Voting in Australian federal elections

David d'Lima JP BTh Dip Ed

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If we cannot explain the reason why we organise ourselves as we do, then we have no right to call ourselves a nation - Bishop John Hepworth, 1999

Appreciating Australia as the world's most democratic country

By the Centenary of Federation (in 2001), Australia had become the most democratic of all the world's nations, as it uniquely combined *compulsory participation*, *preferential voting* for the lower house of its national parliament (the House of Representatives - in which the nation's government is formed), and *proportional voting* to elect Parliament's upper house (the Senate).

As one of the very few countries that applies compulsory voting, the outcome of Australian elections reflects the will of the people. It is less democratic if the election involves substantially fewer than all eligible participants. So voting became compulsory in 1924, after the 1922 election when only 59% of voters participated. Compulsory voting helps to deny the easier opportunity to exert unfair influence that may occur if only a minority of people vote. Participation also accords with a crucial principle that is enunciated in the New Testament: *The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I don't need you!'* (I Corinthians 12:21).

Preferential voting for the lower house (since 1919) enables the choice of local candidates who are preferred by the voters. That approach accords with the biblically affirmed value of choosing leaders of local groups:

... select capable men from all the people ... and appoint them as officials over thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens (Exodus 18:21).

Proportional voting for the upper house (since 1949) gives representation to minorities, in accord with the New Testament esteem for weak and strong:

... those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable ... (I Corinthians 12:20).

The Senate

Known as the *upper house* of Federal Parliament, the Senate is often called the *States' House*, as it provides equal representation to the States regardless of their population. Each State elects the same number of Senators, so the six States are equally represented in the Senate. It was formed that way to protect the smaller States against action by the House of Representatives, in which the many MPs from the more populated States might favour those larger States.

Senators are chosen using a *proportional* voting system - in contrast to the preferential system that is used to elect members of the House of Representatives (in which government is formed). Senate candidates are elected according to the proportion of support given by the voters. Accordingly, as significant small parties or independents may join the Senate and hold the balance of power, the chamber is normally not dominated by government or opposition politicians.

Government is therefore restrained if it must gain consent from at least some non-government Senators to pass any resolution. The capacity of the Senate to check government and reject proposals often enables delays that allow better public scrutiny and accountability. Serving as a House of Review, the Senate effectively upholds a principle found in Proverbs 18:17 - *The first to present his case seems right till another comes forward and questions him.*

The Senate has powers virtually equal to the House of Representatives. The Senate may reject or amend bills, and has the power to disallow government regulations, thus making government more accountable.

The Senate has 76 seats. Twelve Senators are elected by each of the six States and they serve for a term of six years maximum duration. Generally half of the Senators are elected at one federal election, and the other half are elected at the following election. Four Senators are chosen by the mainland Territories (two for the Northern Territory and two for the Australian Capital Territory), and are elected all at the same time to a term of three years maximum duration.

Each Senate candidate must be a citizen of Australia only and be at least 18 years old. Each candidate must pay a deposit of $2,000. No limit is applied to the number of times a citizen may run for the Senate. All Senators commence service in July after their election. In each State (or Territory) the people form a single electorate which chooses all the Senators for that State (or Territory).

The House of Representatives

As the Commonwealth Parliament's *lower house*, the House of Representatives is often called the *People's House* since it provides democratic representation to the people of Australia, who are divided into local areas. Each area is called a *Federal Electorate* (or a *Division*) and its voters elect one Member. The number of electorates varies with the population of each State and Territory.

For the 2016 federal election, Australia was divided into 150 electorates:

47 New South Wales	37 Victoria	30 Queensland
16 Western Australia	11 South Australia	5 Tasmania
2 Australian Capital Territory	2 Northern Territory	

As each Division is a single-member electorate, the House of Representatives has 150 members. Each electorate has roughly the same number of residents (except in Tasmania which has a much smaller number of people in each).

Government is formed by the political party (or parties) holding a majority in the House of Representatives. The Governor-General normally appoints as Prime Minister the Member of the lower house who obtains support from the majority of its members. Each candidate for the House of Representatives must be a citizen of Australia only and must be at least 18 years old. Each candidate must pay a deposit of $1,000. Each Member of the House of Representatives serves for a term of three years maximum duration, but there is no limit on the number of times a citizen may seek election to the House of Representatives.

All members of the House of Representatives are elected using *preferential* voting, so every member is elected only when preferred by a majority of voters. This is more democratic than a "first by the post" system, as in Britain, where the winner might be hated by the overwhelming majority! For example, under that system, if candidates gain 29%, 31%, 30% and 10%, the winner has the support of only 31%, and could be despised by the other 69% of voters!

But under the preferential system, voters will rank each candidate in order of preference. So if no majority is gained by first preference votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is excluded, and the second preferences of that candidate's voters are given to the other candidates, continuing until a candidate gains more than 50% of the votes. This ensures the election of the person who is preferred.

Rejoicing at the ballot box

Australians at each election have the opportunity to demonstrate commitment to our nation and shape its future by voting intelligently. Australians may all give thanks that our political process does not provoke the riots, killing, repression or outcry found in many other nations. Our elections are peaceful, orderly, and mainly without corruption, as we value and respect the democratic process.

Prayer is needed as the Australian people select the leaders of our nation, as there are responsible and irresponsible people across the political spectrum. The challenge for Christians at each election is to pray for wisdom in choosing our leaders, and ask God to help them in their work.

The nation also requires Christ-centred ambition to shape the civic culture, as Godly individuals join and reform the political parties, and obtain preselection to run as candidates for Parliament, while commending the Lordship of Christ.

Australia may continue to rejoice as one of the few stable democracies in the Southern Hemisphere and one of the oldest continuously democratic nations of the world - if we are willing to raise up MPs who defend our civic foundation and who will encourage the Australian people, according to the Preamble in the Federal Constitution, to be *humbly relying on the blessing of Almighty God*.

Prayers read in the Australian House of Representatives to open each sitting day during the 20th Century and beyond

Almighty God, we humbly beseech Thee to vouchsafe Thy blessing upon this Parliament. Direct and prosper our deliberations to the advancement of Thy glory and the true welfare of the people of Australia.

Our Father, which art in heaven, hallowed be thy Name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.

FamilyVoice AUSTRALIA

4th Floor, 68 Grenfell St, Adelaide SA 5000
DDL@fava.org.au www.fava.org.au
Phone: +618 8223 6383

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