5

Elections and voting

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The Alternative Vote (AV) system used to elect the federal House of Representatives (and the lower houses of the state and territory legislatures) is almost unique in the world, as is Australia's demanding form of compulsory voting, which requires voters to mark multiple preferences (see Chapter 1). The three-year cycle for House federal contests is also the joint shortest term for a parliamentary government in the world, along with New Zealand. (The USA has two-yearly congressional elections, but a four-year presidential executive term.) Australia also has an upper house at the federal tier (and in five of the six state parliaments) elected by a well-regarded proportional representation system, the Single Transferable Vote (STV). The integrity of elections was once poor in some Australian states (in some cases lasting for decades). But in modern times these problems have been rectified and Australian elections (federal and state) have long met the highest international standards.

What does democracy require for all the voting systems that elect the legislature?

- Votes should be translated into seats in a way that is recognised as legitimate by most citizens (ideally almost all of them).
- No substantial part of the population should regard the result as illegitimate, nor suffer a consistent bias of the system 'working against them'.
- If possible, the system should have beneficial effects for the good governance of the country.
- If possible, the voting system should enhance the social representativeness of the legislature and encourage high levels of voting across all types of citizens' criteria for elections.

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What does democracy require for the electoral system for the lower house of the federal legislature – the Alternative Vote?

- It should accurately translate parties' votes *nationally* into seats in the legislature.
- If possible, it should foster close links between MPs and voters in their local areas.
- If possible, the system should give clear signals of the overall government direction wanted by a majority of voters.

What does democracy require for the electoral system for the upper house of the federal legislature – the Single Transferable Vote?

- It should accurately translate parties' votes *within each state or territory* into seats in the legislature.
- It should foster the national representation of overall state interests.
- If possible, the system should have beneficial effects in correcting any biases in the representation of parties nationally arising from the lower house elections, especially in giving seats to otherwise-excluded parties – a 'balancing' effect.

The chapter begins by reviewing recent changes in Australia's elections and party competition features. Next, a strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities (SWOT) analysis summarises the key democratic achievements and limitations of voting and elections. Following that, three sections consider more specific aspects of Australian elections operations relevant for democratic auditing.

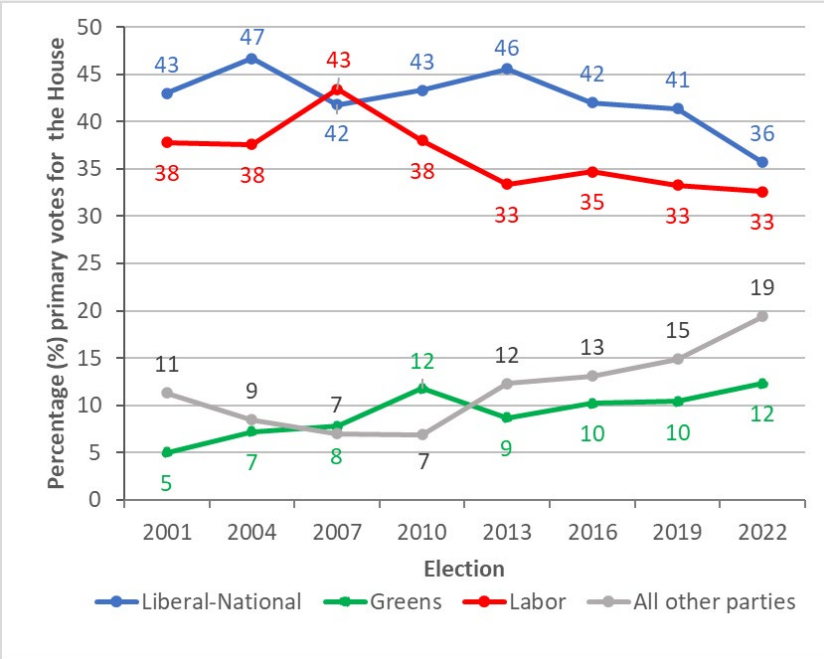
Recent developments

The 2022 federal elections produced important developments in patterns of voting and partisan success in both the House of Representatives and the Senate, pluralising the representation of parties in both houses, but without denting the governing predominance of the top two parties, Labor and the (permanent) Liberal-National Coalition. After presenting recent election outcomes for each house, the final sections of the chapter explores how fairly their respective electoral systems worked.

House elections

Historically, Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition have dominated the lower house elections for decades, winning far more first-preference votes than any competitors. However, this pattern has tended to erode in recent years, as Figure 5.1 below shows. The top two parties' share of first-preference votes was three-quarters in 2019, but only two-thirds in 2022, and it has broadly trended down over time, from 84 per cent in 2004. Green voting has wobbled but gradually grown larger in this century, reaching one in eight votes in 2022. In general, the 'left' side of the political spectrum has been more fragmented between Labor and the Greens than has been

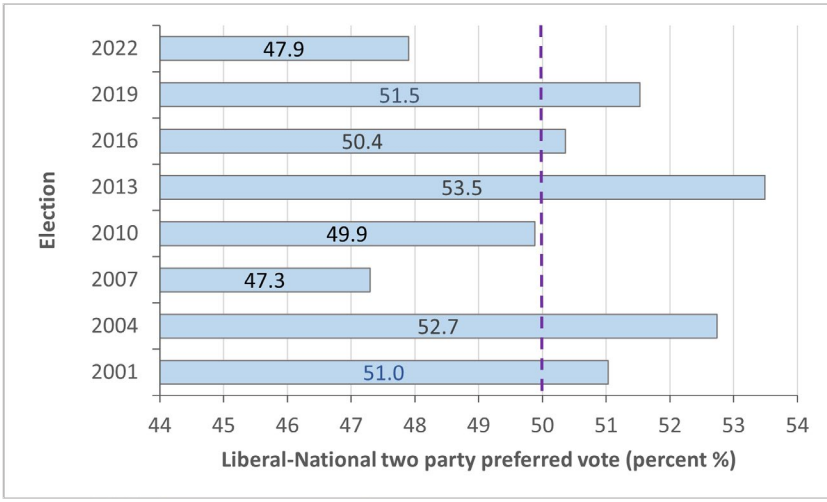
Figure 5.1: The proportion of first-preference votes won by the main parties at House of Representatives elections, 2001–2022



Source: Compiled by the author from AEC (2023a).

Notes: Results for 2022 and earlier years can be accessed from the AEC's webpage. 'All other parties' includes Katter, Pauline Hanson's One Nation, Family First, Xenophon, Democrats, Center, United Australia and all smaller micro parties at different times.

Figure 5.2: The Liberal-National Coalition share of the two-party preferred (TPP) vote, 2001–2022

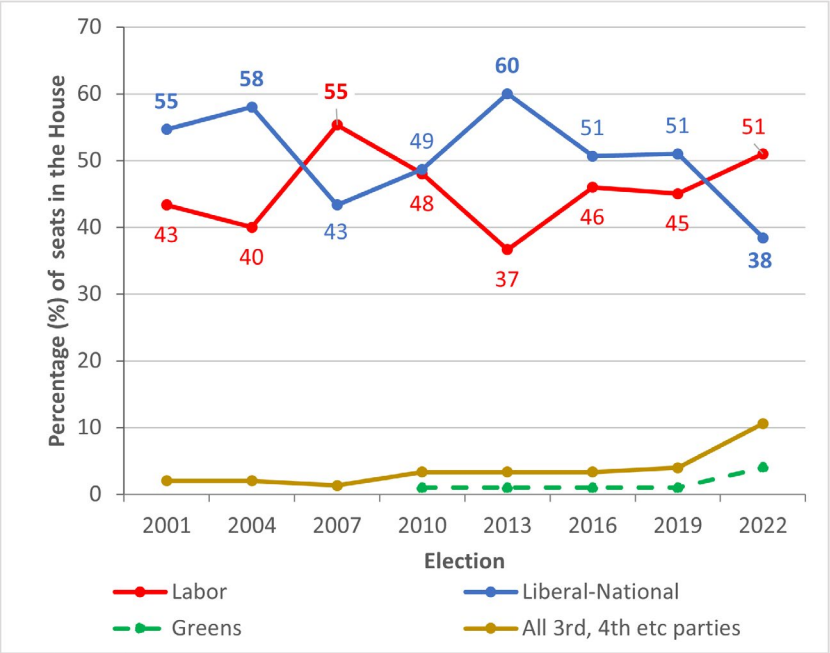


Source: Compiled by the author from AEC (2023a).

Note: The zero on the horizontal axis is not shown here; the scaling starts at 44 per cent.

true on the right, although at times parties to the right of the Liberal-Nationals have won small chunks of support (as with the 5 per cent for the Palmer party in 2022). In 2007, Labor beat the Liberal-National Coalition in primary votes, but in 2010, when it just clung on to power, it was 5 per cent behind. In 2022 Labor won convincingly overall at later stages of the AV count (the two-party preferred vote, or TPP vote), but still got 3 per cent less in primary votes than the Liberal-National Coalition.

Figure 5.3: The percentage of MPs won by parties at House of Representatives elections, 2001–2022



*Source: Compiled by the author from AEC (**2023a**).*

Notes: The House had 150 seats from 2001 to 2016, and 151 thereafter, so a majority always required 76 seats. The Greens won a seat from 2010 to 2019 and four seats in 2022. In 2022, the Independents included seven Teal Independents. Smaller party seats are hard to show here, but Katter won a seat from 2013 to 2022, Centre from 2019 to 2022, Xenephon in 2016 and Palmer in 2013.

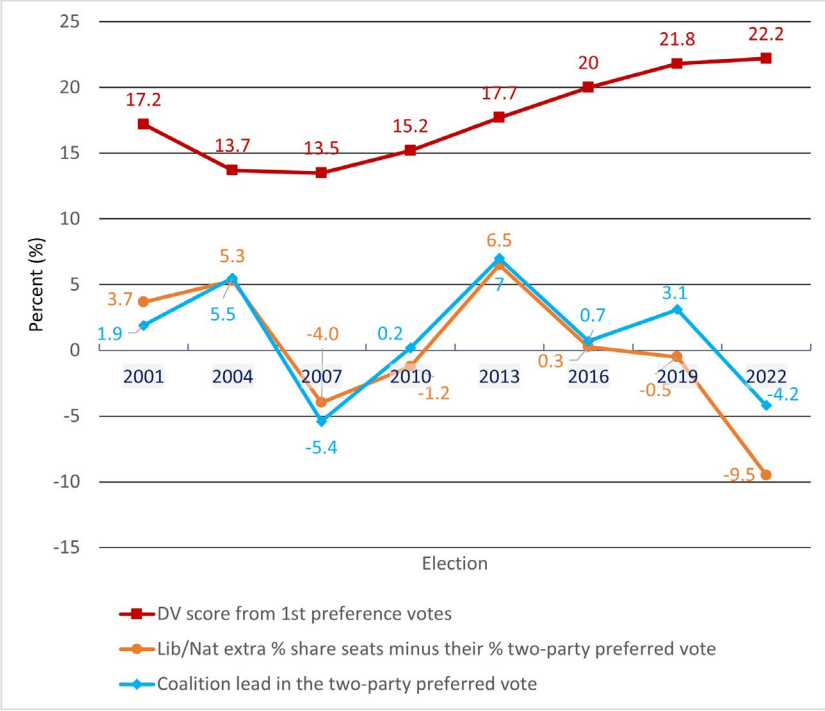
In order to understand seats outcomes we need to look at the TPP vote stage. This is the last stage in AV counting, where other candidates have been eliminated from the count and it has come down to the last two largest parties. In 138 out of 153 House contests the top two parties were the Liberal-Nationals and Labor; Figure 5.2 shows that the contest for TPP between them has often been very tight indeed. Historically, most Greens voters have used their later preferences votes to back Labor, as they clearly did in 2007 and 2022, and mostly in 2010 – the three occasions in Figure 5.2 where there was also a centre-left majority in primary vote shares. On the other five occasions the Liberal-National Coalition has received the TPP majority, drawing support from a range of other smaller parties and also the backing of some Greens voters.

Because the TPP numbers have hovered very close to the majority level (50.1 per cent), the differences in the percentages of lower house seats won by the top two parties, shown in Figure 5.3, have diverged sharply in some elections (notably 2013) and Labor has done better in terms of seats percentages than the vote share might suggest (even in its big 2013 defeat). In 2022, it gained over half the seats although its primary vote was only a third of the total. The representation of third and fourth parties lagged behind their vote share until 2022 when it picked up appreciably.

How fair are the lower house elections?

One of the most basic tests of the democratic performance of a country's electoral system asks: What is the difference between the proportion of votes cast for a particular party and that party's representation in parliament? In AV the key voting indicator for determining winning seats is the TPP vote, shown in Figure 5.2. The Liberal-National Coalition's net TPP lead over Labor is tracked in Figure 5.4. In every election since 2001, the party with the most TPP votes has always formed the government in a very reliable manner, even in 2010 when the incumbent

Figure 5.4: The Liberal-National Coalition's partisan advantage in terms of its percentage share of seats minus the two-party preferred vote, and the deviation from proportionality (DV) in the House of Representatives elections, 2001–2019



*Source: Compiled by the author from AEC (**2023a**).*

Notes: The blue line, the Liberal-National Coalition lead in the TPP vote, shows the Coalition percentage vote share minus the Labor vote share. The orange line, showing the Coalition's advantage, indicates how far the Liberal/National parties were over-represented against their parties' TPP vote preferences at the end of the AV counting process. The DV score shows the percentage of MPs winning seats in the House of Representatives that was not justified in terms of their first party vote shares.

Labor government won a tiny lead (just 0.2 per cent) but the same seats as the opposition Liberal-National Coalition. Labor nonetheless secured enough additional support from smaller parties to stay in office until 2013. Thus, the AV voting system has reliably delivered the 'right' winner (which occasionally has not happened in state elections, notably in South Australia – see Chapter 20).

Many democratic voting systems give a 'winner's bonus' to the largest party in the form of a bigger lead in seats than their lead in terms of votes, as happens in Australia. To track this over time compared with the TPP votes, the orange line at the bottom of Figure 5.4 shows the Liberal-Nationals' share of House seats minus their TPP percentage. This measure shows their advantagement in representation when they won most votes, and how far they were disadvantaged in terms of seats when they lost. In the main this index has moved remarkably closely together with the Liberal-National Coalition's lead in TPP terms. The seats percentage advantage for the Liberal-Nationals is generally a little bit higher than its TPP advantage, but by tiny amounts in elections up to 2016. In 2019, however, the Liberal-National Coalition gained more of an advantage than its TPP lead, but was then more substantially under-represented in 2022 than before. This seems to have been chiefly due to the rise of the Teal Independents, discussed in detail later in this chapter. In this way, the AV system's operations clearly determine why the top two parties have so far won almost all the House seats, and monopolised government between them.

Comparing other parties' seats shares with their primary votes, it is important to bear in mind that even in democracies with proportional representation (PR) election systems, small parties

Figure 5.5: A simple example of how to calculate the deviation from proportionality (DV) score

Party	% votes	% seats	Deviations
A	45	65	+20
B	30	22	-8
C	20	12	-8
D	5	1	-4
Total	100	100	

Next add up the positive and negative numbers in the Deviations column, ignoring their signs, to get a number called the 'modulus' = 40.

To eliminate the double-counting involved in the modulus, divide by two, so DV score = 20.

Source: (**Dunleavy, 2018**, *Figure 2).*

may often be denied seats, as happens in Australia. The Greens (Australia's third largest party) particularly suffered before 2022 because they got a tenth of votes nationwide but rarely enough in any given electoral district to make it past the AV first-votes stage. In 2019, for example, they received 10 per cent of first-preference votes but won just one seat in Parliament (Melbourne). In 2022, their one-eighth (12.5 per cent) national support won them only four seats (2.6 per cent, thanks to three new ones in central Brisbane). Other minor parties on the far right, the United Australia Party and Pauline Hanson's One Nation, each received over 4 per cent of first-preference votes in 2019, although neither won a seat in Parliament. However, in 2022, the Independents on 5 per cent nationally did unusually well by winning 10 seats (6.7 per cent), thanks to some Liberal-National voters defecting to the Teal Independents over policies for the environment and women's issues, plus some of their candidates attaining concentrated support in specific local areas.

A second key test of an election system is how far parties' seats shares compare with their first-preference support (their 'primary vote') – the political alignments that arguably matter most to voters. Here the achievements of AV clearly do come at some cost to the proportionality of elections. The top line in Figure 5.4 shows a key indicator of democratic responsiveness, known as the deviation from proportionality (DV) score, which is widely used in political science to compare liberal democracies. Figure 5.5 shows how to calculate the DV score in the most straightforward way. The deviations between each party's vote share and its seat share are added up (ignoring the + or – signs) and then divided by two to eliminate double-counting. The larger the DV score is, the greater the proportion of seats that have been 'misallocated' to parties that do not 'deserve' them in terms of their first-preference vote shares. Because very small parties with dispersed votes across districts almost always cannot win any seats, the minimum achievable DV score in any country is not really zero, but approximately 4–5 per cent (or more if lots of tiny, 'no hope' parties or one-off candidates contest elections in many districts).

Looking back to Figure 5.4, the DV line (at the top) shows a quite different patterning from the other lines. The DV score has risen significantly in each of the last four elections, mainly because of the rise in votes for the Greens and other smaller parties. In every election the parties over-represented in terms of winning seats compared with their first-preference votes

are the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor. In 2004 and 2007, just over one in eight seats were being 'misallocated' to the big two parties, out of line with voters' first preferences. But in the 2016–2022 period this proportion reached over a fifth. All the top line numbers in Figure 5.4 are high for a liberal democracy – for example, in the USA, which has first-past-the-post (FPTP) voting, the DV score is under 10 per cent. Recent DV scores of over 20 per cent are on a par with other Westminster FPTP countries (like the UK, Canada or India) and more than twice the DV values in most European liberal democracies.

How much does this matter? Advocates for a majoritarian system like AV argue that it is more likely to produce parliamentary majorities where the responsibility for government decisions is clear, enhancing satisfaction with democracy (**Blais and Gélineau, 2007**; **Foa et al., 2020**). Voters can reward or punish the incumbent party at the next election according to its performance, with a clear replacement government also known well in advance of people voting (Norris 2004). On the other hand, minority governments formed only after elections by ad hoc coalitions (not the regular Liberal-National concertation which persists across many elections) can blur responsibility and, therefore, accountability for government performance. Some analysts also claim that majoritarian systems lead to more effective opposition parties and more rigorous parliamentary debate, while others argue that governments in FPTP and AV systems do more economic regulation, helping consumers by creating lower price levels (**Rogowski and Kayser, 2002**).

The potential downsides of majoritarian electoral systems include an adversarial dynamic between parties, centred more on competition than on collaboration to produce long-run national interest policies. Voters for election-winning parties are less satisfied than voters backing election losers, with a greater gap in in majoritarian systems than in PR systems (**Foa et al., 2020**). This may even open the way for election 'bad losers' to query the legitimacy of election results, as Donald Trump did in the USA after his 2020 defeat. For voters who support small parties, the experience of them being denied effective representation despite winning hundreds of thousands of votes is a bruising one and may damage trust in democracy. Advantaged parties may also use their cushioning against new competitors entering and winning seats so as to support joint 'cartel' arrangements with other advantaged parties, keeping in place election, campaigning or party funding arrangements from which they benefit. Lastly, single-member districts in many countries have been shown to damage the numbers of women in parliament compared to multi-seat systems. These strengths and weaknesses of majoritarian systems are evident in the House of Representatives elections.

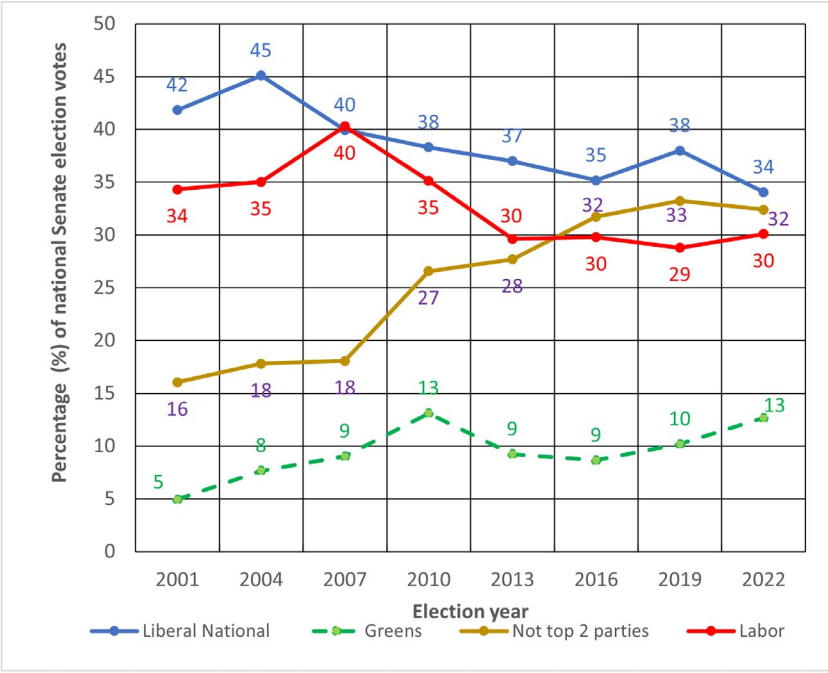
Looking beyond the federal level at the five other Australian lower houses in states, and the unicameral legislatures in Queensland and the two territories, all their legislators serve fixed four-year terms. They use AV voting in single-member districts (albeit with some small variations) and in single-member constituencies, with the notable exception of Tasmania (which uses STV in multi-member districts – see Chapter 22). Labor and Liberal-National predominance is a feature of all eight polities. The largest states (NSW and Victora) have large lower houses, while states with small populations have fewer members (as in Tasmania). All state and territory electoral districts have quite small populations and local areas, so that elected members can become well known locally. Since states and territories handle most of the public services and regulation issues most likely to engage voters' attention, localism has good aspects (high levels of voter information) and potential drawbacks (sectional pressures on representatives).

Senate elections

The Senate is elected using STV with 12 seats for each state and 2 for each territory (see Chapter 1). Senate seats are usually held for six-year terms, with half of senators being elected every three years. (If a rare 'double dissolution' of the Senate occurs, then the number of seats contested is 12 per state. It is also possible in this conjuncture that an incumbent senator may lose their seat after serving only three years.) Since 1959, the Senate has used a PR electoral system. Internationally, these systems have produced very different voting behaviours among citizens (backing a greater variety of parties) and seats outcomes (producing more multi-party results) when compared with majoritarian systems such as AV or plurality rule (FPTP).

In fact, voters in Australia's upper house elections only rather slowly changed their behaviour to more multi-party voting, even in this century. Before 2010, the Liberal-National Coalition got above two-fifths first-preference support, and before 2022 it stayed not far below that (Figure 5.6). Labor reached this level only once, in 2007, and subsequently dropped to gain less than a third of first-preference support for the last four elections. In 2001, one in six people were choosing to give their first-preference backing to one of the third, fourth or lower-placed parties, with less than a third of this share going to the Greens (Figure 5.6). By 2010, the non-top-two share of votes topped a quarter, and within that share the Greens were backed by one in eight voters. Greens support subsequently fell back for three elections, before returning to its 2010 level in 2022. The share of primary votes going to fourth, fifth and other smaller parties has kept growing since 2010, however, and the votes share for all parties outside the top two (including the Greens) has been a third of the total since 2016. Who these other smaller parties have been is discussed in detail in Chapter 12 on the Senate. Voting patterns for these groupings are hard to analyse over time because some have been episodic or discontinuous competitors (standing only in years when their chances looked better or in individual states where they had

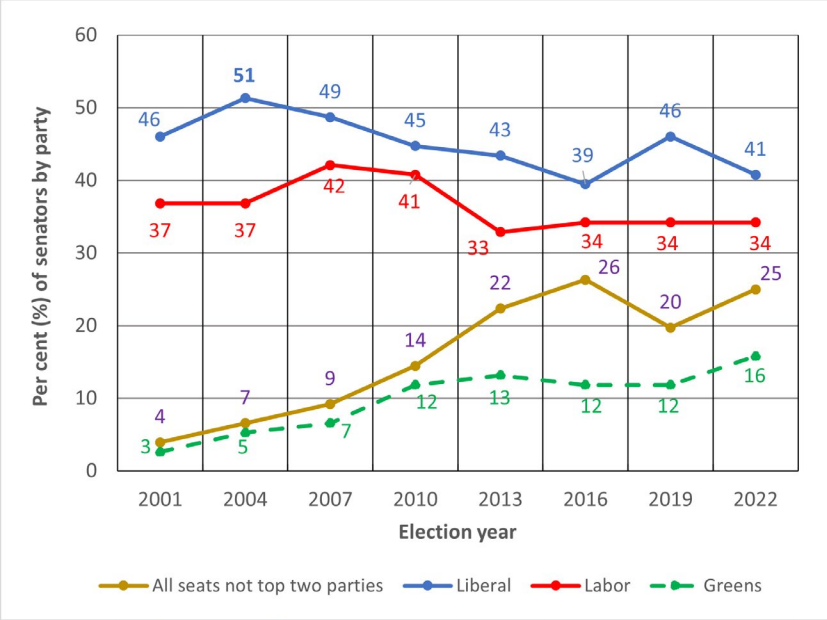
Figure 5.6: The proportion of first-preference votes won by the main parties at Senate elections, 2001–2022



Source: Compiled by the author from AEC (2023a).

Note: The line for all parties below the top two includes the Greens votes shown.

Figure 5.7: The percentage (%) of seats won by the main parties at Senate elections, 2001–2022



*Source: Compiled by the author from AEC (**2023a**).*

Note: The line for all parties below the top two includes the Greens seats shown.

surged for some reason, and then taking a break). Some 'surges' of support in a particular state were produced by a well-known legislator leaving one of the top two parties to stand under a new party label, or as a 'disguised' independent relying on their past partisan reputation, without starting a distinct party of their own. Other parties have been single-issue cause groups. Genuine independents have also been elected in particular states, and in 2022 the Teal Independents, which are discussed later in this chapter, swelled this vote share.

Turning to seats outcomes (Figure 5.7), they have clearly followed the over-time pattern of voters' behaviours (in Figure 5.6), as we would expect with a PR system. However, in six member STV seats, the formal 'quota' of votes that a party must achieve in order to secure a seat is still 1/(6 + 1), which is 14 per cent. This relatively high level has helped the largest parties at the expense of the smallest ones (who are eliminated early on from the STV counting process). In fact, senators can be elected with much lower levels of initial support than the formal quota, especially where they attract a lot of second or third preferences from voters for other parties.

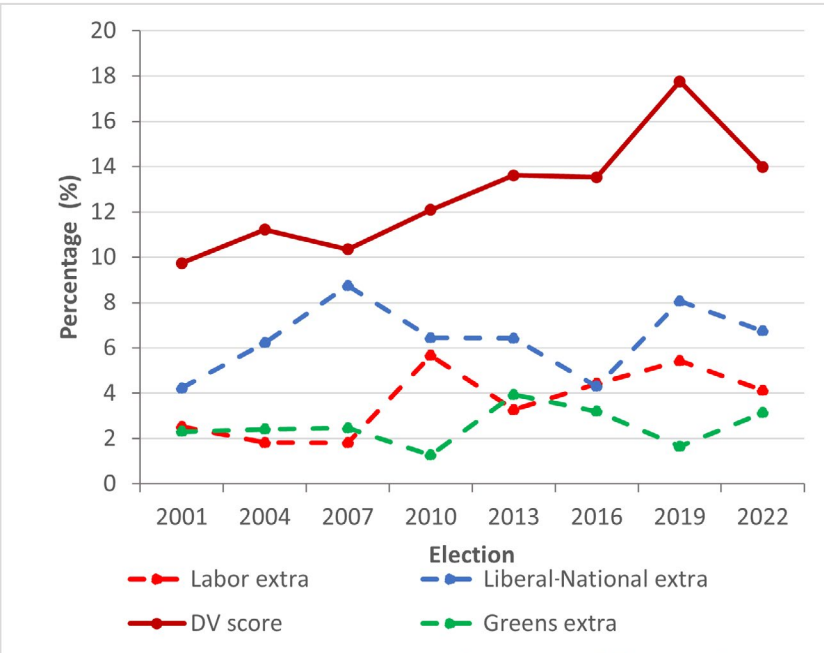
Of the top two parties, the Liberal-National Coalition have enjoyed the most 'bonus seats' success (Figure 5.7). However, they only gained one (narrow) single-party majority (in 2004) and a close miss (in 2019) – on both occasions they needed senators from smaller parties on the centre right to back them to pass new laws. Since 2000 Labor has never got a Senate majority on its own, and most recently has flatlined on a third of the seats for four elections. However, with Greens support it won in 2010, was almost there in 2007 and controlled exactly half the chamber (without a majority) in 2022. The top two parties' share of Senate seats declined somewhat, from 88 per cent in 2004 to 75 per cent by 2022. The Greens regularly won an eighth of seats from 2010 to 2019, enjoying a slight seats bonus, which persisted in 2022. By contrast, all other, smaller parties have tended to be under-represented in terms of senators compared to their national vote share – piling up votes across the states, but not winning seats. One exception was the double dissolution election of 2016, when the larger numbers of 12 seats being contested per state lowered the formal quota needed for parties to win seats under STV to a 13th of the vote (under 8 per cent) and less than that in practice.

How fair are the upper house elections?

Knowing that the Senate is elected by a PR system in multi-seat state-wide elections, we might expect that the deviation from proportionality score would be much lower than it is in the House elections. However, Figure 5.8 shows that this is only partially the case. The Senate's DV score has been 14 per cent or more for the last four elections. This is less than the recent House numbers (above 20 per cent), but it is still a relatively high score in international terms and well above those in most European countries with PR systems. There are several reasons for this. First, a larger number of voters fragment their Senate first-preference votes across smaller parties with little chance of winning seats – creating gains that can be mopped up in bonus seats by the top two parties and the Greens, as Figure 5.8 shows. For any electoral system in the world the level of votes for tiny parties defines the lowest level that the DV score can go to. Second, the six-seat competitions at state level cannot easily be accurate because the number of seats available is limited. Indeed, in most states, if you were to calculate a DV score for the state only, it would have been above 20 per cent in 2022. Third, the same biases in representation in Figure 5.8 apply in almost all of Australia, so that there is little scope for patterns in different state results to offset each other.

In some other countries (like Spain) high DV scores can be created in PR systems by malapportionment – that is, seats themselves being distributed unfairly between areas. And of course, in Australia the upper house seats are very unfairly distributed, with large and tiny states each getting the same 12 senators. However, in recent history, this malapportionment has actually mitigated and not accentuated the quite high Senate DV scores – for example, the Greens' under-representation in senators for large population states like NSW and Victoria has been offset by their winning more seats in smaller states like Tasmania. Of course, this is only true in terms of party labels, since a party's presence in one state may not compensate their voters who go unrepresented in other states, and state parties themselves differ somewhat in their policy priorities.

Figure 5.8: Deviation from proportionality and the levels of over-representation of the top three parties in Senate elections, 2001–2022



Source: Computed by authors from AEC (2023a).

Note: The top line shows the DV score. The dashed line second from the top shows Liberal-National over-representation in terms of seats percentage compared to its primary votes percentage; the bottom two dashed lines show this for Labor and the Greens. Taken together these 'seats bonuses' account for the DV scores, with all seats deficits accruing to third or lower-ranked parties.

Nonetheless some recent commentators have suggested that Senate elections are 'fairer' than those for the House:

> *In the most recent House of Representatives election* [2019 then]*, the Coalition and Labor together received 75 per cent of the vote but 96 per cent of the seats. The Greens received 10 per cent of the vote but 1 per cent of the seats, and independents and minor parties received 15 per cent of the vote and 3 per cent of the seats. By contrast, the Coalition and Labor received 67 per cent of the vote in the last two Senate elections but hold 80 per cent of the seats in the Senate. The Greens received 10 per cent of the vote but hold 15 per cent of the seats, and other minor parties and independents received 23 per cent of the vote but hold 5 per cent of the seats. (***Browne and Oquist, 2021***, p.32)*

Looking beyond the federal level, four other Australian state upper houses, called Legislative Councils (LCs), are smaller bodies than the Senate, ranging in size from 15 members in Tasmania to 42 members in NSW. Four states also use STV voting (albeit with some small variations), either with all members elected every four years (in Victoria and from 2025 in Western Australia) or with half of members elected at a time and serving for eight years. Tasmania elects LC members by halves, but using the AV system in single-member districts. In NSW and Western Australia (from 2025) whole-state elections are for very large districts (22 and 37 seats respectively) – ones where almost any party (no matter how small) will win representation under STV. In South Australia, 11 members at a time are chosen (implying a formal quota of 8 per cent), but Victoria uses 5 member seats with a high quota of 17 per cent (favoring the two largest parties).

Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis

Current strengths	Current weaknesses
Australia's electoral arrangements are balanced and allow for the expression of different benefits. Having a majoritarian electoral system in the House of Representatives and PR in the Senate (using STV) has combined the strengths of both types of electoral system in one design. AV (mostly) produces clear majorities in the House that help simplify and increase government accountability to voters. PR for the Senate means a lower overall likelihood of the government having a majority in the review chamber – thereby putting in place valuable extra checks and balances on government policy-making.	The majoritarian AV system design in the House of Representatives leads to markedly disproportional electoral outcomes, advantaging the top two parties at the expense of all other parties and independents. It also serves to discourage new entrants, even with multiple preferences that avoid 'wasted votes' from people backing them. Critics also argue that by making Senate majorities elusive or narrow, STV makes it harder for the government to pass controversial legislation, even when changes are evidently needed or demanded by the public.

The electoral importance of voters' and MPs' party loyalties, especially for politicians in the top two parties, has helped governments in the lower house to limit the extent of any 'pork barrel' politics to meet the demands of individual MPs. However, critics argue that it has allowed overly strong executive actions to develop unpunished, as with the 'sports rort' and 'robodebt' controversies at the time of the 2019 elections (see Chapters 13 and 14).	Critics argue that the small party senators have often become the marginal 'veto players' who are crucial for many controversial legislation votes. Ministers have regularly had to buy off the agreement of these individuals or small or regionally specific parties, by making 'pork barrel' concessions to specific state interests.
Australia has a short electoral cycle of three years (see later in this chapter). Therefore, citizens have more frequent opportunities to have their say in elections and they can more quickly vote out governments they are unhappy with.	Short election cycles mean a government has a very limited window of perhaps two years in which to tackle 'hard' policy choices before campaigning in earnest resumes. Critics argue that semi-permanent campaigning makes it more difficult to do long-term policy-making. It also makes it harder for citizens to evaluate the performance of governments.
The prime minister (PM) can call the election at an exact time of their choosing. But in practice this is limited by the short election term (plus factors like holiday periods). This power nonetheless provides a valuable if limited counter-vailing influence to some of the inherent difficulties for incumbents of governing in a public-interested way.	Giving PMs discretion on the precise election data has advantaged incumbents, while also creating uncertainty for opposition parties about the timing of elections. The power may accentuate the political-business cycle temptation to 'rig' policies to work at their best in a planned election window in short-term ways that boost the governing party's chances but may be sub-optimal for the national interest.
A key role of parties is to recruit new talent for political life. The local scale of campaigning for House elections (and their frequency) has both reduced the barriers to new people gaining political experience and cut the costs of getting involved.	Near-continuous campaigning for elections means that the most common pathway into a parliamentary career is to begin by working as a political staffer for a major party, and then to transition to standing as a candidate to be an MP (see Chapter 6). This professionalisation of politics has made MPs less diverse and created more of a disconnect between legislators and their communities.
Cross-national evidence shows that single-member electoral districts inhibit the chances of women being selected as parties' candidates in winnable seats. In recent decades there has been some increase in women's representation in the House, notably at the 2022 election with the impact of the Teal Independents (see later in this chapter). By contrast, competing for votes in multi-member seats has fostered women's representation. In 2022 the Senate became more than 50 per cent female for the first time. Labor's voluntary party quotas have been a key factor in increasing women's representation both there and in the House of Representatives.	Single-member districts for electing MPs, plus party selectorates' pro-male biases, have meant that women's representation was still only 31 per cent in the House of Representatives in 2022, and has lagged far behind parity for decades. In international rankings, Australia slipped to 58th in terms of the share of women parliamentarians (**Hough, 2022**; **Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2021**).

Australian elections are conducted with high integrity overall (**Karp et al., 2017**; **Mackerras, 2022**), thanks to the professional and non-partisan management of elections by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) and state equivalents. The public largely trust public services to deliver free and fair elections.	Two key weaknesses for electoral integrity in Australia include biased press media coverage (**Finkelstein, 2012;** Young, 2011) (see Chapter 8) and only partly regulated campaign finance (Cameron and Wynter, 2018; **Centre for Public Integrity, 2020**) (and see Chapter 7). Occasionally serious wobbles occur in bipartisanship over how elections are conducted (**Ransley, 2021**). Polls show that citizens are concerned about possible hidden or disproportionate influence arising from large-sum money and political finance donations by firms involved with politics – such as property companies (**Karp, Knaus and Evershed, 2020**).
Most of the Australian population have cared who wins elections and have believed that who people vote for can make a big difference to their lives.	Despite overall high confidence in the electoral process itself, long-term data shows that many citizens have become more distrustful of politicians and more dissatisfied over time with the performance of democracy in Australia.
Future opportunities	**Future threats**
Following increased immigration to Australia from Asian countries, increasing ethnic diversity is likely to be better recognised in future election candidates and successes, especially in urban House seats.	The momentum for representation of First Nations peoples has remained contested between the top two parties. Since the 2023 referendum for the Voice failed to pass (see Chapter 4), their isolation from most electoral politics will likely not decrease.
The period of greater partisan convergence in policy stances during the COVID-19 pandemic increased public trust in government (**Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2022**). 'Fringe' candidates and movements have failed to win seats, showing that Australia has relatively few problems of increasing polarisation of 'mainstream' party voters, such as that found in the USA.	

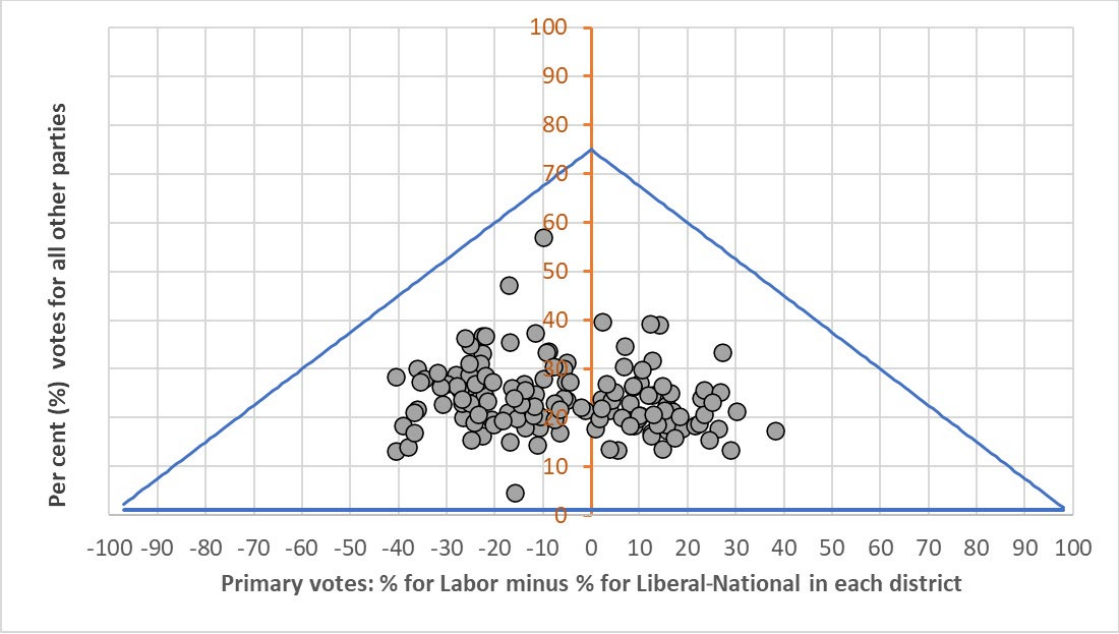
The rest of this chapter looks at three issues with federal elections in more detail: the quality of representation and citizens' political engagement, the overall integrity of election processes, and the effects of Australia's rapid (federal) electoral cycle.

The quality of representation and citizen's political engagement

So far, the analysis in this chapter has only focused on national data, which inherently averages across the electoral results of the electoral districts for House elections (or states for the Senate). How people see their party doing nationally matters a lot to voters, in particular whether it is apparently treated fairly or not in terms of seats for votes. But so does what happens in their own local area.

One way to capture the variations across districts is shown in Figure 5.9, called a 'crown diagram'. In this case, the blue outline shows the competition space for eight parties because the average number of parties per seat in the 2022 election was 7.6. With eight parties competing, the result must lie within this space – in fact, the smallest number of parties contesting a district in 2022 was 4 and the largest number was 16, but we cannot draw all these competition spaces here, and so the blue triangle is the best we can do. On the horizontal axis, we chart the percentage vote for the first-preference vote of the largest party nationally (Labor) at district level, minus the percentage first-preference vote for the Liberal-National Coalition (the second ranked party). The diagram covers all the seats (138 out of 153) where these were the

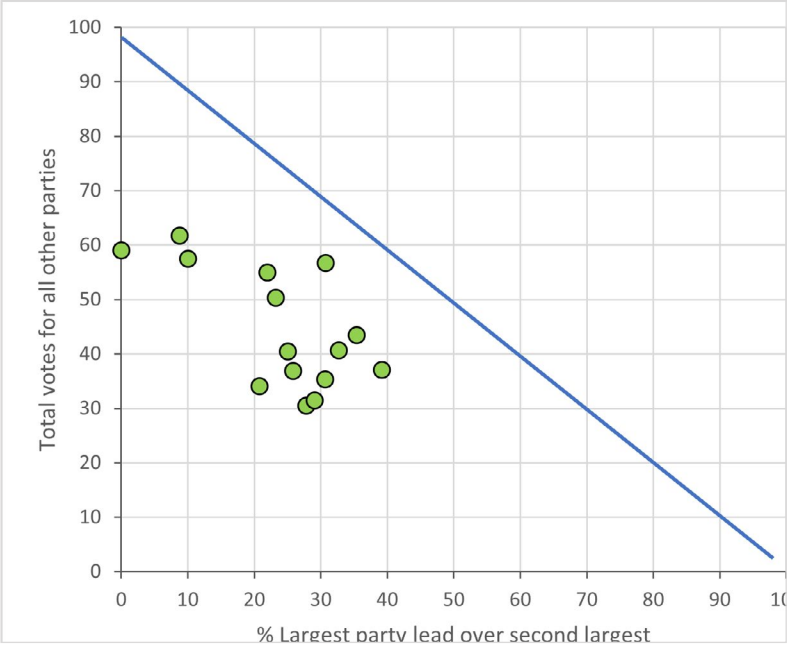
Figure 5.9: A 'crown diagram' view of the 2022 first-preference vote patterns across parties for the House of Representatives in the 138 districts where Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition were the top two parties



*Source: Computed by the author using data from division results at AEC (**2022**).*

Notes: The horizontal axis shows the Labor lead (in per cent) over the Liberal-National Coalition at district level, with Labor ahead for positive results and behind for negative results. The vertical axis shows the percentage total vote for all third or lower-ranked parties. The circles show the outcomes for individual districts. The triangular outline shows the feasible competition space for eight-party competition – all possible results must lie within this area.

Figure 5.10: The patterning of seats in the 15 districts where one or both of the top two parties (either P1 or P2) in first-preference votes was not Labor or Liberal-National Coalition



Source: Compiled by the author using data from division results at AEC (2022).

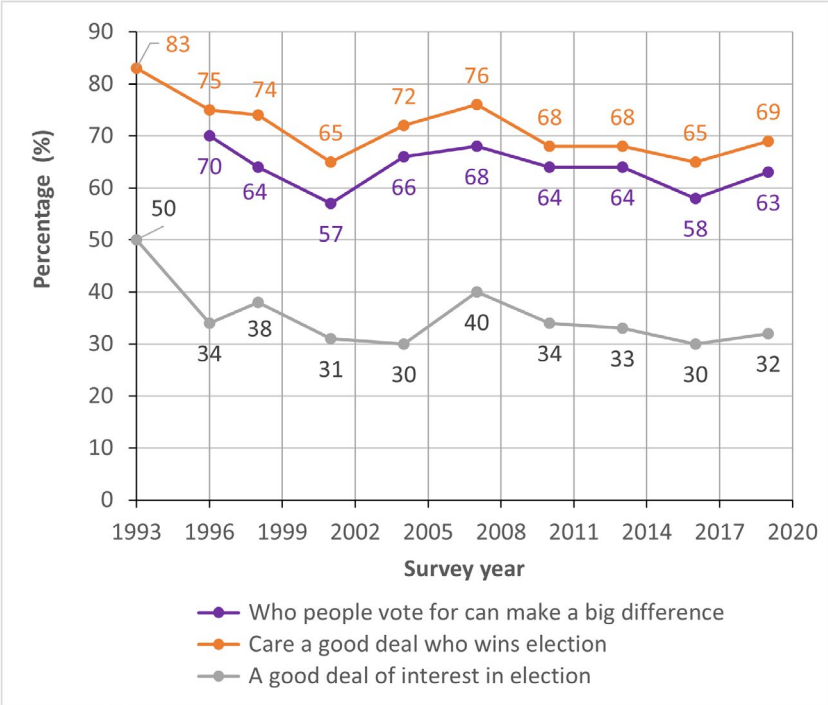
Notes: The horizontal axis here shows the percentage lead of the largest party (P1) in first-preference votes over those for the second-ranked party (P2). The vertical axis shows the percentage total vote for all third or lower-ranked parties. The circles show the outcomes for individual districts. The space below the diagonal line shows the feasible competition space for eight-party competition in this representation – all possible results must lie within this area.

top two parties. On the right-hand side of the diagram, with positive scores, Labor was ahead in a district; on the left, with negative scores, the Liberal-National Coalition was beating it locally. But the 2022 contest was emphatically a multi-party one, and so the vertical axis in Figure 5.9 shows the combined votes for all other parties in each district – the higher up the score from bottom to top that a district's circle is situated, the more third, fourth and other parties won votes there.

The pattern in Figure 5.9 shows that the large majority of local results in 2022 fell in the middle of the diagram, the zone where no single party wins an overall majority of the votes. There were considerably more seats where the Liberal-National Coalition came top on first preferences, on the right of the diagram, with some seats having large gaps (over 30 percentage points) between the Liberal-National Coalition and Labor. In some seats the Coalition candidate actually won a majority of first-preference votes and so was elected straightaway, without any further need to redistribute votes between parties. By contrast, Labor had very few safe seats where it was well ahead of the Liberal-National Coalition by 30 points or more, and no seats where it won a majority of the first-preference votes. This situation reflects Labor's dependence on transfers of voters' second or subsequent preferences to it in order to achieve a narrow majority of seats. The district outcomes are also well inside the competition space for eight-party contests, and relatively far from the top boundaries shown.

Figure 5.9 also shows that in 2022 the total votes for the non-top-two parties (those that were ranked third, fourth, etc.) averaged 20 per cent. In those seats where Labor and the Liberal-National Coalition formed one of the top two parties, the smaller parties' primary votes were never lower than 12 per cent; they ranged up over 30 per cent in a few Labor seats and far more in some districts that the Liberal-National Coalition held. The five uppermost circles in Figure 5.9 show seats where more voters backed the ensemble of smaller parties competing than

Figure 5.11: Respondents' interest in elections and beliefs about political efficacy, in Australian Election Study surveys, 2001–2019



Source: Compiled by author using data from **Cameron and McAllister (2019).**

Note: 'Who people vote for can make a big difference' shows the percentage of respondents that selected 1 or 2 on a scale of 1–5, where 1 is 'Who people vote for can make a big difference' and 5 is 'Who people vote for won't make any difference'. Unfortunately, these questions were not asked at the 2022 federal election – see **Cameron et al. (2022).**

the top two parties. So multi-party competition was clearly an important feature of the 2022 election. These local outcomes (and especially Labor's apparently weaker position here in first-preference votes than the Liberal-National Coalition) also illustrate the importance of AV's two-party preferred vote, which Labor went on to win nationally and in half of all seats in 2022.

In addition, however, there were 15 seats in 2022 where an independent, the Greens or another smaller party (like Katter and Xenophon in their 'home' districts), succeeded in becoming either the first-ranked party (P1) or the second-ranked party (P2) locally in terms of their first-preference votes. In Figure 5.10, the horizontal axis shows the percentage of P1 votes minus those for P2 – and again all the results come from areas where the largest P1 party's lead was less than 40 per cent. As was to be expected, given how these cases came to be charted separately, the total vote for smaller parties shown on the vertical axis is higher here, never less than 30 per cent and in some cases near to or above 60 per cent.

Voters whose party 'loses' the election nationally may often be disappointed, but if their vote contributed to a local win for either their first-preference party or a party they supported in the TPP vote, this might compensate a good deal for an adverse national result. AV ensures that a maximum number of Australian voters can be assured that their preferences shaped their local outcome, either by forming part of the winning TPP majority or by providing the TPP runner-up with a vote.

How strongly felt are later preferences in voters' utility functions? Is a late-preference choice as important to them as a first-preference vote? There is not much data on this, and historically political scientists have relied on asking voters if they 'identify' with a party – a rather controversial and disputed notion (Bergman, Tran and Yates, 2019) – or, more recently, just

whether in general they 'prefer' one party. In 2022 the Australian Election Study found that 30 per cent of their survey respondents preferred the Liberal-National Coalition, 28 per cent Labor, 10 per cent the Greens and fully 24 per cent no party (**Cameron et al., 2022,** Figure 3.1). This might suggest that some later vote transfers are not necessarily deeply felt or thought through.

A final battery of questions in the Australian Election Study surveys asked in a consistent way over decades whether their respondents thought that voting makes a 'big difference', or whether respondents 'cared a good deal' about election results or had a 'a good deal of interest' in the election outcome. These are rather vague questions and so people could perhaps answer them in lots of different ways, but the questions have been consistently worded and administered. Figure 5.11 shows that in this century the patterns of responses have been pretty stable over time, with over two-thirds of respondents saying that they cared about the election outcome, and fluctuations in this measure tracking closely the somewhat lower level of respondents endorsing the statement that 'who people vote for can make a difference'. The proportion of survey respondents who said they had 'a good deal of interest' in the elections has been much lower, and has been just a third for the last decade. In Figure 5.11 a few pre-21st century results for these questions are also included, to show that current levels on all three indices are appreciably lower than those reached in the 1990s, something of a golden era for democratic satisfaction in Australia.

The Teal Independents

The change of government after almost nine years of conservative rule and three Liberal PMs was the big story of the 2022 election. But the second key development was that 16 'crossbench' MPs were elected to the House of Representatives in 2022: 6 women independents dubbed 'Teal' to signify their blue-green credentials, 4 Greens, and a handful of candidates winning on their local reputations as small-party MPs or other independents. The Teal wins were part of a well-organised campaign, contesting a wider range of seats and with funding support secured by the Climate 200 campaigns guru Simon Holmes à Court. All of them occurred in 'blue-ribbon' Liberal seats and reflected the apparent public indifference of the Liberals and successive PMs (Tony Abbott and Scott Morrison in particular) to a range of women's issues that soared in prominence after the 'Me Too' movement and allegations of misogynistic behaviour by (mainly Liberal) politicians. One consequence was that '[a] gap between men and women backing the coalition [that had] opened up in 2019 … was reduced but still there in 2022, with 39 per cent of men backing them but only 32 per cent of women' (**Cameron et al., 2022**, Figure 5.2).

The Teal candidates were generally centre-right Liberal women (although there were some men also) who left their party to campaign on greater and quicker response to environmental issues and climate change and on taking women's issues seriously. By standing in apparently very secure Liberal seats, they aimed both to detach some moderate Liberal voters to back them and to convince centre and left voters that a broader coalition could win in right-of-centre seats, because

Figure 5.12: Among 2022 voters giving a first preference to the Teal Independents, which parties had they backed in the 2019 election?

2019 vote	Per cent
Labor	31
Greens	24
Other	23
Coalition	18
Too young, not eligible	4
Total	*100*

*Source: Cameron et al. (**2022**, Figure 3.2).*

otherwise even dissatisfied moderate Liberal voters would stay party-loyal and not back Labor or the Greens in such seats.

A good deal of media commentary after the election focused on the Teals' successes in attracting former Liberal voters. But in fact, such people were always likely to form only a minority of the Teal voters. Figure 5.12 shows that less than one in five Teal 2022 voters came from 2019 Liberal voters, and well over half from Labor and the Greens. There are some difficulties here, because the Australian Election Study sample of Teal supporters was not a large one and the analysis relies on recalled votes (which voters may 'reconstruct' or mis-remember). Yet the close match of Figure 5.12 with the Teals' intelligent campaign strategies and the targeted areas where they succeeded both suggest that this data should be taken seriously (**Cameron et al., 2022**, p.18).

How far the Teal phenomenon is indicative of a new ratcheting up of what Cameron et al. (**2022**) term 'partisan dealignment' remains to be seen, especially as in other 2022–2023 state elections held in Victoria and NWS similar Teal campaigns did not produce wins, despite taking place in smaller seats. In NSW, the Teals were perhaps disadvantaged by the state's different variant of AV, which allows voters to indicate some preferences only, rather than requiring voters to number all candidates (as federal AV does). In Victoria, they were at a funding disadvantage and were competing against an incumbent Labor government, not Liberal ministers (see Chapter 18). It may be that the Teal moment will turn out to be another 'surge' quasi-party that has problems sustaining itself between elections or carrying over victory in one political conjuncture into different future situations, for example with growing Liberal votes. Alternatively, given the Liberals' move to the right under the leadership of Peter Dutton, the Teals may be able to consolidate their local electoral support and extend their appeal to new areas, in the process achieving a lasting diversification of party competition (see Chapter 6).

Electoral integrity

One of the most disturbing trends in 'backsliding' democracies like the USA and Hungary has been a shift by many politicians (especially on the right) to voter suppression tactics against their opponents' voter groups or areas, using a series of micro-institution changes to restrict who can vote and how much difficulty they face in doing so (**Dunleavy, 2021**). If all else fails, the areas in which elections can take place can also be 'gerrymandered' to create artificial malapportionment between opposition parties' votes and seats. Sustained action on these lines in the USA has been missed by political scientists placing too much trust in a few objective indices of election performance (for example, Little and Meng, 2023). However, rigging elections in these ways has become impossible in Australia, because non-partisan electoral commissions control elections districting and voting processes at the federal and state levels. A proposal by PM Morrison and Liberal ministers to increase the requirements for voters to identify themselves raised some suspicions of potential partisan voter suppression tactics, but it was abandoned in 2021 (**Miller, 2021**). However, in the past severe malapportionment to favor the Liberal-National Coalition by over-representing rural areas persisted in some state elections, like Queensland and South Australia, into the 1970s (see chapters 19 and 20).

At federal level the AEC (**2021**) has operated on the primary requirement that federal House districts should be equalised as far as possible. This has meant that the middle majority of

seats (those falling between the upper and lower quartiles) had electorates from just below 110,000 to just above 120,000 in 2022 (see the middle column in Figure 5.13), with the result that the majority of MPs in 2022 were chosen by 96,000 to 106,000 voters each (the last column). Votes cast in the largest seats were only 10,000 above the upper quartile number. However, the AEC recognised a need for a few large and very scantily populated or inaccessible areas to be much smaller than average seat sizes, with four seats in the Northern Territory and Tasmania having electorates of below 80,000, well below the lower quartile level.

These variations have been accepted by all parties as legitimate, however, and all the other operations of the AEC have been well regarded and attracted consensus agreement. A study using a large international group of expert political scientists has also rated the integrity of most aspects of Australia's elections process very highly and mostly on a par with the best international comparator democracies, as Figure 5.14 shows. However, the following three aspects were scored poorly by experts:

Figure 5.13: The distribution of federal electoral district sizes in 2022

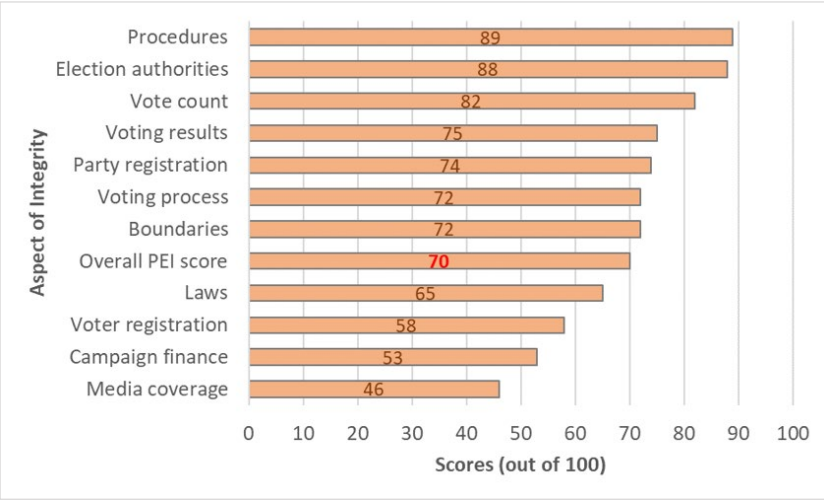
Indicator	In districts	
	Size of electorates	Votes cast in 2022
Maximum	133,500	116,220
Upper quartile	121,360	105,640
Median size	114,390	100,910
Mean size	*114,100*	*99,950*
Lower quartile	109,140	96,140
Minimum	71,890	51,010

*Source: Computed from AEC (**2023b**).*

Notes: A quarter of all seats lie above the upper quartile, between the upper quartile and the median, between the median and the lower quartile, and below the lower quartile. The median is the district that is exactly halfway down the size list. The mean is given by: total population divided by number of seats. All numbers are rounded to the nearest 10.

- Voter registration, where processes are relatively unmodernised and run by the states.
- Campaign finance, where at both federal and state levels incumbent politicians from the top two parties have been reluctant to restrict the maximum sizes of donations and keen to raise the minimum sizes at which declaring donations becomes compulsory (**Centre for Public Integrity, 2020**; and see Chapters 6 and 7).

Figure 5.14: Experts' perceptions of electoral integrity in Australia as scores out of 100 (in 2017)



*Source: Compiled by the authors from data in Norris, Wynter and Cameron (**2018**).*

Notes: Figure 5.14 shows the Perceptions of Electoral Integrity (PEI) expert survey scores across 11 dimensions of electoral integrity. Estimates are on a scale from 0–100, where higher scores indicate higher levels of integrity. Very high: 70+; high: 60–69; moderate: 50–59; low: 40–49; very low: <40.

- Worst of all, as shown in Figure 5.14, is the rating of the role of the media in Australian elections – mainly due to the heavy partisan imbalance in the press favouring the Liberal-National Coalition and the virulence and directness of right-wing press campaigns.

Additionally, in 2019 the incumbent federal ministers 'played' government advertising on Liberal-National Coalition talking points right down to the wire, before the PM finally announced the election date (and the purdah on public advertising came into force) at short notice. This experience was not repeated in 2022.

The federal electoral cycle

In the history of democratic reforms, shortening the term of elected representatives has been a characteristic demand of the most radical reformers, but one rather rarely implemented, albeit with some exceptions. In 1789 the USA constitutional founding fathers set up Congressional elections for their entire lower house every two years (reflecting their strong anti-monarchism). The English Chartist mass movement in the early 19th century demanded annual parliamentary elections, but UK political elites retained the country's familiar five-year maximum parliamentary terms. In all the Australian states and territories, elections for the lower house must now occur every four years. Around the world, 90 per cent of countries hold elections every four or five years (**Pickering, 2016**). Thus, three-year federal elections are short terms for a parliament and an executive dependent on it.

In addition, the federal PM can pick the precise date for an election, and premiers regularly go to the polls before 36 months have passed if there seems to be a partisan advantage in doing so. From 1990 to 2013, the average House term was actually 32 months (**Pickering, 2016**). Half-Senate elections normally coincide with every election for the House of Representatives, but a PM can also choose to precipitate a double-dissolution election for all Senate seats at once, as Abbot did in 2016. Senators normally serve up to six-year terms.

Critics of three-year House terms argue that they induce election fatigue and create unnecessary expense (**Rhodes, 2017**). Perhaps more serious criticisms claim that they add to government costs and accentuate chronic political short-termism in Australia. Governing elites repeatedly 'kick into the long grass' troublesome or potentially unpopular decisions that nonetheless may have to be made at some point in the national interest (see Chapter 15). Especially if the partisan control of government or the PM changes at an election, then no sooner has a new set of ministers come to power and put through perhaps a year's or 18 months' worth of new legislation than they must start scanning the polls and anticipating the next election as the 'long campaign period' begins. And six months before the likely next election date (that is, no more than 26 to 30 months into a term), a blanket disinclination to push through deeply contested or difficult laws or executive actions may set in. In the formal election period itself, the rules around civil service purdah mean no new policy announcements are made.

Since three-year terms are specifically included in the Australian Constitution, however, they are very hard to change. It would require a referendum to do so, and probably bipartisan support for a change, which has never been forthcoming. In 1988 the Hawke Labor government proposed fixed four-year terms for both the House and the Senate in a national referendum held without bipartisan support from the Liberal-National Coalition. Only a third of electors backed it

(Galligan, 1990, p.498), adding to three previous referendum rejections by voters since 1970 (in 1974, 1977 and 1984). Perhaps more voters might have backed the House proposal in 1988 had it not been linked to changes also for the Senate (**Bennett, 2000**). Because Senate and House elections have been held on the same day, a four-year House term (as in the states) would also imply either lengthening senators' terms to eight years or perhaps reviving the 1988 proposal of four-year terms for the upper house as well.

Moving to fixed election times, removing the PM's ability to select the date has also been advocated as a way of stamping out the potential for months of games-playing by opportunistic PMs – who sometimes seek to mislead their rivals that they might go very early if the opinion polls look favourable. But defenders of the status quo suggest that in Westminster systems it helps PMs to combat the inherent difficulties of being an incumbent at elections if they can seek a new mandate to govern at a time of their choosing (**Bennett, 2000**). Some Australian states have settled on a mixed approach. Victoria and South Australia have maximum four-year parliaments, but also require a minimum of three years between elections, which eliminates premiers calling an election too early or too opportunistically (**Bennett, 2000**).

Conclusion

Compared with other liberal democracies (and especially Westminster system countries), Australia's unique electoral systems perform very well in getting citizens to communicate a great deal of information about their preferences in elections, and then counting these in sophisticated ways that ensure every vote can help shape the outcome, in both House and Senate elections, in different ways. Preferential (AV) systems have normally privileged the main parties, however, and national DV scores are high in the House and relatively high in the Senate – mainly because many voters disperse their support across multiple tiny parties or candidates. However, the success of the Teals in 2021 shows that past patterns can change, confirming the growth of 'party dealignment' detected by many observers since 2000. STV in the Senate helps independents and has been a major check on the legislative program of the federal government. Australian voters also get plenty of choice among three main established parties (Labor, the Liberal-National Coalition and the Greens) plus independents and smaller parties. Populist politics by new parties has remained a small phenomenon, before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, which some analysts argue has reduced populist policies' appeal cross-nationally (**Bennett Institute for Public Policy, 2022**), for a while.

Surprisingly, the past links between federal MPs and their constituents have not been all that strong (certainly far less than has been true of representatives in state lower houses). However, constituency linkages may well become more important because of the rise of independents and partisan dealignment, meaning that MPs will not be able to rely as much on long-run party loyalties and polarisations among their electors. In terms of social diversity, the representation of women and First Nations peoples improved significantly at the 2022 election. However, the Australian Parliament remains unrepresentative for Chinese Australians, Indian Australians (the fastest growing groups in the population) and in terms of age.

Note

1 We are most grateful to Professor Sarah Cameron of Griffith University for her advice on many election aspects. The analysis and opinions here are our responsibility alone.

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