

Australian democratic reforms that led the world

If we want people to really value Australian democracy, we need to recognize the 'glass half full' as well as the 'glass half empty'. If voters see nothing good in it, they may decide it's beyond repair, and either withdraw completely from political engagement or advocate non-democratic options. According to a 2012 Lowy Institute poll, only 60% of Australians considered democracy preferable to other forms of government.

*By world standards, Australian democracy rates very well, notwithstanding the many ways in which it needs to improve. (See: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy_Index.) It also had illustrious beginnings and was an early implementer of many reforms that have now become common round the world. The following are some of them, largely taken from the Judith Brett's excellent book, *From Secret Ballot to Democracy Sausage: How Australia Got Compulsory Voting*.*

1. **Votes for women:** Australia was the second country in the world, after New Zealand, to give women the vote. NZ did so in 1893, and Australia in 1902, though before Federation South Australia had given women the vote in 1894.
2. **Allowing women to stand for parliament:** South Australia was the first place in the world to allow this, in 1894, and it happened partly by accident. When the bill for female franchise was before parliament, those opposing it moved an amendment giving women the right to stand for parliament as well, thinking this idea was so absurd that even some of those favouring female franchise would vote against the bill given this amendment. However, their plan backfired, and the bill, with the amendment, was passed 31 votes to 14.
3. **Male franchise without property qualifications:** Property qualifications for men voting in the lower house were removed in Victoria in 1856, and the other Australian colonies soon after.
4. **The secret ballot:** Australia was not the first place to adopt the secret ballot – France, Belgium, Switzerland and many American states had it before us – but it was the first country to make it work effectively. In those times candidates supplied their own ballot papers (already filled in) and voters just chose one and stuffed it in the ballot box. But given these ballot papers' distinctive colours and designs, anyone watching could see who the voter had voted for. Victoria introduced the practice of having the *government* produce the ballot papers, as well as having booths within which voters could fill them in, in 1856, and the other colonies soon followed suit. These innovations attracted the interest of reformers overseas, and came to be known as the 'Australian ballot'. They were adopted in New Zealand in 1870, the UK in 1872 and later in Europe and North America. Prior to secret voting, voters openly declared who they were voting for, and employers, landlords or the government could threaten or punish them if they voted the 'wrong' way, or could bribe them to vote a certain way, often with alcohol. As a result polling stations were often sites of mass drunkenness and brawling.
5. **Elections managed by an impartial government agency:** From the 1850s William Boothby had initiated a raft of reforms as Provincial Returning Officer in South Australia: candidate nominations on paper; voting by ballot paper; no polling stations in licensed premises; governments – not candidates or voters – bearing the cost of elections; having returning officers as permanent government positions; administration of the elections by a central government agency; continuous updating of the electoral roles; and proactive efforts by this agency to have voter registration forms delivered by police and council clerks to those eligible to vote, based on

data supplied by the registrar of births, deaths and marriages. Post-federation, the 1902 Electoral Bill adopted Boothby's organisational model when creating a national agency to administer elections. Within this were permanent, salaried positions and defined job roles, and all its work was conducted impartially and away from the influence of politicians. It maintained the electoral role (starting with a massive voter enrolment drive in 1903), conducted elections, and amended seat boundaries as necessitated by population changes. Eventually there was just one electoral role used for both state and federal elections, but this was accepted by the states at different times, from Tasmania in 1908 to Queensland in 1991. Other reforms that even today are far from universal across the globe were: the right to vote in any booth in the electorate, absentee voting in any electorate, postal voting, and early voting.

6. **Saturday voting:** Australia introduced Saturday voting in 1911 to make it easier for voters to get to polling booths. The British, by contrast, vote on Thursdays and Americans on Tuesdays.
7. **Preferential voting:** Australia adopted preferential voting in 1918. It is only practised in about 8 other countries, and even then it's mostly only used in certain circumstances, such as local elections, or in certain parts of the country. While many people don't support preferential voting, I believe the advantages of it are as follows: it ensures that the winning candidate is the one selected by the majority of voters (out of the final two contenders); and it encourages small parties and independents to run, and ensures that, in doing so, they don't damage the chances of the parties or independents that are closest to them politically.
8. **Compulsory registration and voting:** Australia introduced compulsory voter registration in 1911, and compulsory voting in 1924. Again, this is unusual in the world; only 19 out of 166 democracies have compulsory voting, and only 9 of them strictly enforce it. Not everyone agrees with this measure either, but I believe its major benefit is as follows. The people who are most likely to *not* vote in a voluntary system are those who are most likely to need the protection and support of government, and to the extent that they don't vote the government is therefore less likely to support them. And it allows forces in society unsympathetic to these disadvantaged groups to actively discourage them from voting, particularly if these forces have partisan control of electoral processes, as they do in the US. As Barack Obama commented, if the US had the same system as Australia, 'it would completely change the political map in [the US] because the people who tend not to vote are young. They are lower income. They are skewed more heavily towards immigrant groups and minority groups.' He added that it would also counteract the power of money to determine elections (perhaps an overstatement but true to a great degree) and it would encourage lawmakers to make it easier to voter rather than harder. Given that only 58% of eligible voters voted in the last US presidential election, it could almost double the numbers voting there.