of MHORs and electorate staff



Sources: Australian censuses (figures normalised between census years); PWSS (2025) *The independent review of resourcing in parliamentary offices*, pp. 58–59

Recommendation: Increase the number of parliamentarians, including the number of territory senators, in this term. If a 50% increase in the total number of parliamentarians is not feasible in this term, make progress towards that target.

FIXED FOUR-YEAR TERMS

As part of this inquiry, the Committee has been asked to consider the length of parliamentary terms and the potential for fixed terms.

Extending the parliamentary term to four years is supported by a variety of political figures, including both Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and then-opposition leader Peter Dutton in the run-up to the 2025 election.⁷⁴

One of the main arguments made in favour of such a change is that a three-year term is too short to make significant legislative changes.⁷⁵

A short term is not an impediment to reform. Gough Whitlam's first term as prime minister was only about 18 months, and Bob Hawke's first term was just a little longer. Both were very productive. Hawke's first term is particularly notable for featuring significant electoral reforms, including:

- An increase in the number of MPs from 125 to 148,
- Major reforms to party financing,
- The creation of the independent Australian Electoral Commission,
- And the introduction of the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters to recommend changes to Australian electoral laws.⁷⁶

A three-year term has at least two benefits over a four-year term: it means parliamentarians face the people they represent more often, and it keeps Senate terms at six years instead of an unwieldy eight years.⁷⁷

In addition, moving to a four-year term would require a constitutional amendment, and by extension a referendum.

An argument for fixed terms is that they allow for forward planning and remove the political advantage for a government to surprise the opposition by going to an early election.

⁷⁴ Pearson (2025) *Albanese sceptical Coalition would back fixed four-year term call*, <https://www.9news.com.au/national/anthony-albanese-fixed-terms-peter-dutton-referendum-four-year-australian-election-news/2ff80622-fbfb-4a35-837d-2426dbfb5f91>

⁷⁵ Hall (2025) *The 124 year-old feature of Australian elections that Albanese supports changing*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/the-124-year-old-feature-of-australian-elections-that-albanese-supports-changing/go9pf86qm>

⁷⁶ AEC (2019) *A short history of federal electoral reform in Australia*, <https://www.aec.gov.au/Elections/history-of-electoral-reform.htm>

⁷⁷ Alternatively, senators could serve the same four-year term as members of the House of Representatives. This occurs in some state upper houses. The effect would be to make the Senate more proportional, and likely elect more crossbenchers as in the 2016 double dissolution, but lose the staggered representation intended to counter-balance intense but fleeting popular sentiment.

Back in 2016, senior journalist Michelle Grattan identified “fixed” three-year terms as a good compromise between our current three-year terms (which have often ended up as two-and-a-half-year terms due to early elections) and four-year terms.⁷⁸

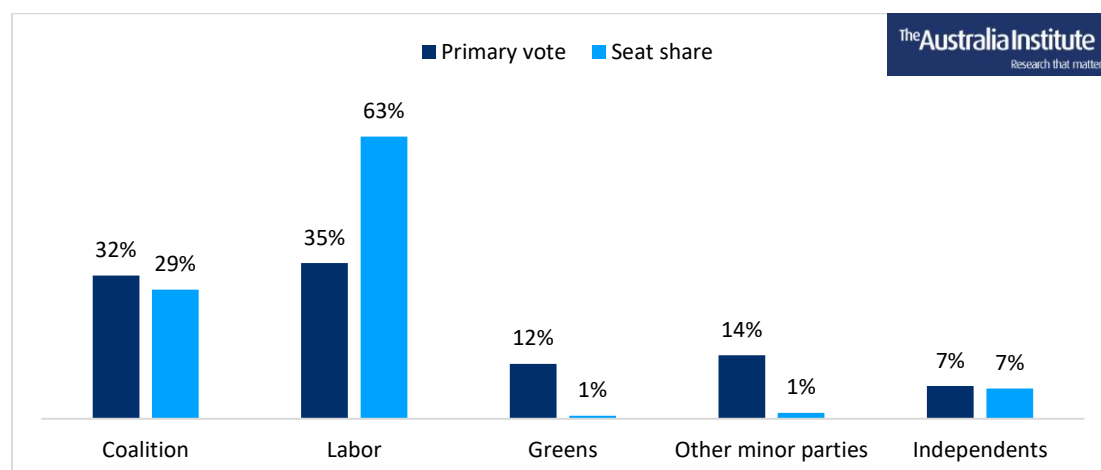
Given Prime Minister Albanese has said there will not be a referendum on four-year terms in the next three years,⁷⁹ Grattan’s compromise is the only viable option for fixed terms.

PROPORTIONAL REPRESENTATION

Australia’s federal MPs are elected through a winner-takes-all system of single-member electorates. This tends to give winning parties seats disproportionately more seats than the votes they receive, while smaller parties with significant vote share can end up with no seats in the House of Representatives at all.

The Australian Labor Party’s historic victory in the 2025 federal election gave the party 62.7% of the seats in the House of Representatives. This was well out of proportion to its primary vote of just 34.6%.⁸⁰

Figure 10: Party vote share compared to seat share in House of Representatives



Source: AEC (2025) *First preferences by party*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/31496/Website/HouseStateFirstPrefsByParty-31496-NAT.htm>; AEC (2025) *House of Representatives - final results*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/31496/Website/HouseDefault-31496.htm>

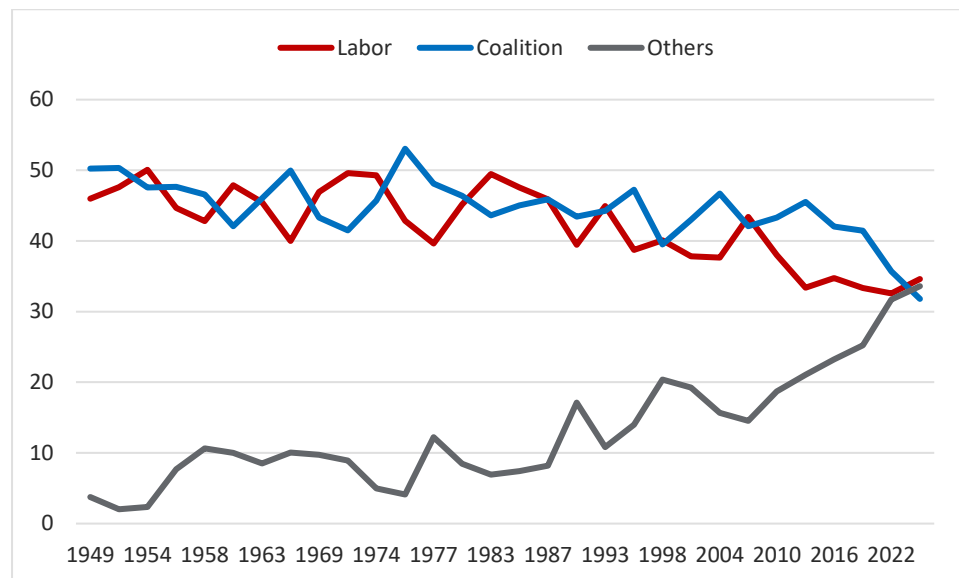
⁷⁸ Grattan (2016) *Four-year federal terms are too hard, but what about making the three-year term fixed?*, <https://theconversation.com/four-year-federal-terms-are-too-hard-but-what-about-making-the-three-year-term-fixed-57278>

⁷⁹ Wang (2025) *Anthony Albanese rules out referendum to create fixed four-year terms*, <https://www.news.com.au/national/politics/anthony-albanese-rules-out-referendum-to-create-fixed-four-year-terms/news-story/179f91660f808458758742b4fd4206b8>

⁸⁰ Predavec (2025) *Landslide Labor win out of proportion to primary vote*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/landslide-labor-win-out-of-proportion-to-primary-vote/>

This year's election was also remarkable for being the first under the modern party system where the minor party and independent vote exceeded the vote for the official Opposition (the Liberal–National Coalition). The decline in the major party vote has run for decades and is, with some interruptions, seen at the state and territory level as well.⁸¹

Figure 11: Vote share of Labor, Coalition, and all others



Source: Australia Institute analysis of AEC data; Predavec (2025) *The 2025 federal election is the first where a major party received fewer votes than independents and minor parties*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/the-2025-federal-election-is-the-first-where-a-major-party-received-fewer-votes-than-independents-and-minor-parties/>

Proportional representation represents more voter voices

While single-party government is often referred to as “majority” government, in fact no one party or coalition has won a majority of the first-preference (primary) vote since 1975.

In 2022, the Labor Government received just 33% of the primary vote – but won a majority of the seats. It won a super-majority in 2025 with just 35% of the primary vote. In Australia’s single-member electorate system, a minority of votes easily becomes a majority of seats.

New Zealand adopted proportional representation in 1996 after an election where a majority government formed with a record low vote share of just 35%. Since then, most of its governments have formed from parties that won a majority of the vote.

In the 2023 New Zealand election, the incoming three-party coalition of Nationals, ACT, and NZ First had 53% of the vote between them. Another proportional system (Hare-Clark) is

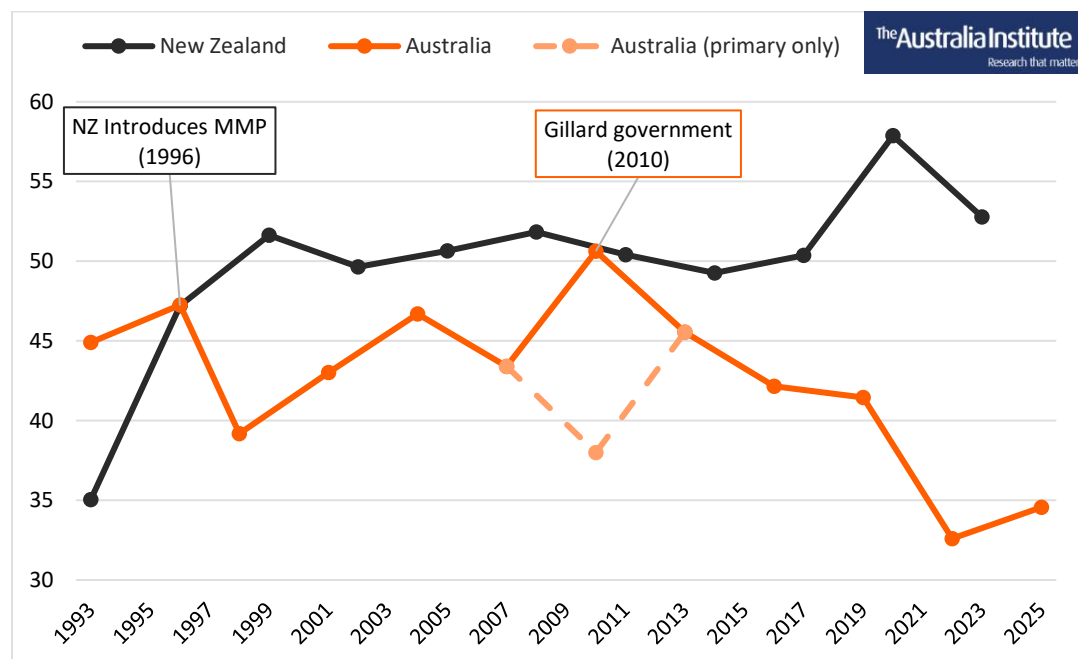
⁸¹ Predavec (2025) *The 2025 federal election is the first where a major party received fewer votes than independents and minor parties*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/the-2025-federal-election-is-the-first-where-a-major-party-received-fewer-votes-than-independents-and-minor-parties/>

employed for elections in Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory, where governments generally have the support of MPs elected with half or more of the primary vote.

While no Australian government has won a majority of the primary vote since 1975, the Gillard Labor Government was in some ways the closest to it.

Only 38% of Australians cast primary votes for Labor in 2010, but 13% voted for the Greens and independents who made formal confidence and supply agreements with the government.

Figure 12: Vote share of parties/MPs supporting Government



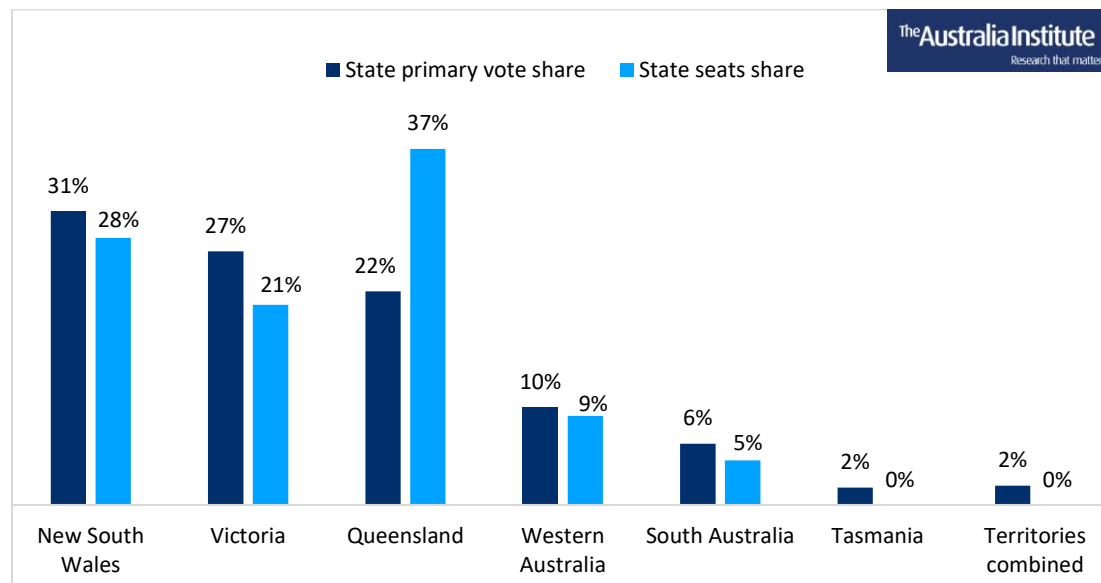
Source: Australia Institute analysis of AEC & Te Kaitiaki Take Kōwhiri [NZ Electoral Commission] data; Predavec (2025) "Election entrée: First preferences of different governments", <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/election-entree-first-preferences-of-different-governments/>

That makes the 2010 election the only time since 1975 where confidence in the government was based on MPs receiving the primary votes of most Australians.

Without proportional representation, state representation is skewed

Australia's single-member electorates tend to distort the composition of party rooms relative to their levels of support across various states. For instance, only about 22% of Coalition voters live in Queensland, but 16 of its 43 MPs – or 37% – are based there.⁸²

Figure 13: State and territory portion of Coalition vote/seat share



Source of data: AEC (2025) *First preferences by party*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/31496/Website/HouseStateFirstPrefsByParty-31496-NAT.htm>; AEC (2025) *House of Representatives - final results*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/31496/Website/HouseDefault-31496.htm>

In other words, some parties are under-represented in the House of Representatives, while some states are under-represented in particular parties. In 2019, Malcolm Baalman observed a similar phenomenon in the Canadian context, whose federal system parallels that of Australia.⁸³

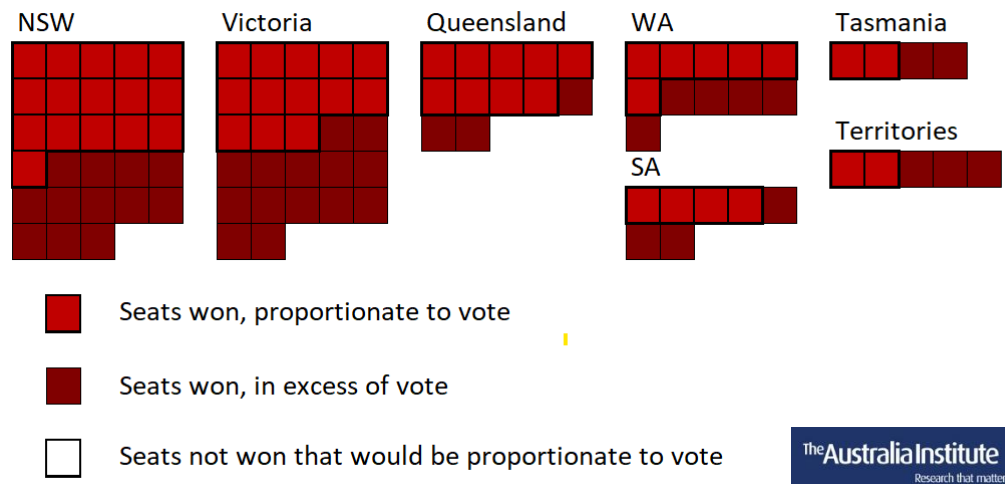
Things would look very different if, in each state, political parties won seats roughly proportional to their respective vote share (proportional representation, or PR).

Labor would have won significantly fewer seats from New South Wales, Victoria, and Western Australia. Just over half of the Labor MPs would be representing the two largest states, New South Wales and Victoria, as opposed to nearly three-in-five currently.

⁸² Australian Electoral Commission (2025) *Party representation*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/31496/Website/HousePartyRepresentationLeading-31496.htm>.

⁸³ Baalman (2019) *Canada's new parliamentary caucuses are all wrongly constituted*, <https://onelections.net/2019/11/07/canadas-new-parliamentary-caucuses-are-all-wrongly-constituted/>

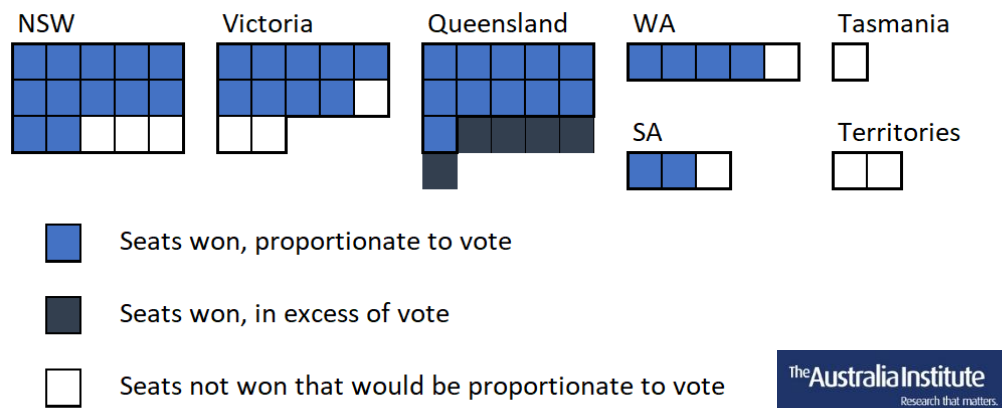
Figure 14: Labor MPs by state and territory, current system vs PR



Source: Australia Institute calculations

The Liberal–National Coalition would have won significantly more seats in New South Wales and Victoria, but fewer seats in Queensland. Fewer than one-in-four Coalition MPs would be representing Queensland, as opposed to over one-in-three currently. Liberal–National MPs would also hold about two of the five seats in the territories, avoiding a wipe-out.

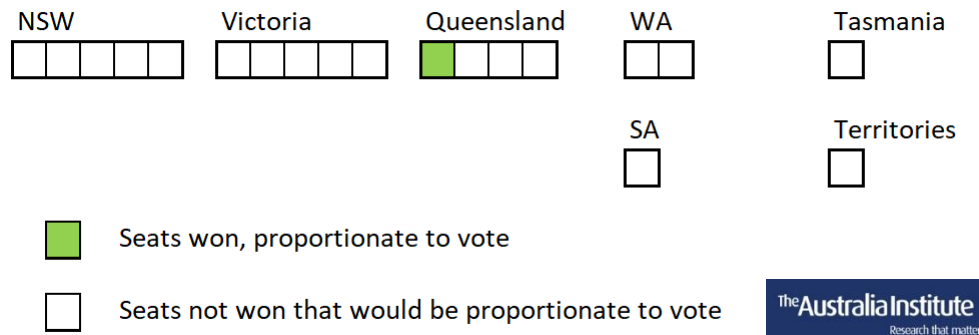
Figure 15: Coalition MPs by state and territory, current system vs PR



Source: Australia Institute calculations

The Greens would have roughly 19 MPs, roughly half of which would come from NSW and Victoria, rather than having just one MP from Brisbane.

Figure 16: Greens MPs by state and territory, current system vs PR



Source: Australia Institute calculations

Of course, each electoral system has its advantages and disadvantages. But a downside of the existing winner-takes-all system of single-member electorates is the skewed representation of some regions in certain parties' parliamentary delegations. For instance, far more Liberal–National MPs come from Queensland than do Liberal–National voters.

Tasmania already demonstrates that an alternative is possible. The proportional representation used in its state House of Assembly means most voters cast a primary vote for a winning candidate at last year's election, and "over 90% cast a vote for a party that won at least one seat in their electorate".⁸⁴

Proportional representation in the House of Representatives could help parties with nation-wide presence ensure more balanced policy deliberation within their party rooms, better representing the distribution of their supporters across different states.

Recommendation: JSCEM consider the issue of proportional representation in voting for the House of Representatives, particularly a Hare-Clark system with multi-member electorates.

⁸⁴ Raue (2024) *Making votes count is about more than turning out*, <https://www.tallyroom.com.au/55642>

Political participation

The inquiry's terms of reference ask for "the suitability and potential reform of measures to ensure universal voter access, including polling booth availability and location, early voting, remote polling, and postal voting arrangements".

WHO IS COUNTED?

Australia has some of the highest voter turnouts in the world thanks to compulsory voting. In the 2025 federal election, the headline voter turnout was 90.7%, a welcome and appreciable increase from the previous election, though it is still the second lowest on record since compulsory voting was introduced in the 1920s.⁸⁵

However, the headline voter turnout only captures part of the process by which people are excluded from participating in voting. Of the 21.6 million voting-age individuals living in Australia on election day, about 6 million – over one-in-four – did not cast a vote that was counted.⁸⁶

Nearly 3 million Australians who were entitled to vote did not have their vote counted for the election of the House of Representatives:

- 1.7 million enrolled Australians did not turn out⁸⁷
- 900,000 Australians who voted did not cast a valid vote.⁸⁸ Some would have done so deliberately, but for others this would have been an accident.
- 300,000 Australians who are eligible to vote were not on the electoral roll.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ AEC (2022) *Turnout by state*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/27966/Website/HouseTurnoutByState-27966.htm>; (2025) *First preferences by party*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/31496/Website/HouseStateFirstPrefsByParty-31496-NAT.htm>; Shields (2022) *Voter turnout in the 2022 federal election hit a new low, threatening our democratic tradition*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/voter-turnout-in-the-2022-federal-election-hit-a-new-low-threatening-our-democratic-tradition/>

⁸⁶ Voting-age population is calculated by the authors, by applying the proportion of population aged 18 and over, derived from Australia's population pyramid for the year 2025, to the total population as of 31 March 2025, the closest date to the closure of voter enrolment. Data from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2025) *National, state and territory population*, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/national-state-and-territory-population/latest-release#methodology>; Australian Bureau of Statistics (2025) *Population clock and pyramid*, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-clock-pyramid>

⁸⁷ AEC (2025) *First preferences by party*

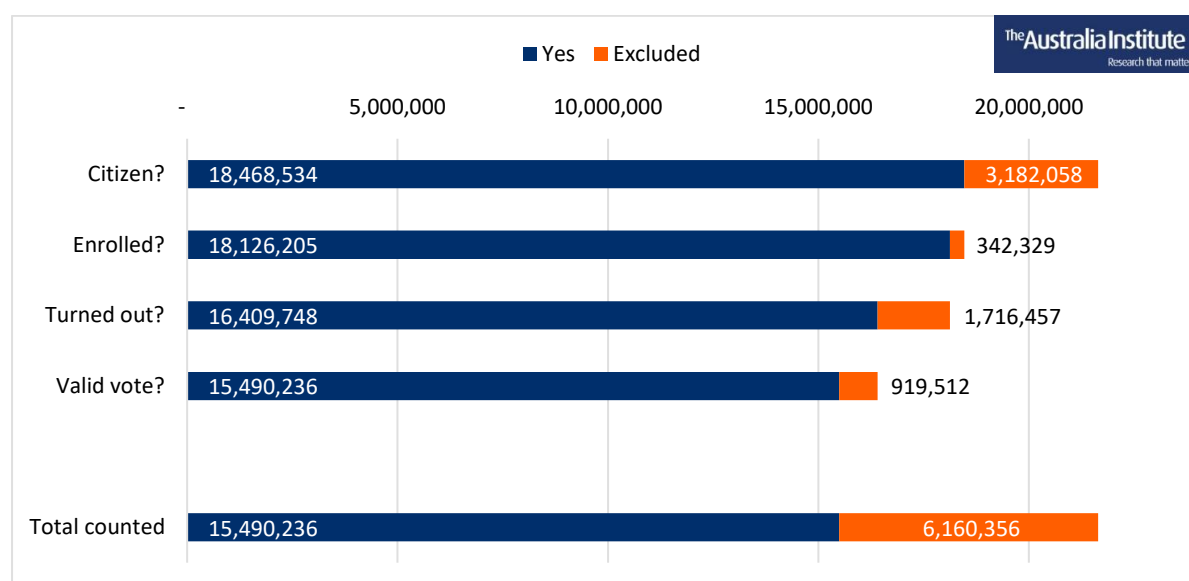
⁸⁸ AEC (2025) *First preferences by party*

⁸⁹ AEC (2025) *Size of the electoral roll and enrolment rate 2025*, https://www.aec.gov.au/enrolling_to_vote/enrolment_stats/national/2025.htm

To put it another way, despite compulsory voting in federal elections, only 84% of those entitled to vote – 15.5 million out of 18.4 million – actually cast a valid vote in the 2025 federal election. The recent election nonetheless saw noticeable improvement from the previous federal election in 2022, where the effective participation rate was just 82.5%.⁹⁰

Furthermore, over three million adults living in Australia are not citizens and therefore not eligible to vote.

Figure 17: Conditions for having a vote counted at the 2025 federal election



Adults excluded from the franchise

Over 3 million people live, work and pay taxes in Australia, but are not citizens and therefore not entitled to vote. Of these, about 1.2 million adults are permanent residents, most of whom having lived in Australia for some years and, by virtue of their status, are committed to living in the community for the foreseeable future.⁹¹

⁹⁰ Australian Electoral Commission (2022) *First preferences by Party*, <https://results.aec.gov.au/27966/Website/HouseStateFirstPrefsByParty-27966-NAT.htm>; Australian Electoral Commission (2023) *Size of the electoral roll and enrolment rate 2022*, https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/national/2022.htm

⁹¹ Permanent resident population is estimated by adding permanent migrant increases from FY2022 to the population of non-naturalised permanent migrants as of August 2021 (allowing for a double-counting of the permanent migrant intake in July 2021 which was likely negligible). For each period from FY2022, permanent migrant population change is calculated by subtracting the number of naturalisations from the total permanent migrant intake; for non-naturalised permanent migrants as of August 2021, the population is calculated by subtracting the population of naturalised permanent migrants from the total.

There are also about two million adults living in Australia as temporary residents, holders of temporary visas such as student or work visas.⁹² The term “temporary” does not quite capture their existence: this itinerant population has become a permanent fixture in Australia. Moreover, some temporary residents have lived in Australia for multiple years.

A person’s connections to the community are not always reflected by the visa status assigned to them – because of Australia’s complex immigration system, someone could have studied and worked in the country for a decade without obtaining citizenship.

There are also temporary residents whose home countries allow Australian citizens to vote in their national elections (such as Jamaica and the UK), as fellow citizens in the Commonwealth of Nations.⁹³ New Zealand extends voting rights to all its permanent residents.⁹⁴

When all these factors are considered, Australia’s elections are less participatory than the official turnout figures suggest. Among the 21.6 million adults living in Australia in 2025, only about 71.6% of voting-age population cast a valid vote in the latest national election, about the same as New Zealand’s 73.8%.⁹⁵ Since New Zealand does not have compulsory voting, it

The adult population of permanent residents is then estimated by applying the proportion of adult population among permanent migrants as of August 2021 to the estimated total permanent resident population, assuming that the age structure of permanent migrants had not significantly changed.

Data from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) *Permanent migrants in Australia*, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/permanent-migrants-australia/latest-release#data-downloads>; Department of Home Affairs (2023) *Australia’s Migration Trends 2021–22 Highlights*, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/live/migration-program>; Department of Home Affairs (2023) *Australia’s Migration Trends 2022–23*, <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-statistics/statistics/visa-statistics/live/migration-program>; Department of Home Affairs (n.d.) *Migration Program planning levels*, <https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/what-we-do/migration-program-planning-levels>; Australian Electoral Commission (2025) *National new citizen enrolment rate*, https://www.aec.gov.au/Enrolling_to_vote/Enrolment_stats/performance/new-citz.htm

⁹² Adult temporary resident population is estimated by subtracting, from the total adult population (from the ABS population pyramid), the population of eligible voters (from AEC 2025 electoral roll statistics) and the adult population of non-naturalised permanent residents.

⁹³ Electoral Commission of Jamaica (n.d.) *Registration Procedures*, <https://www.ecj.com.jm/voters/voter-information/registration-procedures/>; (UK) The Electoral Commission (n.d.) *Who can vote in UK elections*, <https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/voting-and-elections/who-can-vote-uk-elections>

⁹⁴ Electoral Commission New Zealand (n.d.) *Are you eligible to enrol and vote?* <https://vote.nz/enrolling/get-ready-to-enrol/are-you-eligible-to-enrol-and-vote/>

⁹⁵ Depending on whether temporary residents are included in “voting-age population”, New Zealand’s ratio is slightly higher or slightly lower than Australia’s. Calculations by the authors. For New Zealand, population aged 18 and over is estimated from its 2023 census data, assuming population aged 18–19 was 40% of the population aged 15–19 (as age breakdown by year is not available. Data for Australia is as shown above; for New Zealand from Stats NZ (2023) *2023 Census population counts (by ethnic group, age, and Māori descent) and dwelling counts*, <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/2023-census-population-counts-by->

is clear that compulsory voting alone is not sufficient to ensure Australia's democracy remains as participatory as possible.

Australia's strong democratic institutions and compulsory voting ensure relatively high participation in elections, but six million people living in Australia still go uncounted: because they cast an invalid vote, because they fail to turn out, or because they are ineligible to vote either due to age or citizenship status. As a result, Australia sees comparable democratic participation to some countries without compulsory voting. Its democracy can and should be made more representative.

Voting age

The eligibility criteria also have room for expansion. The voting-age in Australia starts at 18, which is higher than countries like Indonesia (17), Greece (17), Austria (16) or Brazil (16).⁹⁶ The United Kingdom plans to reduce voting-age to 16 as well.⁹⁷

As Troy Bramston argues:

Lowering the minimum voting age from 18 to 16 will encourage a more active and engaged democratic citizenry, and when coupled with increased public information and civics education in schools, there is no valid argument against this reform.⁹⁸

ethnic-group-age-and-maori-descent-and-dwelling-counts/; Electoral Commission New Zealand (2023) *2023 General Election: Voter turnout statistics*, <https://elections.nz/democracy-in-nz/historical-events/2023-general-election/voter-turnout-statistics/>; Electoral Commission New Zealand (2023) *Party Votes and Turnout by Electorate*, https://electionresults.govt.nz/electionresults_2023/statistics/party-votes-and-turnout-by-electorate.html

⁹⁶ Mathur and Scotland (2024) *Explainer: What you need to know about Indonesia's elections*, <https://www.newsworthy.org.au/explainer-indonesian-elections-2667241396.html>; Government of Greece (2022) *Conditions to vote*, <https://www.gov.gr/en/sdg/residence/participating-in-municipal-elections-and-elections-to-european-parliament/european-elections/conditions-to-vote-None>; Government of Austria (2025) *Right to vote*, https://www.oesterreich.gv.at/en/themen/transparenz_und_partizipation_in_der_demokratie/demokratie-und-wahlen/wahlen/1/Seite.320210; Koster (2025) *Should we let 16-year-olds vote? Germany, Argentina and Brazil do, and the UK will soon*, <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/the-uk-is-lowering-the-voting-age-could-australia-do-the-same/gravfu8z2>

⁹⁷ Martin (2025) *UK to allow 16-year-olds to vote in biggest electoral change since 1969*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2025-07-18/uk-voting-age-changes-to-allow-16-and-17-year-olds-to-vote/105544740>

⁹⁸ Bramston (2025) *Strengthen democracy? It's time to lower the voting age*, <https://www.theaustralian.com.au/commentary/strengthen-democracy-its-time-to-lower-the-voting-age/news-story/ce7bdb966daa193fd93419cdf78eed64>

If we also recognised the voting rights of 16- and 17-year-olds in Australia, we could have included another 600,000 or so Australians in the recent federal election.⁹⁹

Australia Institute research finds that “if you don’t vote, you don’t count”. Examples include the increase in pension spending after compulsory voting was introduced in Australia; large and sudden increases in public health expenditure when women received the vote in the United States; and improved public services in African-American communities after the *Voting Rights Act 1965*.¹⁰⁰ Allowing those 16 and 17 years of age to vote could lead to similar, valuable outcomes for young people.

Recommendation: Lower the voting age to 16, on a voluntary basis or with a nominal fine for not voting until age 18.

EARLY VOTING

In the 2025 federal election, only 45% of Australians voted on election day – a record low.¹⁰¹ The change is a consequence of rising pre-poll and postal votes.

Of elections in living memory, 2025 had the shortest pre-poll period, with booths opening only 11 days out from the election (over a week later than in 2019). Despite this, Australians set pre-poll records.¹⁰²

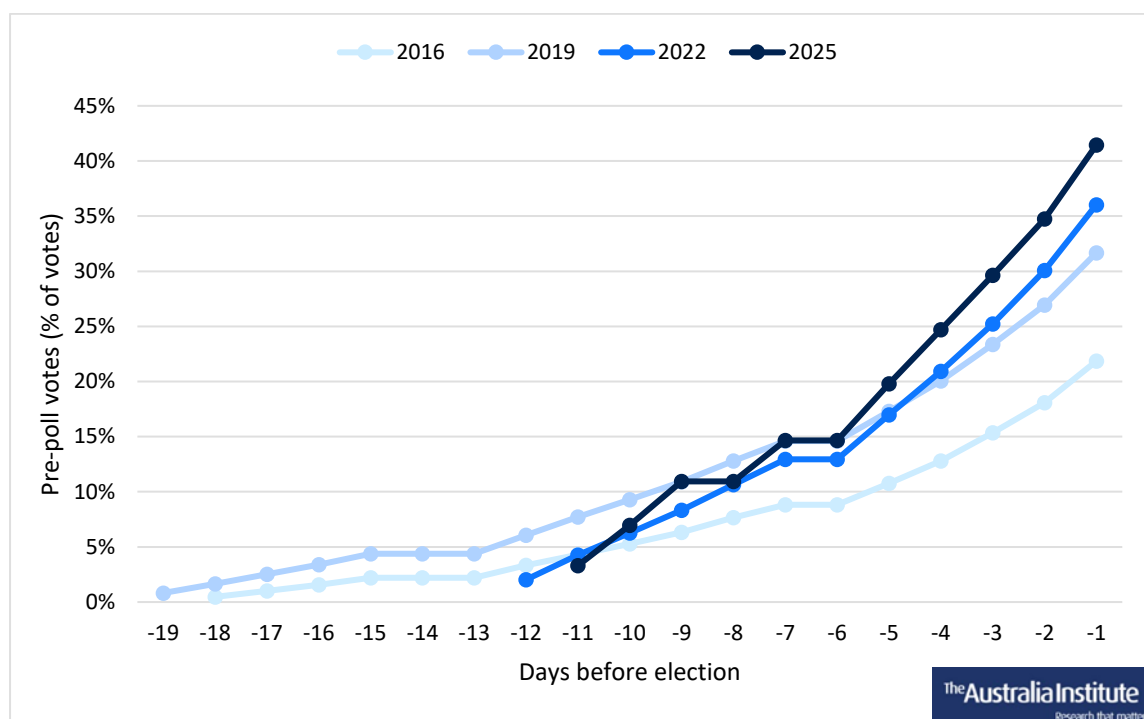
⁹⁹ Data from Australian Bureau of Statistics (2025) *Population clock and pyramid*, <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/population-clock-pyramid>. Of the around 680,000 aged 16 to 17, the authors assume that the proportion of non-citizens was similar to that in the general population, as show below.

¹⁰⁰ Shields & Campbell (2016) *#democracysausage*, pp. 11–12, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/report/democracysausage/>

¹⁰¹ Predavec (2025) *The rise of early voting in Australian elections*, <https://australiainstitute.org.au/post/the-rise-of-early-voting-in-australian-elections/>

¹⁰² AEC (2025) *Downloads and statistics*, <https://www.aec.gov.au/election/fe25/downloads-statistics.htm>

Figure 18: Pre-poll rate by days before each federal election



Source: AEC data, <https://www.aec.gov.au/election/fe25/downloads-statistics.htm>

On top of a delayed start, there were also pauses for ANZAC day and the Sunday before election day, but 2025 quickly outpaced every other year for early voting. On the Friday before polling day, 1.1 million people turned up at a booth to cast their vote, the first time more than a million Australians voted on a day other than election day.

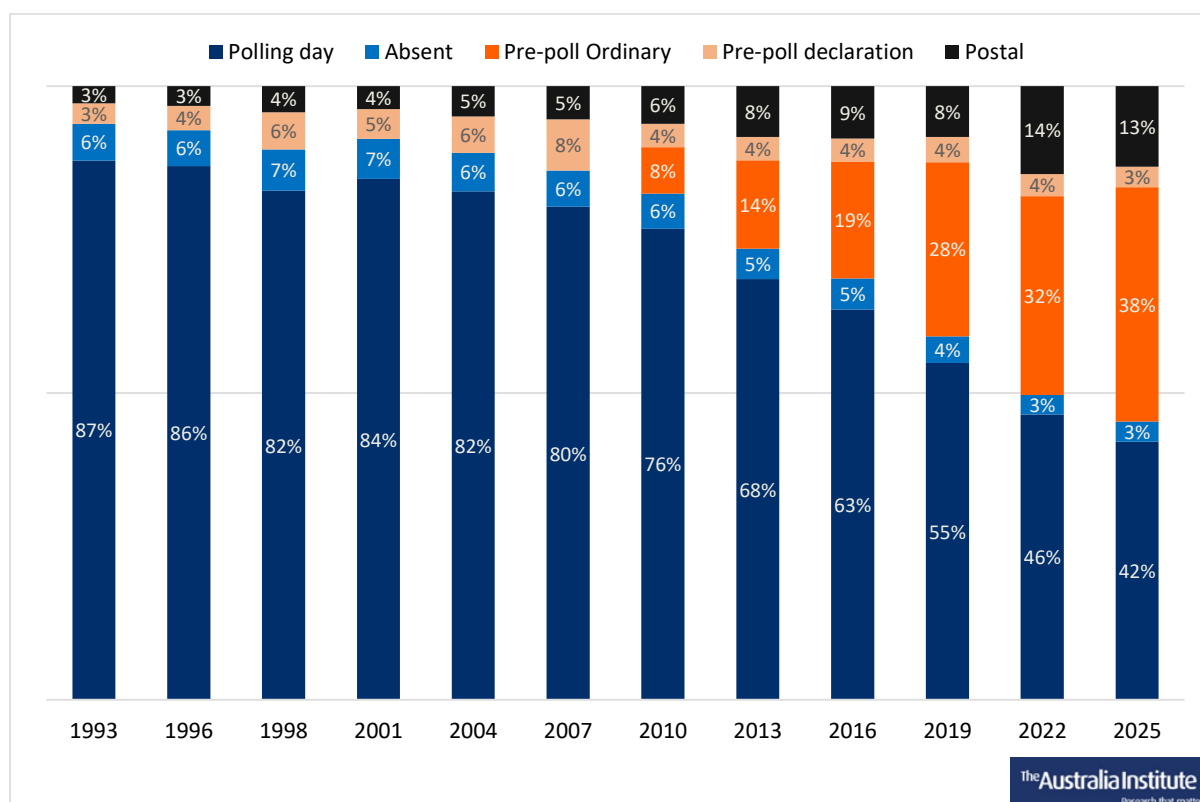
This is a continuation of long-term trends away from on-the-day voting.

There are six categories of voting in Australian elections:

- Ordinary polling day: a vote cast in the voter's home electorate on the day
- Absent: a vote cast outside of the voter's home electorate (but in the same state or territory) on the day
- Ordinary pre-poll: a vote cast in the weeks leading up to polling day, and without a specific reason for doing so
- Declaration pre-poll votes: a vote cast in the weeks leading up to polling day, with a specific reason for doing so.
- Postal votes: a vote issued, and generally returned, by mail (requires a reason).
- Provisional: a vote cast where a voter's name cannot be found on the roll, is already marked off, or by a silent elector. They make up a very small share of the vote (0.3% in 2022), so have not been included in Figure 19.¹⁰³

¹⁰³ AEC (2023) *Glossary*, <https://www.aec.gov.au/footer/Glossary.htm>

Figure 19: Vote type by federal election



Sources: For 1993 to 2019, Green (2022) *Tracking the Early Vote for the 2022 Federal Election*, <https://antonygreen.com.au/5647-2/>; for 2022 & 2025, AEC election data, <https://www.aec.gov.au/election/fe25/downloads-statistics.htm>

Prior to 2010, pre-poll votes all required a declaration with a specific reason that the voter could not cast their ballot on polling day. From 2010 onwards pre-poll voters have not needed to provide a reason, and early voting has dramatically risen in every election since then. The 2022 election was the first where most Australians did not vote on polling day, and 2025 saw that number grow further.

It can be more convenient for someone to vote according to their own schedule rather than on a specific Saturday. However, individual convenience may be diminishing the significance of election day and with it, the ability of Australians to effectively exercise their democratic rights.

A key aspect of an election campaign is hearing the parties' full list of policies, seeing how their leaders perform under the stresses of a campaign, and then coming together as a country to make a choice about who should represent Australians in the next parliament. As more and more Australians vote early, it becomes more difficult to say for certain that the country is "coming together" to make their choice.

Early voting can have real consequences when issues surface late in the campaign. In the 2024 Queensland election, Labor lost government with a 7.0% swing against them – taking

only 46.2% two-party-preferred. However, Labor narrowly won votes cast on election day with 50.6% two-party-preferred.¹⁰⁴ To some extent, this reflects that early voters tend to be more conservative than the electorate as a whole. However, it is also the case that those who vote on the day see more of the election campaign than early voters – particularly on the issue of abortion rights in the case of the recent Queensland election.¹⁰⁵

When voters go to the ballot box, it's important that the choice they make is informed as much as possible by the knowledge of what the different candidates, parties, and leaders are offering. Millions of Australians – more every election – are missing out on the twists, turns and policy announcements of the final weeks of an election campaign.

Recommendation: JSCEM consider how to encourage voting on election day, for example by further shortening the early voting period or requiring those voting early to give a reason.

COMPULSORY VOTING

Compulsory voting is a cornerstone of Australian democracy. When voting is optional, those with lower education and lower income are less likely to vote.¹⁰⁶ This makes government less representative and exacerbates disenfranchisement.

The Commonwealth fine for not voting is just \$20 and has not increased for 40 years. Over time that means the deterrence value of the fine has declined.¹⁰⁷

The ACT is the only other jurisdiction with such a low fine. This year, the ACT Electoral Commission proposed increasing the fine for not voting to \$40 and pegging it to penalty units to stop it from falling behind due to inflation.¹⁰⁸

Recommendation: Increase the fine for not voting and peg it to penalty units.

¹⁰⁴ Green (2024) *QLD2024 – Preference Flows and Vote by Type compared to 2020*, <https://antonygreen.com.au/qld2024-preference-flows-and-vote-by-type-compared-to-2020/>

¹⁰⁵ Sharma (2024) *How abortion became a pivotal Queensland election issue*, <https://www.9news.com.au/national/qld-election-2024-how-abortion-became-a-queensland-election-issue/b958aea1-b3a8-4610-bc6d-2bebe56728da>

¹⁰⁶ Flinders (2014) *Low voter turnout is clearly a problem, but a much greater worry is the growing inequality of that turnout*, <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/look-beneath-the-vote/>; OECD (2011) *Society at a glance 2011: OECD social indicators*, p. 97, https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/social-issues-migration-health/society-at-a-glance-2011_soc_glance-2011-en

¹⁰⁷ Browne and Shields (2022) *Fortifying Australian democracy: submission to the inquiry into the 2022 election*, pp. 39–40

¹⁰⁸ ACT Electoral Commission (2025) *2024 Legislative Assembly election report*, <https://www.parliament.act.gov.au/parliamentary-business/in-committees/committees-11th-assembly/integrity-commission-and-statutory-office-holders/inquiry-into-the-operation-of-the-2024-act-election-and-electoral-act-1992#tab2627879-8id>

Conclusion

Australia's democracy remains strong by international standards, but we cannot afford to be complacent. The issues discussed and recommendations made in our submission would fortify our institutions and norms against coming shocks, conflicts and disruptions – domestic and global.

Australian elections should be democratic, fair and competitive, and it is disappointing that changes legislated this year go in the opposite direction. However, there is still ample time to address these problems ahead of the next federal election.

Recent elections have been bedevilled by a race to the bottom on misinformation and false advertising. Truth in political advertising laws would address a major source of disinformation. South Australia's four-decade-old laws prove that reform is feasible and constructive, though they can of course be improved.

The 2025 election also saw political parties inserting themselves into the postal voting process and engaging in unsolicited political communication. Limiting these activities would improve the public's trust in the electoral system.

Australia needs more parliamentarians to make local members more accessible to voters and deepen the talent pool for ministries and committee work. An increase in the number of parliamentarians by 50% would account for population growth since the last increase in the 1980s, and make the House of Representatives "one vote, one value" for the first time since Federation.

A move towards proportional representation in the House of Representatives would help represent the more than one-in-three voters who did not cast a first preference vote for a major party. It would also have benefits for political parties, by protecting against electoral "wipe outs", making party rooms more geographically representative and allowing parties to preselect quality candidates regardless of where they live.

While turnout in the 2025 election is good by international standards – thanks in part to compulsory voting – it is still near historic lows. Measures to improve meaningful participation in voting, and to expand the franchise to better reflect contemporary Australian society, would help ensure the representative nature of election results.

The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters has an opportunity to fortify our democracy. Australians can be rightfully proud in our representative liberal democracy – but we cannot afford to be complacent. The reforms proposed in this submission would make our political system more responsive, representative, fairer and more trusted, and serve as a positive example for a world that is getting less liberal and more authoritarian.