



# AUSTRALIAN CONSTITUTION CENTRE

## Democracy in detail

Australia today has a system of government known as a representative democracy. How our Government works is defined in the Australian Constitution.

However, the meaning of democracy in our modern world can be hard to put your finger on. We know it involves governments and elections. And just to make it harder, countries around the world with systems of government considered to be democratic are all different. They have in common a process of regular elections by the people to form government. In Australia we elect our representatives from political parties or independent candidates who then form a Parliament and an Executive Government.

Almost half of the world's countries are today considered democracies of some sort. These include constitutional monarchies like Australia and republics such as the USA.

## The origins of Australian democracy

Many believe that democracy sprung up in Ancient Greece. This was a participatory democracy where all male citizens voted on each law. Women and slaves were excluded. The word democracy comes from the Greek word *demokratia*. *Demos* means people and *kratos* means power. Together they mean that the people hold the power.

The British who came to Australia after 1788 generally had democratic ideals and principles. The first settlements in Australia were penal colonies and many would not associate convicts with democracy.

Over time as our colonies grew they became more democratic. This was helped by convicts being released into the community once their sentences were served and the arrival of free people. The Australian colonies locally adopted English institutions, particularly the traditions of

the common law and judicial independence, plus the emerging ideas of representative government (Parliaments) and later of responsible government (Executive accountability).

By the late 19th century the six colonies were all self-governing. Throughout the second half of that century the leaders of the colonies discussed and debated about whether they should join together to become one country. Delegates gathered at constitutional conventions from 1890 and drafted our Constitution. In 1899 and 1900 the people of the colonies voted through referendums to accept the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Australia. Then on 1 January in 1901 the colonies peacefully joined together in a Federation and each colony became a State.

The Constitution established the rules for our ongoing democratic Australian Government. Australia shares some of our constitutional arrangements with other democracies. Like some others we elect a parliament. Yet unlike most we have compulsory voting. Together, all our democratic constitutional concepts and our interpretations of them give us a democracy that is uniquely Australian.

## What does our constitution say about democracy?

Sections 7 and 24 refer to our Houses of Parliament being "directly chosen by the people". There are other basic requirements which are thought to be part of our constitutional democracy which cannot be changed without a referendum:

1. That we have a system of voting which gives effect to the peoples' selection of representatives
2. Government is by the people, through their representatives
3. We have direct popular elections
4. We have the freedom to discuss political and economic matters
5. The ability to vote should be so general in scope and voting power be shared among voters so that those elected can fairly be seen



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- to be the representatives of the people
6. There be full, equal and effective participation in elections

## Democracy is something that evolves

Democracy doesn't stand still. It's always changing, adapting and evolving to suit the times. Some of the events that occurred during the early years of Australian colonisation would not be considered right, proper or democratic these days. That's why the framers of our Constitution left it to Parliament to pass laws about elections. As long as those laws are consistent with the Constitution, Parliament can pass laws on things such as political advertising and donations, whether prisoners can vote, how disputes about elections are solved and how elections are conducted.

The values of the people of the times permeate through Australian democracy. Decisions made by our elected representatives and High Court interpretations of the Constitution also reflect the views of the times. Each generation tries to improve upon the ideas of the last to progress the social, cultural and political values of the community while retaining our founding traditions.

Our democracy is sustained by the people and the institutions of Australia. Our democracy can only continue with the approval of the people and so it is the democratic values of Australians that maintain our democracy. However, democracy relies on each and everyone one of us engaging with our system of government constructively and knowledgeably.

## Questions:

1. Which country first came up with the idea of democracy?
2. What type of democracy does Australia have?
3. Is voting compulsory in Australia for citizens 18 years and over?
4. Is voting for our parliamentary representatives written in the Australian constitution?

