



Unit 4: Representative Democracy. The story of voting rights in Australia including for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and women – Year 5 - C & C Strand: Government & Democracy

Topic 5.2: The Constitution and the right to vote in Australia

The secret ballot and the 'Australian ballot'

Open voting

In Britain and Australia, elections were originally held in the open, at 'hustings' (i.e. temporary platforms set up for the occasion). Speeches would be made by candidates. In those days, only men who owned property or had a certain income could vote. They would tell the polling official, out loud before the crowd, who they voted for and it would be recorded in a book. Lists of who voted for which candidate were sometimes published afterwards. This meant that people could be pressured or influenced to vote in a particular way by their employers, landlords, customers and neighbours. It also meant there was lots of corruption. People could be bribed to vote in a particular way, and watched to ensure they did so.

In Australia, voting would often happen outside pubs. Candidates ended up 'treating' potential voters with free alcohol, so it often became a rowdy, and sometimes violent, affair. Entertainment was laid on as well, including performances by bands. The voter would write the name of the candidates they wanted to vote for on a piece of paper, sign it, bring it to the polling station and hand it to the electoral official, who would then ask them to say out loud who they voted for. As the day wore on, the crowds would become drunk and sometimes riots occurred. People were injured and in 1843 [two men](#) were shot during election violence.

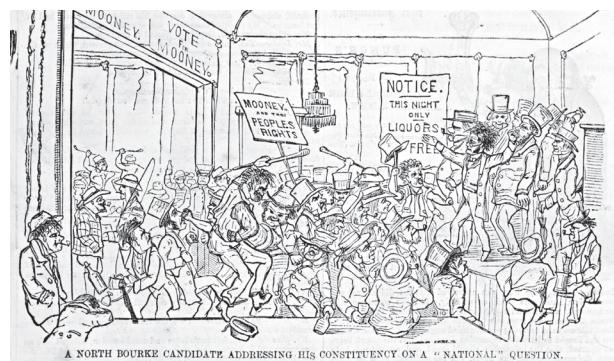
The introduction of the secret ballot

The voting system was first changed in the colonies of Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia in 1856. New South Wales followed in 1858, Queensland in 1859 and Western Australia in 1877.

These colonies introduced a system under which people could vote according to their conscience, without anyone else knowing how they voted.

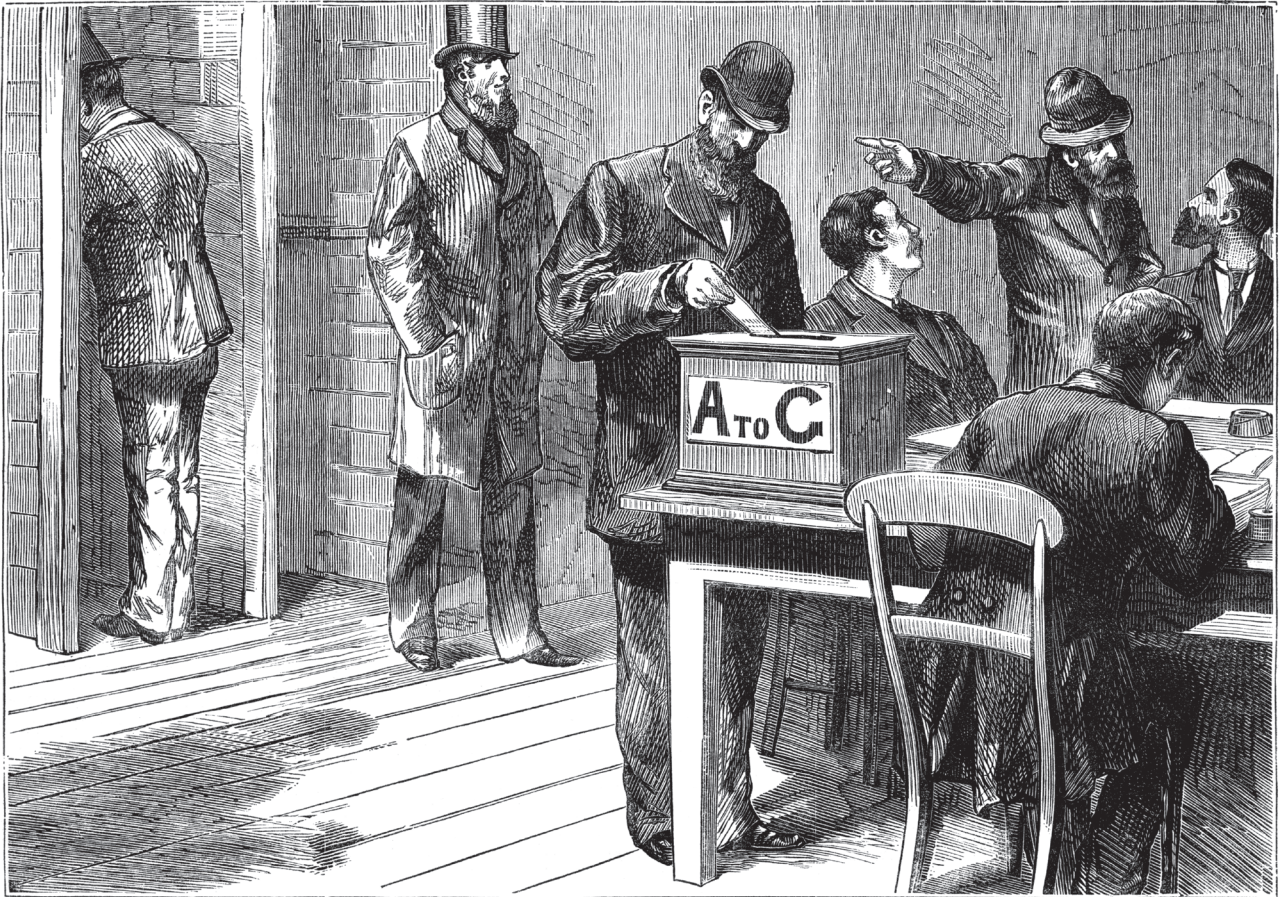
Some people opposed this change. They argued that people should have the courage to vote openly and should not hide behind secrecy in giving their vote. They thought this was a cowardly approach and 'unmanly'. If voters could conceal their vote, they might vote in their own selfish interests, rather than in the public interest. It was thought that people would be more likely to vote in the public interest if they did so under the scrutiny of the public.

We see this concern reflected in our own Parliaments. Votes on passing legislation are made openly, with Members moving to one side of the room or the other to show how they vote. Each Member is publicly responsible for his or her vote, and can be called to account by the voters in his or her electorate at the next election.



The candidate Booth, standing on a stage, waving his arms and speaking to a riotous crowd|1855
Source: State Library of Victoria

THE GENERAL ELECTIONS



INTERIOR OF A POLLING BOOTH.

As for elections in the mid-1800s, some argued that even though the franchise was limited to a small proportion of the people, having open elections meant that anyone could turn up to watch it happen, and by their cheers, heckles and applause, they could influence those who were able to vote. It made the system more participatory. The obvious reply to this argument, however, was that it would be more participatory if you let more people vote.

Once the franchise was indeed widened to include most males, this made it more likely that pressure and influence would be applied, particularly when poor workers had to vote in front of their employers. On the other hand, it also meant that poor men could sell their vote to the highest bidder, corrupting the electoral system.

In South Australia, the move to a secret ballot happened in the same year that the right to vote was extended to all men 21 years and older. In addition to reducing the likelihood of intimidation (i.e. bullying) and bribery affecting electoral results, one of the greatest attractions of the secret ballot was ending the drunkenness and disorder associated with elections. As one politician noted, no one would bother to buy a drink for a voter if he could not check whether it resulted in the voter voting in a particular way.

Interior Of Polling Booth | 1880
Source: State Library of Victoria

Innovation in the practice of the secret ballot

The innovation of the secret ballot in Australia, in contrast to earlier versions in France, Switzerland and some States in the United States, was that the voter did not provide his own ballot paper, or use ballots provided by the political parties. Party ballots were usually coloured so that [people could still tell](#) which party a voter was voting for. Instead, the government provided the ballot papers to the voters at the polling booth, and they all looked the same.

The ballot papers contained a printed list of all the candidates, and the voter then crossed out the ones they did not want elected. This made it easier for those with limited literacy to vote, as they did not have to write out (and correctly spell) the names of candidates. But in the United States it was seen as [preventing people who couldn't read](#) from voting. It was easier for them to vote by saying a name or handing in a ballot prepared by the party they supported.



The other innovation was that voting was brought indoors, at a government provided polling station. The government set up separate private stalls within the polling station for voting, along with the pen and ink to mark the ballot. Once a voter had finished marking his vote on the ballot, he then folded it and placed it in a sealed ballot box. All of this was now run by the government, rather than the candidates, who had previously paid for and constructed the hustings and printed their own ballot papers.

While Australia did not invent the idea of the secret ballot, it did invent the most effective practical means of ensuring that the ballot was indeed secret. South Australia later added the innovation of swapping from pens and ink to pencils, as this was less messy and speeded up the process. It also introduced the idea of marking a box beside a candidate's name, rather than crossing out names.

The 'Australian ballot' spreads across the world

This method of ensuring that the secret ballot was more effectively secret is often known as the 'Australian ballot'.

The 2022 Commonwealth election. Some people, including those who are blind or visually impaired, are still not afforded a secret ballot
Source: AEC

It was adopted in New Zealand in 1870 and in [Britain in 1872](#). In Britain it reduced the costs of election campaigns because 'treating' (otherwise known as bribing, influencing or vote-buying) was no longer practical. Canada adopted the Australian ballot in 1874 and Belgium did so in 1877.

In the United States, the Australian ballot was used from 1888. Elections in the mid-nineteenth century were often violent affairs, with supporters of one party attacking voters for the other side on their way to vote. [Eighty-nine Americans](#) were killed at the polls during election day violence in the mid-nineteenth century. The Australian ballot was effective at ending the violence and making the voting system fairer.





Topic 5.2: Lesson/ Activities Seven

The secret ballot



AUSTRALIAN
CONSTITUTION
CENTRE

Time/Lesson	Learning Goal
<ul style="list-style-type: none">1 hour	To <u>identify</u> the rules of a secret ballot system of voting. To <u>understand</u> the pros and cons of secret ballot voting in elections.
Rationale	Success Criteria
To understand the importance of the right to vote and who is able to vote, students need an understanding of the voting process.	Students <u>discuss</u> the benefits of voting and having a representative government. They <u>explore</u> the secret ballot and compulsory voting as key features of Australia's democracy
Teaching Reference Document	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">TRD 27: The Secret Ballot and the 'Australian Ballot'	
Resources	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Resources for this activity can be as elaborate as you choose. You may like to set up proper voting booths or just use desks.Rules for exclusion for each year.Voting role play cards. (see Resource 2).	
Tuning In	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students conduct a class vote on an issue relevant to themselves.Teacher explains that the class is going to vote (choose one issue).Students close their eyes and teacher reads out the options. Students are to vote for one option only. Teacher tallies results.Display results, small discussion of numbers and perhaps how the data could be represented.Second issue is then introduced for voting. Teacher informs students that they are able to keep their eyes open when they vote for this issue.Students vote and teacher tallies. Display results, small discussion of numbers and perhaps how the data could be represented.Optional – this could be done as a mathematics lesson with the results graphed. This would need to occur immediately before the civics lesson to allow for following discussion.Teacher draws students' attention to how they felt when they had their eyes closed as opposed to open during the vote. Provoke a discussion about whether students felt swayed by their friends to vote a certain way when their eyes were open as opposed to closed.Activate Prior Knowledge about voting – elicit understanding or views of students who may have been to the polling booth with their parents.	
Teacher Instruction	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Students think-pair-share and discuss the pros and cons of the "Secret Ballot" (this is an opportunity for the teacher to elicit understanding and direct conversations) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bWwR2CUNudA	

Group/Independent Learning

- Students run their own representative democracy and vote.
- Break students into pairs and give each a school issue to create a policy around – you may like to have the issues prewritten or depending on your group they could come up with their own issue. Alternatively, brainstorm a set of issues on the board as a class.
- In each pair the students define the issue and develop a solution to the issue. E.g Litter may be a problem and the solution may be to have everyone sit, put their rubbish in their lunchbox and then be dismissed by the teacher who watches the rubbish disposal.
- Once students have had a chance to develop a strong solution they choose one person in the pair to be their vocal representative.
- Explain that each issue will be presented and voted upon.
- Optional: you may like just the class to vote or you could extend the presentation and voting to other year levels or classes.
- The votes will determine which issue and solution will be presented to a person of importance i.e. the principal.

Wrapping It Up

- Tally the votes and authenticate the process.
- Discuss the differences between the voting results from each year based on the rules voting. Look at skewed results.
- Optional: Use excel or similar to graph results and look for trends.

Differentiation

Due to the open-ended nature of this activity differentiation comes imbedded in the conversations and understanding that students have of each role/issue. Literacy support can be offered to students who may need their role/person read or explained to them.

Assessment Strategies

Observation of understanding.

