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Elections and the electoral system

THE FIRST ELECTION

The Constitution made specific provision for the first general election of the Commonwealth Parliament. The first Parliament was to be summoned to meet not later than six months after the establishment of the Commonwealth,¹ which occurred on 1 January 1901. The first general election was held on 29 and 30 March 1901,² and the Parliament was summoned and first met on 9 May 1901. Following the enactment of the Constitution on 9 July 1900 and before the election for the first Parliament,³ opportunity was given to the State Parliaments under the Constitution to make laws determining the divisions in each State for which Members of the House were to be chosen, and the number of Members to be chosen for each division up to the limits imposed by the Constitution. If a State failed to make a determination, the State was to be considered to be one electorate.⁴

The Constitution made further provision that, until the Parliament otherwise provided:

- the qualification of electors of Members of the House of Representatives be that which was prescribed by State laws;⁵ and
- the laws in force in each State relating to elections apply to elections of Members of the House of Representatives;⁶

being those laws applying to the more numerous House of Parliament of the State.

The first general election was conducted on the basis of State laws.⁷ The number of Members elected was 75, which was consistent with that prescribed by the Constitution.⁸ A conference of statisticians held early in 1900 determined the population of Australia as at the end of 1899 and initial representation was based on these statistics.

THE COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL ACT

State electoral laws ceased to have effect for the Federal Parliament when it passed its own legislation in 1902.⁹ This legislation and subsequent amendments were consolidated in 1918 and formed the basis of the Commonwealth's electoral law. The *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* has been substantially amended over the years. This chapter outlines the provisions applicable at the 2016 general election.¹⁰

1 Constitution, s. 5.

2 New South Wales, Victoria, Western Australia and Tasmania on 29 March 1901, and Queensland and South Australia on 30 March 1901.

3 *Quick and Garran*, p. 409.

4 Constitution, s. 29; South Australia and Tasmania each voted as one electorate.

5 Constitution, s. 30.

6 Constitution, s. 31.

7 At that time the only States where women were entitled to vote were South Australia and Western Australia.

8 Constitution, s. 26.

9 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1902*; *Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902*.

10 Comprehensive details of electoral procedures and election statistics are available from the Australian Electoral Commission and on the Commission's web site <www.aec.gov.au>. Historical coverage of election results is also contained in the *Parliamentary Handbook*.

Review of electoral arrangements

A Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform was established in the 33rd and 34th Parliaments. In each Parliament since then a Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters has been appointed. The standing committees have inquired into and reported on the conduct of each general election and related matters. As a result of the committees' reports a number of amendments have been made to the Commonwealth Electoral Act.

ELECTORS

Members of the House of Representatives are elected on the basis of universal adult franchise for citizens. This principle is based on the interpretation of constitutional provisions.¹¹ Elections are characterised by:

- adult suffrage;¹²
- secret ballot;¹³ and
- single vote.¹⁴

These features, together with the following innovations, make up the principal voting provisions which are currently followed in federal elections:

- **Compulsory registration** of voters since 1911. A roll of electors is kept for each electoral division and every eligible voter is required to enrol.¹⁵
- **Preferential voting system** since 1918.¹⁶ Up until 1918 the first-past-the-post system was used at federal elections.
- **Compulsory voting** became effective at the 1925 general election.¹⁷ It is the duty of every elector to vote at each election.¹⁸
- **Extension of franchise** to Aboriginal people on a restricted basis since the 1949 general election,¹⁹ to all Aboriginal people since the 1963 general election,²⁰ and to persons 18 years of age and over since 1973.²¹

In summary, persons entitled to enrol and to vote at federal elections (subject to certain disqualifications) are all persons who have attained 18 years of age and who are Australian citizens. British subjects whose names were on the electoral roll on 25 January 1984 are also entitled to be enrolled and vote. Enrolment may be claimed by 16 year olds but they are not entitled to vote until they turn 18.²² Persons who have applied for

11 Constitution, ss. 30, 41.

12 Originally excluding Aboriginal people (other than those already enrolled in a State in 1902). The passage of the 1902 Act made Australia the first country to give women (with the exception of Aboriginal women in some States) both the right to vote and the right to stand for election in the national Parliament. New Zealand had given women the right to vote, but not stand for election, in 1893. In some Australian States at Federation women already had the vote (South Australia from 1895, Western Australia from 1899), and were thus able to vote in the first federal election in 1901.

13 The main innovation of the type of secret ballot which originated in Australia in the 1850s (and is still in some jurisdictions referred to as the 'Australian ballot') was the government printed ballot paper listing all eligible candidates, combined with the marking of the paper in private. Earlier 'secret' systems, where used (notably in France and some States of the United States), had involved ballot papers, perhaps supplied by candidates or interested parties, being brought to the poll by the voter.

14 Plural voting is precluded by the Constitution, s. 30.

15 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 82, 101.

16 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 240.

17 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1924*.

18 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 245. Failure to vote at an election is an offence. An elector who fails to vote can avoid the matter going to court by providing 'a valid and sufficient reason' or paying a \$20 penalty to the Electoral Commission.

19 Those entitled to State enrolment, or members or former members of the Defence Force. *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1949*.

20 Amending legislation passed in 1962 in response to recommendations by the Select Committee on Voting Rights of Aborigines, H of R 1 (1961).

21 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 93. Change effective for 1973 Parramatta by-election and 1974 general election (previously age 21).

22 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 93, 100.

Australian citizenship may also apply for provisional enrolment which takes effect on the granting of citizenship.²³

A person who is the holder of a temporary visa for the purposes of the Migration Act, or a person who is an unlawful non-citizen under that Act, is not entitled to enrolment. A person who, being of unsound mind, is incapable of understanding the nature and significance of enrolment and voting, or who has been convicted of treason or treachery and has not been pardoned, or who is serving a sentence of three years or longer for an offence against the law of the Commonwealth or of a State or Territory, is not entitled to enrolment or to retain enrolment.²⁴ The Registrar-General (of births, deaths and marriages) and the Controller-General of Prisons, or their equivalents, in each State and Territory are required to provide to the appropriate electoral authorities details of relevant deaths and convictions, as the case may be.²⁵

Electors should normally be enrolled in the subdivision in which they live. Special provisions apply to enrolled persons leaving Australia but intending to return within six years,²⁶ itinerants,²⁷ prisoners,²⁸ and Members of Parliament. Senators may be enrolled in any subdivision in the State or Territory which they represent, and Members of the House of Representatives may be enrolled in any subdivision of the electoral division which they represent, even if they do not live in the division.²⁹

NUMBER OF MEMBERS

The Constitution determines the composition of the House of Representatives and provides that it shall consist of Members directly chosen by the people of the Commonwealth and that the number of Members representing the States shall be, as nearly as practicable, twice the number of Senators representing the States. The number of Members in each State shall be proportionate to the populations of the respective States. The manner in which the number is determined, although set down in the Constitution, was a matter in respect of which the Parliament could legislate, and it has subsequently done so.³⁰

A list showing the number of Members of the House of Representatives in each Parliament since 1901 is shown at Appendix 11.

²³ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 99A.

²⁴ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 93. The High Court has ruled that amendments to the Act to exclude all persons serving a sentence of imprisonment were invalid, being inconsistent with the system of representative democracy established by the Constitution, *Roach v. Electoral Commissioner* [2007] HCA 43.

²⁵ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 108, 109.

²⁶ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 94.

²⁷ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 96.

²⁸ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 96A.

²⁹ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 99(4).

³⁰ Constitution, s. 24; *Representation Act 1905* (repealed). The provisions are now in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act*—see ‘Determination of divisions’ at p. 89.

This table shows the representation of the States and Territories at the 2016 general election, and at the next general election following the redistribution of 31 August 2017.

	2016	<i>next election</i>
New South Wales	47	47
Victoria	37	38
Queensland	30	30
Western Australia	16	16
South Australia	11	10
Tasmania	5	5
Australian Capital Territory	2	3
Northern Territory	2	2
	<hr/> 150	<hr/> 151

Territorial representation

The Parliament may admit new States to the Commonwealth or establish new States, and may determine the extent of representation of new States in either House.³¹ The Parliament may also make laws for the government of any Commonwealth Territory and determine the extent and terms of representation of any such Territory in either House.³² The Parliament has determined that the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory shall be represented in both the House of Representatives and the Senate.³³

The Commonwealth Electoral Act provides for Territories to be represented in proportion to their populations, population quotas being determined in the same manner as for the original States, subject to provisos that:

- the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory each have at least one Member; and
- any other external Commonwealth Territory be entitled to separate representation only if its population exceeds one half of a quota; until so entitled the Territories of Cocos (Keeling) Islands and Christmas Island are included in an electoral division of the Northern Territory;³⁴ and the Territory of Norfolk Island is included in an electoral division of the Australian Capital Territory.³⁵

In 2004 the Commonwealth Electoral Act was amended to set aside a determination under section 48 of the Act which had specified one Member for the Northern Territory at the next election, and to provide that the prior determination (specifying two Members) should apply.³⁶ The amendments also made provision for the Electoral Commissioner to allow for the effect of statistical error in respect of the population count of the territory concerned, before making a determination resulting in a reduction in the representation of the Australian Capital Territory or the Northern Territory.³⁷

31 Constitution, s. 121.

32 Constitution, s. 122.

33 For a description of former provisions for the representation of the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory and limitations on Members representing the Territories in earlier years see pages 168–9 of the second edition.

34 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 56A (currently Lingiari).

35 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 56AA (currently Canberra, proposed to change to the new ACT electorate after the 2017 redistribution). The Territory of Jervis Bay is also included in an ACT electorate (currently Fenner).

36 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 48A, inserted by the *Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Representation in the House of Representatives) Act 2004*.

37 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 48.

The growth of the House

Appendix 11 shows the number of Members of the House of Representatives and the representation of each State and Territory for each Parliament since 1901. Significant variation in membership has occurred as follows:

- In 1949 the membership of the House increased from 75 to 123 following legislation increasing the number of Senators from six to 10 for each original State.³⁸
- In 1977 the High Court ruling in *McKellar's case* invalidated the formula then being used for allocating Members to the States in proportion to their populations,³⁹ and consequently the number of Members, which had reached 127 during 1974–75, was reduced to 124 for the ensuing Parliament.
- In 1984 the membership of the House increased from 125 to 148 following legislation increasing the number of Senators to 12 for each original State.⁴⁰
- Redistributions increased the number of Members to 150 from the 2001 general election.

In both 1949 and 1984 a major reason given for the enlargement of the House was the increase in the number of people to be represented.

TABLE 3.1 RATIO OF ELECTORS TO MEMBERS

<i>Year of election</i>	<i>Electors</i>	<i>Members</i>	<i>Average number of electors per Member</i>
1901	907 658	75	12 102
1946	4 744 017	75	63 254
1949	4 913 654	123	39 948
1983	9 373 580	125	74 989
1984	9 866 266	148	66 664
2001	12 636 631	150	84 244
2016	15 676 659	150	104 511

ELECTORAL DIVISIONS

Determination of divisions

The Constitution provides that:

- the House of Representatives shall be composed of Members directly chosen by the people of the Commonwealth; and
- the number of Members chosen in the several States shall be in proportion to the respective numbers of their people.⁴¹

These provisions, together, express the concept of equality of representation, the national concept and the democratic character of the House of Representatives.

³⁸ *Representation Act 1948*.

³⁹ *Attorney-General (NSW); Ex rel. McKellar v. Commonwealth* (1977) 139 CLR 527. The invalidated formula, introduced by the *Representation Act 1964*, had involved rounding up, instead of rounding to the nearest integer. In this ruling the High Court also upheld the validity of provisions of the *Representation Act 1973* which provided that the four Territory Senate places created in 1974 could not be included for the purpose of calculating the number of Members of the House under the 'nexus' provision of the Constitution.

⁴⁰ *Representation Act 1983*.

⁴¹ Constitution, s. 24; see also Ch. on 'Members'.

The Constitution, having provided for the determination of the number of Members and the manner in which they are chosen, also specified that, until the Parliament otherwise provided, the Parliament of each State could make laws to determine the divisions for the State. The Federal Parliament passed its own legislation in 1902 (*see* page 85). Electoral divisions are also commonly known as seats, electorates or constituencies.

In order to determine the number of Members for the States and Territories the Electoral Commissioner first ascertains a quota by dividing the population of the Commonwealth (excluding territorial populations) by twice the number of Senators for the States. The number of Members to be chosen for each State or Territory (other than Norfolk Island and the Jervis Bay Territory) is then determined by dividing the number of people of the State or Territory by the quota. If on such division there is a remainder greater than one half of a quota, an additional Member is chosen.⁴² This determination is subject to the constitutional requirement of there being a minimum of five Members for each of the original States⁴³ and the requirement of the Commonwealth Electoral Act that there be a minimum of one Member for each of the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory.⁴⁴

The Commonwealth Electoral Act provides that each State and the Australian Capital Territory, and the Northern Territory on becoming entitled to more than one Member, shall be distributed into electoral divisions equal in number to the number of Members of the House of Representatives to be chosen for the State or Territory, and one Member of the House of Representatives shall be chosen for each division.⁴⁵ These divisions are known as single-member constituencies. Multi-member constituencies, although allowed for in the Constitution, have not been used.⁴⁶

In order to determine these divisions, the Electoral Commissioner ascertains a quota of electors for each State and Territory by dividing the number of electors in the State or Territory by the number of Members to be chosen in that State or Territory.⁴⁷ The boundaries of each division are then determined by the State or Territory Redistribution Committee, as outlined below.

Because of Australia's uneven distribution of population, divisions vary greatly in area. In 2016 the largest division in terms of area was Durack in Western Australia (1.63 million square kilometres) and the smallest was Grayndler in New South Wales (32 square kilometres). The largest division by enrolled population was Canberra, Australian Capital Territory, with 144 391 electors; the smallest Lingiari, Northern Territory, with 65 752 electors.

42 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 48.

43 Constitution, s. 24.

44 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 48(2B). In addition, sections 48(2E) and (2F) prescribe a mechanism for taking account of the possible effects of estimation error on population figures, in such a way as to make it less likely that the Northern Territory or Australian Capital Territory will lose a Member as a result of a determination.

45 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 56, 57. The means of determining the number of Members is laid down in s. 48; *and see* Ch. on 'Members'.

46 Except at the first election when both South Australia and Tasmania each voted as one division.

47 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 65.

Redistribution

The Commonwealth Electoral Act provides for regular redistributions.⁴⁸ The Electoral Commission must direct a redistribution of a State or Territory:

- when changes in the distribution of population (ascertained during the thirteenth month of the life of each House of Representatives, if still continuing⁴⁹) require a change to the number of Members in a State or Territory;
- when more than one third of the divisions within a State deviate from the average divisional enrolment for the State by more than 10 per cent, and have done so for more than two months, or in the case of the Australian Capital Territory, when one division so deviates; or
- within 30 days of the expiration of a period of seven years since the previous redistribution, except that should the seven years expire during the last year of the life of a House of Representatives the redistribution is to commence within 30 days of the first meeting of the next House of Representatives.

Such provisions also apply to the Northern Territory by virtue of section 55A of the Commonwealth Electoral Act, and it is treated as a State for the purposes of redistribution.⁵⁰

To conduct a redistribution the Electoral Commission appoints a Redistribution Committee for the State or Territory, comprising:

- the Electoral Commissioner;
- the Australian Electoral Officer for the State or Territory (in the case of the ACT the senior Divisional Returning Officer);
- the Surveyor-General for the State or Territory or the Deputy Surveyor-General (or equivalent); and
- the Auditor-General for the State or Territory or the Deputy Auditor-General.

In circumstances where the appropriate State officials are not available, the places of the Surveyor-General and Auditor-General may be filled by senior employees of the Australian Public Service from the State or Territory nominated by the Governor-General.⁵¹

A quota of electors, ascertained by dividing the number of electors in the State or Territory by the number of Members,⁵² is the basis for the proposed redistribution. The estimated enrolment in a proposed division may not depart from this quota by more than 10 per cent. In making the proposed redistribution, the Redistribution Committee is required, as far as practicable, to endeavour to ensure that, three years and six months after the redistribution (or earlier time determined by the Electoral Commission),⁵³ the number of electors enrolled in each proposed electoral division in the State or Territory will be not less than 96.5% or more than 103.5% of the average divisional enrolment in the State or Territory. Subject to this requirement the Redistribution Committee shall give due consideration, in relation to each proposed electoral division, to:

48 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 59. The States having been distributed into divisions once are thereafter redistributed. The words 'distributed' and 'redistributed' are commonly used synonymously.

49 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 46.

50 The first redistribution of the Northern Territory to provide for two Members occurred in 2000.

51 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 60.

52 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 65.

53 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 63A.

- community of interests within the proposed electoral division, including economic, social and regional interests;
- means of communication and travel within the proposed electoral division;
- the physical features and area of the proposed electoral division; and
- the boundaries of existing divisions in the State or Territory.⁵⁴

Redistribution Committees are required to consider any suggestions and comments lodged with them pursuant to public advertisement in the Gazette and the press. A period is allowed for lodgement of suggestions. At the end of the lodgement period, the Redistribution Committee must make copies of all suggestions available for perusal at the relevant office of the Electoral Commission, and invite written comments on the suggestions. A further period is allowed for submission of comments.⁵⁵

Once the initial proposals are determined by the Redistribution Committee, maps showing the names and boundaries of each proposed division must be exhibited at every Electoral Commission office in the State or Territory. Copies of any suggestions or comments made to the committee, detailed descriptions of the proposed boundaries and the committee's reasons for its proposals must be made available for perusal at Electoral Commission offices.⁵⁶ A member of a Redistribution Committee may submit a statement of dissent to any proposal⁵⁷ and copies of any such statement must also be made available.

Maps of proposed divisions and the availability of other documents must be advertised publicly and written objections may be lodged.⁵⁸ Objections to proposed redistributions are considered by an 'augmented Electoral Commission', that is, the members of the Redistribution Committee concerned and the Chairperson and the non-judicial member of the Electoral Commission.⁵⁹ The augmented Electoral Commission must hold an inquiry into an objection unless it is of the opinion that the objection is frivolous or vexatious or is substantively the same as a submission previously made.⁶⁰ Objections are determined by a majority vote of the augmented Electoral Commission. A final determination of names and boundaries of divisions requires not only a majority vote of the augmented Electoral Commission, but an affirmative vote from at least two of its three members who are also members of the Australian Electoral Commission.⁶¹ If the findings of the augmented Electoral Commission, in its own opinion, are significantly different from the original Redistribution Committee proposals, further objections can be made and a second round of hearings occur. The resultant determinations are final and conclusive. They are not subject to appeal of any kind and cannot be challenged in any court.⁶²

Parliamentary procedure

Following determination relevant documents are forwarded to the Minister responsible, who must have them presented to each House within five sitting days of

54 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 66.

55 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 64.

56 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 68.

57 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 67.

58 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 69.

59 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 70.

60 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 72.

61 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 71(6).

62 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 77. The enrolment of new electors and changes to existing enrolments are implemented immediately following the determination of new boundaries. However, for the purpose of electing Members, the new boundaries do not come into effect until the next federal election.

receipt.⁶³ Under these procedures Parliament has no further role and has no opportunity to alter the determination in any way.⁶⁴

Limited redistribution

If writs are issued for a general election and the number of Members to be elected in a State or the Australian Capital Territory does not correspond to the existing number of electoral divisions, a so-called 'mini-redistribution' is conducted by the Electoral Commissioner and the Australian Electoral Officer for the State or Territory (the senior Divisional Returning Officer for the Australian Capital Territory).⁶⁵ To decrease or increase the number of divisions, pairs of contiguous divisions with the least number of electors are combined or pairs of contiguous divisions with the greatest number of electors are divided into three, as the case may be. Where two contiguous divisions are combined to form one, the new division carries the names of the divisions from which it was formed, arranged alphabetically and hyphenated. If two contiguous divisions are divided into three (which has not so far occurred), the names of the former divisions are given to two of the three; and the third new division carries the names of the two former divisions, arranged alphabetically and hyphenated.⁶⁶

Improper influence

It is an offence punishable by fine or imprisonment to seek to influence improperly members of a Redistribution Committee, members of an augmented Electoral Commission or a Redistribution Commissioner in the performance of their duties.⁶⁷

In 1978 a Minister's appointment was terminated following a finding by a Royal Commissioner that the Minister's action in seeking to influence Distribution Commissioners in relation to names of electoral divisions had constituted impropriety.⁶⁸

GENERAL ELECTIONS

The following constitutional provisions relate to a general election, that is, an election for all Members of the House of Representatives:

- The Governor-General may dissolve the House of Representatives.⁶⁹
- Every House of Representatives shall continue for three years from the first meeting of the House, and no longer, but may be sooner dissolved by the Governor-General.⁷⁰
- The Governor-General in Council may cause writs to be issued for general elections of Members of the House of Representatives.⁷¹
- After any general election the Parliament shall be summoned to meet not later than 30 days after the day appointed for the return of the writs.⁷²

63 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 75.

64 Before 1984, redistributions were subject to the approval, by resolution, of each House of the Parliament. The former provisions are described in early editions (4th edn, p. 88).

65 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 76. While the Northern Territory is treated as a State under these provisions, now that it has two Members (in accordance with s. 55A), s. 76A provides special arrangements.

66 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 76(10) and (12).

67 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 78.

68 'Matters in relation to electoral redistribution, Queensland 1977', *Report of the Royal Commission of Inquiry*, PP 263 (1978). The case is described in more detail in early editions (4th edn, p. 89).

69 Constitution, s. 5.

70 Constitution, s. 28.

71 Constitution, s. 32.

72 Constitution, s. 5.

A general election follows the dissolution of the House by the Governor-General,⁷³ or the expiration of the House by effluxion of time three years from its first meeting. The period between the first meeting and dissolution, called a Parliament, has varied between seven months (11th Parliament) and a period just short of the three year maximum term (18th and 27th Parliaments). The 3rd Parliament has been the only one to have expired by effluxion of time.⁷⁴ Notwithstanding the generality of the above:

- The Governor-General may dissolve both Houses simultaneously upon certain conditions having been met under section 57 of the Constitution, resulting in a general election for the House and an election for all the Senate.⁷⁵
- Apart from section 57, the constitutional provisions relating to dissolution only concern the House of Representatives. The election of Senators does not necessarily take place at the same time as a general election for the House of Representatives.
- The distinction between the ‘Governor-General’ dissolving the House and the ‘Governor-General in Council’ issuing writs for a general election should be noted. While the decision to dissolve the House may be made by the Governor-General,⁷⁶ the decision to call a general election can only be made on and with the advice of the Executive Council, that is, the Government.⁷⁷

While the majority of Parliaments have extended for more than two years and six months some Parliaments have been dissolved well short of the maximum three year term. Reasons for the early dissolution of the House have included:

- defeat of the Government on the floor of the House (1929, 1931);
- double dissolution situations (1914, 1951, 1974, 1975, 1983, 1987, 2016);
- synchronisation of House elections with Senate elections (1917, 1955, 1977, 1984);
- the Government’s desire to obtain a mandate for various purposes (1917, 1955, 1963); and
- perceived political or electoral advantage.⁷⁸

BY-ELECTIONS

Whenever a vacancy occurs in the House because of the death, resignation, absence without leave, expulsion or disqualification or ineligibility of a Member,⁷⁹ it is the responsibility of the Speaker to issue a writ for the election of a new Member.⁸⁰ Since Federation there have been, on average, three or four by-elections per Parliament.⁸¹ A by-election may be held on a date to be determined by the Speaker or, in his or her absence from Australia, by the Governor-General in Council. The polling must take place on a Saturday.⁸² The issue of the writ is notified in the Gazette.⁸³

⁷³ See Ch. on ‘The Parliament and the role of the House’.

⁷⁴ For a list of federal elections see Appendix 12.

⁷⁵ For further discussion see Ch. on ‘Double dissolutions and joint sittings’.

⁷⁶ However, in practice this power is exercised with the advice of the Federal Executive Council; see *Quick and Garran*, pp. 404–6. For further discussion see Ch. on ‘The Parliament and the role of the House’.

⁷⁷ Constitution, s. 32; and see s. 62.

⁷⁸ Occasionally reasons for dissolving the House have been published, see Table 1.1 ‘Early Dissolutions of the House of Representatives’ in Ch. on ‘The Parliament and the role of the House’.

⁷⁹ For discussion see Ch. on ‘Members’.

⁸⁰ Constitution, s. 33. A by-election is conducted on existing boundaries not redistributed boundaries.

⁸¹ For a list of by-elections see *Parliamentary Handbook*.

⁸² *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 158.

⁸³ E.g. Gazette C2014G00014 (6/1/2014).

If there is no Speaker or if the Speaker is absent from the Commonwealth, the Governor-General in Council may issue the writ.⁸⁴ A by-election writ may be issued by the Acting Speaker performing the duties of the Speaker during the Speaker's absence within the Commonwealth.⁸⁵ A writ has been issued by the Deputy Speaker during the Speaker's absence within the Commonwealth⁸⁶ and the Deputy Speaker has informed the House of the Speaker's intention to issue a writ.⁸⁷

There are no constitutional or statutory requirements that writs be issued for by-elections within any prescribed period.⁸⁸ This is a matter for the Speaker who would have regard to a variety of factors, including:

- any announcements that had been made about possible general elections and consideration of when a general election may take place;
- the cost of holding a by-election separately from a general election; and
- the period of time that a constituency may be unrepresented if a by-election is not held.

The following cases have occurred:

- with a general election pending, the Speaker has declined to issue a writ in order to avoid the need for two elections within a short period of time,⁸⁹ and
- writs have been issued and then withdrawn by the Speaker when dissolution of the House has intervened.⁹⁰

In so far as it concerns the sequence of events following the issuing of a writ, the Commonwealth Electoral Act makes very little distinction between by-elections and ordinary (general) elections—for indicative timetable details *see* page 99.

Notwithstanding that Speakers have decided not to issue writs pending general elections, a suggestion that the Speaker should withhold issue for other purposes has been rejected. In January 1946 the Speaker issued the following statement:

The guiding principle in fixing the date of a by-election has always been to hold the election as early as possible so that the electors are not left without representation any longer than is necessary. With that principle before me I submitted the dates I proposed to the Chief Electoral Officer; he suggested a minor alteration regarding the return of the writ, which I accepted, and the writ was accordingly issued early today. Representations were later made to me that sufficient time was not allowed for a particular State Member to resign. In reply to that I would point out that Mr Wilson's appointment to an office under the Crown had been announced early in December and was published later in December in the Gazette. Individuals and parties thus had ample notice of the pending vacancy in the House. I would also point out that in the last by-election (Fremantle) an exactly similar number of days was allowed between the issue of the writ and nominations. It has been represented to me that the writ should be withdrawn and a new writ issued. If I were to do this I would be considering the wishes of one particular individual, which should not enter into the matter and which would raise a justifiable protest from other candidates and parties. Moreover, the Chief Electoral Officer advises that the dates have already been notified to the commanders of service units outside Australia, and confusion and inconvenience would be likely if the writ were withdrawn and another issued.⁹¹

84 Constitution, s. 33.

85 S.O. 18; *and see* Ch. on 'The Speaker, Deputy Speakers and officers'.

86 VP 1920–21/575 (14.6.1921) (Chairman of Committees as Deputy Speaker). There is some doubt as to the constitutional validity of this action.

87 E.g. VP 1956–57/63 (20.3.1956) (Chairman of Committees as Deputy Speaker); *but see* Ch. on 'The Speaker, Deputy Speakers and officers'.

88 The time between vacancy and polling day has ranged between 17 and 82 days (1901–2016 figures). The minimum period now under the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918* must allow 33 days after the issue of the writ.

89 VP 1926–28/649 (12.9.1928); VP 1964–66/621 (18.8.1966); H.R. Deb. (18.8.1966)157; VP 1990–92/1941 (16.12.1992).

90 VP 1929–31/950 (26.11.1931), Gazette 97 (27.11.1931); VP 1932–34/899 (5.7.1934), Gazette 40 (5.7.1934).

91 Statement issued outside the House. Members of State Parliaments previously had to resign 14 days before nomination.

A writ has been issued by the Governor-General between a general election and the meeting of a new Parliament consequent upon the death of an elected Member and when a Member has resigned to the Governor-General before the House has met and chosen a Speaker.⁹² Based on this procedure new elections have been held before the meeting of Parliament and after the meeting of Parliament.⁹³

When the Court of Disputed Returns (*see* page 104) declares an election absolutely void, a writ may be issued by the Speaker for the purposes of a new election.⁹⁴

The Clerk of the House was subpoenaed by the Supreme Court of Victoria to appear on 20 June 1904 and produce the original writ issued by the Speaker on 15 March 1904 for an election for the division of Melbourne.⁹⁵

In issuing a writ for a by-election Speakers normally follow the procedure set out below:

- the vacancy and cause of vacancy is notified to the House at the earliest opportunity;
- convenient dates are selected and the Electoral Commission is consulted as to their suitability for electoral arrangements;
- proposed dates are forwarded to party leaders for comment;
- dates determined by the Speaker are notified by a press release;
- a writ addressed to the Electoral Commissioner is prepared, signed by the Speaker and embossed with the House of Representatives seal;
- the House is advised;
- the writ is delivered to the Electoral Commissioner;
- the Australian Communications and Media Authority is advised; and
- notification of the by-election is published in the Gazette.⁹⁶

SENATE ELECTIONS

Senators are elected on a different basis to Members of the House of Representatives. Key features of Senate elections are:

- Each State or Territory votes as one electorate.⁹⁷ Twelve Senators are chosen for each State and two Senators for each of the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory.
- Senators are elected by a system of proportional representation which ensures that the proportion of seats won by each party in each State or Territory closely reflects the proportion of the votes gained by that party in that State or Territory.
- There is an election for half the number of State Senators every third year. It is not necessary for half-Senate elections and elections for the House of Representatives to occur at the same time, although elections for the two Houses are generally held concurrently.

⁹² Constitution, s. 33; VP 1983–84/6 (21.4.1983).

⁹³ VP 1964–66/3–5 (25.2.1964) (before), VP 1917/4 (14.6.1917) (after).

⁹⁴ E.g. VP 1904/26 (15.3.1904), 44 (19.4.1904); VP 1907–8/4 (3.7.1907); VP 1920–21/190 (1.7.1920); VP 1996–98/428–30 (11.9.1996), 489 (16.9.1996).

⁹⁵ VP 1904/85 (17.6.1904); *and see* VP 1912/15 (25.6.1912) and Chs on ‘The Parliament and the role of the House’ and ‘Documents’.

⁹⁶ E.g. Gazette S338 (17.9.1996).

⁹⁷ Although the Constitution empowers the Parliament to prescribe a Senate electoral system based on divisions within a State or Territory, that has not been done.

- Elections for Territory Senators are held concurrently with general elections for the House of Representatives.
- State Senators serve for six years from the beginning of their term of service (except following a dissolution of the Senate when half of them serve for three years).⁹⁸ Territory Senators serve until the day before the poll of the next general election.
- A Senate casual vacancy is filled by a person chosen by the Parliament of the State concerned or, in relation to the Australian Capital Territory or Northern Territory, by the respective Legislative Assembly. The person chosen fills the vacancy until the end of the former Senator's term.⁹⁹ If there is one available, a person of the same political party¹⁰⁰ as the Senator previously filling the vacant position must be chosen. For further information on Senate elections *see Odgers*.

METHOD OF VOTING

With every system of election there are two quite separate and distinct processes, the 'voting' process and the 'scrutiny' process, that is, the counting. The first is performed by the voters in the casting of their votes while the second is carried out by the officials responsible for the conduct of the election. The procedure for the scrutiny of votes in House of Representatives elections is provided for in the electoral law.¹⁰¹

Until 1918 the 'first-past-the-post' voting process was used. This is one of the simplest forms of voting as it requires the voter to indicate a vote for only one candidate and the candidate with the greatest number of votes (that is, a relative majority) is elected.

The voting process now in use is a preferential one, usually referred to as 'preferential voting' (also known as the 'alternative vote' system).

Preferential voting

The preferential voting system used is an absolute majority system where for election a candidate must obtain more than 50 per cent of the votes in the count. The voter is required to mark his or her vote on the ballot paper by placing the number one (1) against the name of the candidate of first choice, and to give contingent votes for all the remaining candidates in order of preference by the consecutive numbers 2, 3, 4 and so on; all squares on the ballot paper must be numbered, although one square may be left unnumbered, in which case the blank square will be deemed to be the voter's last preference, provided a first preference has been indicated.¹⁰²

The first step in obtaining the result of the election is to count the first preferences marked for each candidate. If a candidate has an absolute majority (that is, fifty per cent plus one) on the first preferences or at any later stage of the count, that candidate is

98 Constitution, s. 13. The term of service normally starts on 1 July following the election. After a dissolution of the Senate it starts on 1 July preceding the election.

99 Constitution, s. 15; *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 44. Prior to 1980 NT and ACT casual Senate vacancies would have been filled by a by-election, but none occurred. Subsequently, NT vacancies were to be determined by the NT Legislative Assembly but, until the establishment of the ACT Legislative Assembly in 1989, the Senate and the House of Representatives, at a joint sitting, chose the person to fill a casual Senate vacancy in the ACT. Joint sittings for this purpose were held on 5 May 1981 (J 1980–81/227) and 16 February 1988 (J 1987–90/477–8)—for rules adopted for this sitting *see* Rules for joint sittings. The mechanism of filling a casual Senate vacancy by means of a joint sitting of the Commonwealth Parliament is retained in the case of a vacancy in a Territory other than the ACT or NT (should any gain Senate representation), *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 44(2A).

100 That is, the party for which the vacating Senator was elected, Constitution, s. 15.

101 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 274.

102 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 240, 268.

elected. The next step is to exclude the candidate with the fewest votes and sort those ballot papers to the next preference marked by the voter. This process of exclusion is repeated (to achieve the two party preferred figure) until there are only two candidates left in the count, even though one of those candidates may have been declared elected at an earlier stage.¹⁰³

Senate voting

A method of preferential voting related to that described above was also used for Senate elections from 1919 to 1946. A system of proportional representation has been used since 1949. Under that system, a candidate must obtain a certain percentage of the votes in the count, usually referred to as the ‘quota’, to be elected. This system is only appropriate to multi-member constituencies, such as those for the Senate, where each State votes as one electorate.

For Senate elections the voter has the option of marking the ballot paper preferentially by party/group or, alternatively, by individual candidate.¹⁰⁴ The special feature of proportional representation is contained in the method of counting the votes which ensures that the proportion of seats won by each party in a State or Territory closely reflects the proportion of the votes gained by that party. There is thus greater opportunity for the election of minority parties and independents than in the House.

The result of proportional representation has been that since 1949 the numbers of the Senate have usually been relatively evenly divided between government and opposition supporters with the balance of power often being held by minority parties or independents, whose political influence has increased as a consequence. Governments have frequently been confronted with the ability of the Opposition and minority party or independent Senators to combine to defeat or modify government measures in the Senate.

THE ELECTION PROCESS

Table 3.2 illustrates the constitutional and statutory requirements for the conduct of an election and the particular time limitations imposed between dissolution and the meeting of the new Parliament.¹⁰⁵

Issue of writs

The authority for holding an election is in the form of a writ issued by the Governor-General,¹⁰⁶ or in the case of a by-election by the Speaker (*see* page 94), directed to the Electoral Commissioner commanding the Commissioner to conduct an election in accordance with the prescribed procedures.¹⁰⁷

The writs for general elections of the House of Representatives are issued by the Governor-General (acting with the advice of the Executive Council) and specify the date by which nominations must be lodged, the date for the close of the electoral rolls, the date on which the poll is to be taken and the date for the return of the writ. The writ is deemed

¹⁰³ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 274.

¹⁰⁴ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 239. For a more detailed account of this system *see Odgers*, and Electoral Commission publications.

¹⁰⁵ Appendix 12 shows significant dates in relation to each general election since 1940.

¹⁰⁶ Constitution, s. 32.

¹⁰⁷ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 154.

to have been issued at 6 p.m. on the day of issue.¹⁰⁸ Eight writs are issued for a general election, one for each of the six States and the two Territories. The issue of writs is notified in the Gazette.¹⁰⁹

In the case of dissolution or expiry of the House of Representatives the writs must be issued within 10 days,¹¹⁰ so that there cannot be undue delay before an election is held to elect a new House of Representatives.

TABLE 3.2 TIMETABLE FOR A GENERAL ELECTION

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Limitation (a)</i>	<i>Constitutional or statutory provision</i>
Dissolution	—	Constitution, ss. 5, 28
Issue of writs (at 6 p.m.)	Within 10 days of dissolution	Constitution, s. 32; Commonwealth Electoral Act, ss. 152, 154
Close of electoral rolls (at 8 p.m.)	7 days after date of writ	Commonwealth Electoral Act, s. 155
Nominations close (at 12 noon)	Not less than 10 days nor more than 27 days after date of writ	Commonwealth Electoral Act, ss. 156, 175
Date of polling (a Saturday)	Not less than 23 days nor more than 31 days from date of nomination ^(b)	Commonwealth Electoral Act, ss. 157, 158
Return of writs	Not more than 100 days after issue	Commonwealth Electoral Act, s. 159
Meeting of new Parliament	Not later than 30 days after the day appointed for the return of writs	Constitution, s. 5

(a) Advice from the Attorney-General's Department, dated 15 March 1904, states that the dates fixed are reckoned exclusive of the day from which the time is reckoned; and see *Acts Interpretation Act 1901*, s. 36(1).

(b) A general election (or by-election) must therefore take place not less than 33 nor more than 58 days after the issue of writ(s).

Close of electoral rolls

The electoral rolls close at 8 p.m. seven days after the date of the writ. This cut-off applies both to alterations and new enrolments. Amendments to the Commonwealth Electoral Act were made in 2006 closing the electoral rolls three working days after the date of the writ and stopping the processing of new enrolments at 8 p.m. on the day of the writ.¹¹¹ These provisions operated for the 2007 general election but in 2010 were declared by the High Court to be invalid.¹¹²

Nomination of candidates

To contest an election to the House of Representatives a person must be nominated by at least 100 electors in the division he or she is to contest, or by the registered officer of the party endorsing him or her as a candidate. A candidate who is a 'sitting independent'

108 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 152. Form B of Schedule 1 to the Act prescribes the form in which writs are issued.

109 E.g. Gazette S139 (20.7.2010) (issued by Administrator); Gazette C2013G01199 (6.8.2013).

110 Constitution, s. 32.

111 *Electoral and Referendum Amendment (Electoral Integrity and Other Measures) Act 2006*.

112 *Rowe v. Electoral Commissioner* [2010] HCA 46.

Member needs nomination by only one elector.¹¹³ Nominations are made to the Divisional Returning Officer and can be made at any time between the issue of the writ and the close of nominations. Candidates of registered political parties¹¹⁴ may also be nominated in bulk for divisions of a State or Territory by the registered officer of the party. Bulk nominations must be made to the Australian Electoral Officer for the State or Territory no later than 48 hours prior to the close of nominations. For a nomination to be valid, it must have the candidate's consent and be accompanied by a declaration by the candidate that he or she is qualified under the Constitution and the laws of the Commonwealth to be elected as a Member of the House of Representatives. The declaration must also state that he or she will not be a candidate for any other election held on the same day, and give details of his or her Australian citizenship.¹¹⁵

A person who at the hour of nomination is a Member of a State Parliament or Territory Assembly may not be nominated.¹¹⁶ Likewise a Member of the Senate or the House is required to resign to contest an election for the House of which he or she is not a Member.¹¹⁷ There are constitutional prohibitions (outlined in the Chapter on 'Members') concerning persons who hold any office of profit under the Crown, or any pension payable during the pleasure of the Crown out of any of the revenues of the Commonwealth. If unsuccessful, an Australian Public Service or Parliamentary Service employee who has resigned to contest an election must be reappointed to the service.¹¹⁸ Officers of the Electoral Commission are not eligible for nomination.¹¹⁹

A deposit (\$1000 for Member, \$2000 for Senator), is required to be lodged with the nomination. The deposit is returned if the candidate is elected or polls at least four per cent of the total first preference votes polled in the division.¹²⁰ Candidates may withdraw their nominations up to the close of nominations but cannot do so after nominations have closed.¹²¹ If one candidate only is nominated then he or she is declared duly elected without an election being necessary.¹²²

Should a candidate die during the nomination period the hour of nomination is extended by 24 hours to allow time for the nomination of an alternative candidate.¹²³ If any candidate dies between the close of nominations and polling day, the election is deemed to have failed and a new writ for a supplementary election¹²⁴ is issued forthwith. These provisions are based on the principle that no political party should be disadvantaged at an election because of the death of its candidate. In the division of Hume for the 1972 general election an independent candidate died after the close of nominations and a new writ was issued setting a new date for nominations. The dates of the original writ for polling and the return of the writ were retained.¹²⁵ During the 1993

113 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 166(1C). For the purpose of this section the candidate is a 'sitting independent' if he or she was not endorsed by a political party at the previous election and is contesting the same seat, s. 166(1E).

114 To be able to be registered, a party must have at least one member in Parliament or, if it has no parliamentary member, at least 500 party members. *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s.123.

115 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 170. Qualification and disqualification requirements are outlined in the Ch. on 'Members'.

116 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 164.

117 Constitution, s. 43 (the resignation needs to be made before nomination).

118 *Public Service Act 1999*, s. 32. *Parliamentary Service Act 1999*, s. 32.

119 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 36.

120 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 170, 173.

121 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 177.

122 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 179(2). The last occasion of an uncontested election was in respect of the Northern Territory at the 1963 general election. In the 1955 general election 11 divisions were uncontested.

123 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 156.

124 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 180, 181.

125 Gazette S112 (13.11.1972).

general election in the division of Dickson an independent candidate died shortly before the poll. A new writ was issued for a supplementary election, setting later dates for nominations, polling and the return of the writ.¹²⁶ Similarly, a supplementary election was held in 1998 for the division of Newcastle because of the death of a candidate prior to polling day.

Nominations are declared (publicly announced) at the office of the respective Divisional Returning Officer at 12 noon on the day following the day of the close of nominations,¹²⁷ and the order of candidates' names on the ballot paper then determined by lot.¹²⁸

Electoral offences

In order to help ensure fair elections, the Commonwealth Electoral Act prohibits bribery, undue influence and a number of other practices, and provides for penalties for these offences.¹²⁹ On 16 February 1976 a case against a former Minister (Hon. R. V. Garland) and a former Senator (Mr G. H. Branson) was brought by the Attorney-General alleging a breach of the bribery provisions of the Commonwealth Electoral Act.¹³⁰ As a result of the proposed action Mr Garland had resigned his commission as a Minister on 6 February 1976.¹³¹ The magistrate dismissed the charge, ruling that although a prima facie case had been established, a jury, properly directed, would not convict the defendants.¹³²

Polling day

Each voter is required to mark the ballot paper preferentially (*see* page 97) and secrecy of voting is assisted by the provision of private voting compartments. Since the introduction of compulsory voting in 1925, over 90 per cent of enrolled voters have voted at general elections for the House of Representatives.¹³³

Scrutineers

Scrutineers may be appointed by candidates to represent them at polling places during the election,¹³⁴ and at pre-poll voting offices,¹³⁵ in order to observe the proceedings of the poll and satisfy the candidate that the poll is conducted strictly in accordance with the law. Each candidate may also appoint scrutineers at each place where votes are being counted.¹³⁶

126 Gazette S78 (9.3.1993).

127 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 175, 176.

128 Using a method of double randomisation in which an initial draw of numbered balls assigns a number to each candidate and a second draw determines the order in which candidates appear on the ballot paper, *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 213. Form F of Schedule 1 to the Act contains a sample ballot paper. (Before 1984 candidates were listed on the ballot paper in alphabetical order.)

129 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, Part XXI.

130 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 326.

131 Gazette S28 (9.2.1976).

132 Case unreported; but see 'Australia: Alleged breach of Electoral Act', *The Parliamentarian*, LVII, 4, 1976, p. 253.

133 Turnout at the general election which preceded the introduction of compulsory voting was just less than 60%.

134 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 217.

135 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 200DA.

136 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 264.

Counting

Counting commences in the presence of the scrutineers as soon as practicable after the poll closes.¹³⁷ An initial count of first preference votes and a two candidate preferred count is carried out. The purpose of the two candidate preferred count is to provide on election night an indication of the candidate most likely to be elected. After polling day a fresh count is made and preferences are distributed (*see* page 97). Informal (i.e. invalid) ballot papers are not included in the count.¹³⁸ In recent years the number of informal votes cast at general elections for the House of Representatives has varied between 2.1 and 6.3 per cent of the total votes cast.¹³⁹ In 2016 this figure was 5.05 per cent.

Recount

At any time before the declaration of the result of an election, the officer conducting the election may, at the written request of a candidate, or of his or her own volition, recount some or all of the ballot papers.¹⁴⁰ A recount is generally undertaken only where the final result is close and specific grounds for a recount can be identified. If a recount confirms a tied election, the officer must advise the Electoral Commissioner that the election cannot be decided.¹⁴¹ In such circumstances the Electoral Commission must file a petition disputing the election with the Court of Disputed Returns, which must within three months declare either a candidate elected or the election void.¹⁴²

Declaration of the poll

The result of the election is declared as soon as practicable after it has been ascertained that a candidate has been elected—in some divisions this may be a week or more after the election. In a House of Representatives election the declaration of the poll is generally made at the office of the respective Divisional Returning Officer.¹⁴³ Because the time for counting will vary from division to division, declarations of the various polls do not necessarily occur on the same day. The poll may be declared, notwithstanding that all ballot papers have not been received or inquiries completed, if the Returning Officer is satisfied that the votes recorded on the ballot papers concerned could not possibly affect the result.¹⁴⁴

Return of writs

A writ is both the authority for an election to be held and the authority by which the successful candidate is declared elected. When all polls in a State or Territory have been declared at a general election or when the poll has been declared for a division subject to a by-election, the Electoral Commissioner certifies the name of the successful candidate for each division or the division, and forwards the writ to the Governor-General or Speaker, as the case may be.¹⁴⁵ Writs are returnable on or before the date fixed for their return. The date on which a writ is returned is the date on which the endorsed writ comes into the actual physical possession of the person authorised to act upon it (that is, the

137 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 265.

138 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 268.

139 Figures for elections from 1977 to 2016 inclusive.

140 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 279.

141 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 274(9C).

142 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 357(1A), 367A.

143 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 284. It is possible for another place to be determined, s. 284(1).

144 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 284.

145 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 284.

Governor-General or the Speaker).¹⁴⁶ All writs for a general election are returnable by the same day and all writs are forwarded together by the Governor-General's Official Secretary to the Clerk of the House. The issuing authority may extend the time for holding an election or for returning the writs.¹⁴⁷ An error in a writ may be remedied by proclamation.¹⁴⁸

Meeting of a new Parliament

After a general election the House must meet not later than 30 days after the day fixed for the return of the writs.¹⁴⁹ However, the House may meet as soon as the writs are returned and in recent Parliaments it has not been unusual for the House to meet before the date fixed for the return of writs.¹⁵⁰

On the first meeting of a new Parliament, returns to the eight writs for the general election are presented to the House by the Clerk and the Members are then sworn.¹⁵¹

PUBLIC FUNDING AND FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE

Public funding for elections

Responsibility for the operation of the system of public funding¹⁵² is vested in the Electoral Commission.

Principal features of the provisions include:

- To be eligible for public funding political parties must be registered with the Commission.
- For each valid first preference vote received a specified amount is payable, which is adjusted half yearly in accordance with increases in the Consumer Price Index. For the 2016 general election the amount was 262.784 cents.
- No payment is made in respect of candidates or groups who do not receive at least four per cent of the eligible votes polled (that is, valid first preference votes).¹⁵³
- Funding for candidates endorsed by a party may be shared between the relevant State branch and the Federal secretariat of the party.¹⁵⁴

A bill was introduced in December 2017 to limit public electoral funding to demonstrated electoral expenditure.¹⁵⁵

Financial disclosure

The Commonwealth Electoral Act requires political parties, candidates and other persons involved in the electoral process to submit returns, either following elections or

146 Letter from Electoral Commissioner to Clerk of House 17.3.94 (citing advice from the Attorney-General's Department).

147 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 286. Gazette 26 (30.4.1910) 973.

148 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 285. VP 1998–2001/3 (10.11.1998) (Governor-General's proclamation rectifying errors in certificates on writs presented). Other kinds of error in the election process may also be remedied under this provision—in the 2004 general election the times for the return of postal votes in Queensland were extended by proclamation after it had been found that a number of electors had not received postal voting materials.

149 Constitution, s. 5.

150 See Appendix 12.

151 S.O. 4; and see Ch. on 'The parliamentary calendar'.

152 Public funding was introduced by the *Commonwealth Electoral Legislation Amendment Act 1983* (effective 1984).

153 The Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters has recommended that successful candidates below the threshold also receive funding. *Report on the funding of political parties and election campaigns*, Nov. 2011.

154 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 294–302, 321.

155 Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Bill 2017.

annually, to the Electoral Commission disclosing electoral expenditure and detailing political donations received and given. Returns are made available for public inspection on the Electoral Commission website.

In summary, returns are required from candidates,¹⁵⁶ political parties and associated entities, third parties who have incurred or authorised electoral expenditure, and donors. Government departments and agencies must also provide information in their annual reports on payments made to advertising agencies, and market research, polling, direct mail and media advertising organisations.¹⁵⁷

The requirements for returns are complex. Up-to-date information on disclosure requirements is available on the Electoral Commission website.

Disclosure threshold

Political donations and receipts above the disclosure threshold must be individually identified in returns. The disclosure threshold was set at \$10 000 in 2006, the amount to be indexed annually to the consumer price index. From July 2016 to June 2017 the amount was \$13 200.

Unlawful gifts and loans

It is unlawful to receive gifts of a value greater than the disclosure threshold where either the names or addresses of the donors are unknown at the time the gift is received. Loans of more than the disclosure threshold may not be received other than from a financial institution unless details of the source and conditions of the loan are recorded. The amount or value of a gift or loan received in breach of these provisions is payable to the Commonwealth.¹⁵⁸

A bill was introduced in December 2017 to ban political entities from receiving foreign gifts over \$250 or any money transferred from foreign accounts, and from using foreign money for their political expenditure.¹⁵⁹

Offences

It is an offence punishable by a fine to fail to make a return if required to do so, to make an incomplete return, to knowingly provide a return containing false or misleading information, or to fail to retain records relating to matters which are or could be required to be set out in a return.¹⁶⁰ It is also an offence to fail or refuse to comply with notices relating to investigations authorised by the Electoral Commission, or to provide false or misleading information to such investigations.¹⁶¹

Failure to provide required returns does not invalidate the election of a candidate.¹⁶²

DISPUTED ELECTIONS AND RETURNS

At the commencement of the Commonwealth, any question concerning the qualification of a Member or Senator, a vacancy in either House, or a disputed election to

¹⁵⁶ Most candidates in fact submit 'nil returns', as in practice donations are received and electoral expenditure is incurred by political parties and the details shown in the relevant periodic returns.

¹⁵⁷ E.g. payments over the disclosure threshold to advertising, market research or polling organisations, *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 311A.

¹⁵⁸ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 306, 306A.

¹⁵⁹ Electoral Legislation Amendment (Electoral Funding and Disclosure Reform) Bill 2017.

¹⁶⁰ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 315.

¹⁶¹ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, ss. 316.

¹⁶² *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 319.

either House was to be determined by the House in which the question arose.¹⁶³ Under this original procedure three petitions were presented to the House of Representatives disputing the election of Members.¹⁶⁴ The petitions were referred to the Committee of Elections and Qualifications.¹⁶⁵ In each case the committee's report, adopted by the House, did not support a change in the election result.¹⁶⁶ In 1902 legislation was enacted which provided for the validity of any election or return to be disputed by petition addressed to the High Court sitting as the Court of Disputed Returns.¹⁶⁷ In 1907 legislation was enacted providing that the relevant House could refer to the Court of Disputed Returns any question respecting the qualifications of a Member or a Senator to sit in Parliament or respecting a vacancy in either House.¹⁶⁸

Under current legislation the validity of any election or return may be disputed only by a petition addressed to the Court of Disputed Returns.¹⁶⁹ Such a petition must contain a form of words (called a prayer) setting out the relief the petitioner is seeking, set out the facts relied on to invalidate the election or return, be signed by either a candidate or person qualified to vote at the election and be attested by two witnesses. The petition must be filed within 40 days of the return of the writ, with a deposit of \$500, in the Registry of the High Court.¹⁷⁰ The Electoral Commissioner may also file a petition disputing an election, on behalf of the Commission, and is obliged to do so if the election cannot be decided because of a tie.¹⁷¹

The petition is heard by the High Court sitting as the Court of Disputed Returns or is referred by the High Court for trial by the Federal Court of Australia, which in such cases has all the powers and functions of the Court of Disputed Returns. In either court these powers may be exercised by a single justice or judge.¹⁷² When the court finds that any person has committed an 'illegal practice', this fact is reported to the responsible Minister.¹⁷³

The Chief Executive and Principal Registrar of the High Court sends a copy of the petition to the Clerk of the House of Representatives immediately after it has been filed, and after the hearing sends the Clerk a copy of the order of the court. A copy of the order is also sent to the issuer of the writ (that is, the Governor-General or the Speaker).¹⁷⁴ The Clerk presents the petition and order of the court to the House at the earliest opportunity either separately or together.¹⁷⁵ Related documents have also been tabled—for example, an order of the High Court remitting a petition to the Federal Court.¹⁷⁶ The decision of

163 Constitution, s. 47.

164 VP 1901–02/59 (13.6.1901), 83 (5.7.1901), 419 (22.4.1902). See Appendix 13.

165 Until 1987, the Senate at the commencement of each Parliament appointed a Committee of Disputed Returns and Qualifications but it did not function from 1907.

166 VP 1901–02/61 (14.6.1901), 87 (10.7.1901), 441 (29.5.1902).

167 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1902*, ss.192–206. (This legislation did not apply to the election of a Member to fill a vacancy in the House of Representatives during the 1st Parliament.)

168 *Disputed Elections and Qualifications Act 1907*, s. 6 (later repealed and its provisions incorporated in the *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*).

169 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 353.

170 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 355–6.

171 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 357(1A). See Gazette C2013G01703 (18.12.2013) for Electoral Commissioner's petition disputing election of Senators for Western Australia.

172 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 354.

173 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 363.

174 *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 369; VP 1929–31/91–2 (12.3.1930).

175 E.g. VP 2010–13/174 (15.11.2010).

176 E.g. VP 2008–10/133 (11.3.2008).

the court is final and no appeals are permitted.¹⁷⁷ A person whose election has been challenged continues to serve pending the outcome of the hearing.

Any person returned who is declared by the court not to have been duly elected ceases to be a Member of the House of Representatives—in fact the decision means that the person has not been a Member. Any person not returned who is declared to have been duly elected following consideration of an election petition may take his or her seat in the House of Representatives. If any election of any Member is declared absolutely void, then a new election is held.¹⁷⁸

Since the establishment of the Court of Disputed Returns there have been 50 cases of the court being petitioned in connection with a seat in the House of Representatives, including 13 of similar intent lodged after the 1980 general election.¹⁷⁹ The court has ruled the election absolutely void in six cases and the Speaker (or Acting Speaker) has issued writs for new elections to be held.¹⁸⁰ Following the 1993 general election petitions were lodged alleging irregularities in the conduct of a general election, against the Electoral Commission, and challenging the election of all Members elected, rather than challenging the election of specified Members. The cases were dismissed.¹⁸¹

In 1920 a Member (Mr McGrath) was elected at a second election after the first election had been declared void. The House agreed to a motion that compensation be paid to him because he had been compelled to contest two elections as a result of official errors and had thus been involved in much unnecessary but unavoidable expenditure.¹⁸²

The House of Representatives may, by resolution, refer any question concerning the qualifications of a Member or a vacancy in the House to the Court of Disputed Returns.¹⁸³ The Speaker sends to the court a statement of the question together with any documents possessed by the House relating to the question.¹⁸⁴ The court has the power to declare any person not qualified or not capable of being chosen or of sitting as a Member of the House of Representatives, and to declare a vacancy in the House of Representatives. The Chief Executive and Principal Registrar of the High Court sends a copy of the order or declaration of the Court of Disputed Returns to the Clerk of the House, as soon as practicable after the question has been determined.¹⁸⁵ There have been two instances of the House of Representatives referring a question concerning the qualifications of a Member or a vacancy in the House to the Court of Disputed Returns,¹⁸⁶ and several cases have occurred in the Senate.¹⁸⁷

For further coverage of Members' qualifications and disqualifications and challenges to membership of the House *see* Chapter on 'Members'.

¹⁷⁷ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 368.

¹⁷⁸ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 374.

¹⁷⁹ *See* Appendix 13—(figures to end 2016).

¹⁸⁰ VP 1904/25–6 (15.3.1904), 43–4 (19.4.1904); VP 1907–8/3–4 (3.7.1907); VP 1920–21/189–90 (1.7.1920); VP 1990–92/1907 (25.11.1992), 1921–3 (26.11.1992) (by-election not held due to general elections in March 1993); VP 1996–98/428–30 (11.9.1996), 489 (16.9.1996).

¹⁸¹ VP 1993–96/176–7 (19.8.1993), 1106 (27.6.1994).

¹⁸² VP 1920–21/468 (25.11.1920).

¹⁸³ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 376.

¹⁸⁴ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 377.

¹⁸⁵ *Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918*, s. 380.

¹⁸⁶ To December 2017: VP 2016–18/958 (14.8.2017), 1274–5 (6.12.2017). These cases and unsuccessful motions to refer matters are covered under 'Challenges to membership' in Ch. on 'Members'.

¹⁸⁷ *See Odgers*, 6th edn, pp. 172–4; 14th edn, p. 172.