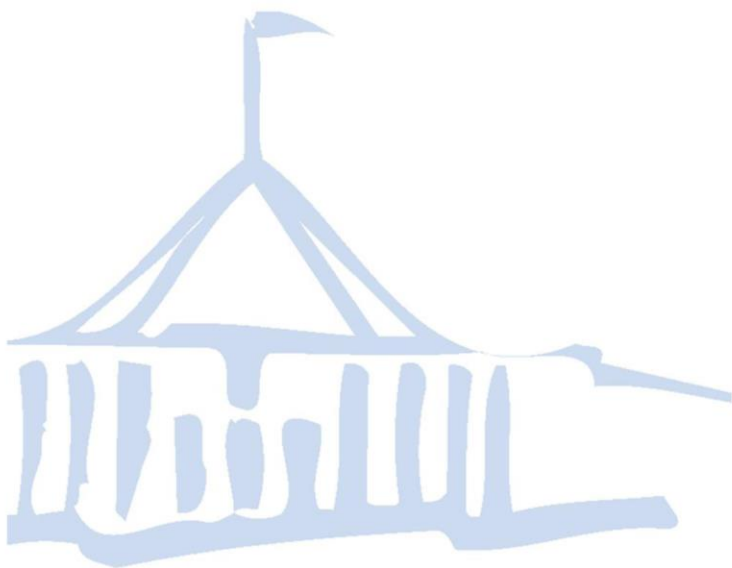


# COMMUNIQUÉ

Should Australia have compulsory voting?

The Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament  
House, Canberra  
27 October 2022



NSSC CIVICS AND CITIZENSHIP  
YEAR 9 & 10 PILOT PROGRAM CONVENTION

## 1. Introduction

The National Schools Constitutional Convention (NSSC) Civics and Citizenship Year 9 & 10 Pilot Program Convention was held at the Museum of Australian Democracy at Old Parliament House in Canberra on 27 October 2022.

One hundred and three students from Government, Independent and Catholic schools from across Australia, covering metropolitan, regional, rural and remote locations were present at their state hubs, and were linked online with the main hub in Canberra.

The Convention topic that delegates were tasked to investigate was, ***Should Australia have compulsory voting?***

## 2. Convention processes

Through a program of pre-reading, working groups and keynote speakers, delegates considered a wide range of issues around the topic before deciding on how they would vote on the topic of the day.

The Convention was facilitated by Emeritus Professor John Warhurst AO.

### ***Convention opening remarks were given by:***

- Emeritus Professor John Warhurst AO, Australian National University, provided opening remarks and welcomed the delegates.
- Dr Roslyn Baxter, Deputy Secretary Australian Government Department of Education, provided an official welcome and reflected on what was happening in the world when she was able to participate in a similar program in the late 1980's. The events that took place at this time shaped her view of civics and citizenship and helped her foster an interest in the law, politics and her further tertiary study. Dr Baxter encouraged and challenged the students to participate and make the most of the opportunity that is not only presented today by participation in the Convention but also to take their learnings back to their school and their local community.

### ***Convention speakers were:***

- Emeritus Professor Judith Brett, La Trobe University, Melbourne – *History and introduction of compulsory voting in Australia*. The address provided a history of the secret ballot across the United Kingdom, the United States of America and Australia. Australia was the first jurisdiction to introduce both the ballot box and the ballot paper. Emeritus Professor Brett spoke to how the right to vote was extended to women in South Australia initially in 1894, which followed New Zealand granting the right to vote to women in 1893. Federally the right to vote for women was not granted until 1903.

Compulsory voting was introduced to Australia in 1924. Elections in Australia are held on a Saturday to allow easy access for all Australians. This differs from the United States of America and United Kingdom who hold voting on weekdays. In Australia this allowed for ease of voting for all. Compulsory voting was seen as a way to reunite the country following World War 1.

There was a much slower move to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were allowed to vote. 1949 saw Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who had served in the armed forces permitted to vote in all state and territory elections, apart from Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory. 1962 saw all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders extended the right to enrol and vote in Federal elections but it was not until 1983 that this became compulsory.

The question was posed to participants from Emeritus Professor Brett was *“What does this history tell us about Australian Democracy?”*

Questions asked by the delegates focused on:

- The access for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to voting rights both from a understanding of the process and the ability to participate.
- Information available to female voters when they first gained the right to vote.
- Was there change in the proportion of citizens voting once voting became compulsory?

- Professor Christine Wallace, University of Canberra – *The arguments for and against compulsory voting*. Professor Wallace spoke of the history of elections and how voting in these elections impacts many elements of our society. The heart of Australian democracy lies in the notion of participation in an election and the democratic process. Arguments for compulsory voting can include the value of a vote as a fundamental human right, which many in Australia take for granted. Compulsory voting allows for greater levels of representation. The ideal is that there is 100% participation. The outcome of an election can perhaps be more trusted due to the level of involvement of electors. Political parties need to appeal to a broad range of voters rather than a narrow focus on those who align with your ideology in order to form a government. There are also benefits to citizens in being part of this democratic process and this strengthens Australian democracy. Arguments against compulsory voting can include the increase in the number of “donkey votes”, however, this is a relatively small proportion of voters. The main argument is that voting infringes on people’s individual liberties by “forcing” participation in the electoral process.

Questions asked by the delegates focused on:

- Links between lack of compulsory voting and election outcomes in other jurisdictions, for example in the United States.
- Would there be greater polarisation if voting was not compulsory?
- Why compulsory voting seen as infringing on civil liberties when other civic duties, such as jury duty, are not seen to impinge.
- How citizens can be more informed/educated when undertaking their vote?

- Professor Mark Evans, Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), Charles Sturt University – *Voting arrangements in other countries*. Professor Evans spoke to the links between rights and responsibilities for those involved in the election of governments. Professor Evans put forward criteria for evaluating the quality of electoral systems, how the world votes, and how this compares with the Australian context and in what areas can there be improvement in the Australian context. Some of the challenges that Professor Evans put forward included short electoral cycles, representatives not always reflecting the broader Australian population. The criteria for evaluating the quality of electoral systems presented by Professor Evans included, is there:
  - Representation
  - A strong constituency link
  - A multi-party system
  - Wasted votes
  - Integrity.Professor Evans presented information on a variety of voting systems that are used around the world including, “*First past the post*”, which allows strong constituency link, however, does see a lack of smaller parties being elected in a multi-party system as well as a large amount of wasted votes. “*Proportional Representation*”, allows for greater representation and encourages multi-party system but can be seen as a complex system of voting. “*Two Round System*”, predominantly seen in France, sees voters mark their preferred candidate needing to receive at least 50% to be declared a winner, if not then a second round is conducted. Australia is 1 of 27 countries that has compulsory voting, turnout being a key measure. However, compulsory voting can mask dissent evidenced by a low level of trust in government.

Questions asked by the delegates focused on:

- The use of quotas in parliaments, would this help with diversity or just tick a box.
- The impact of compulsory voting on the representation of minorities.
- The political party mechanism needing to change to ensure political engagement and participation, in particular campaign financing.
- The need for greater diversity either within the current parties or through the introduction of new parties.

### 3. Delegate deliberations

#### Workshops

**Working Group:** *Consideration of the arguments for and against compulsory voting and implications of compulsory and voluntary voting.*

**NSW** For and against arguments summarised by various groups using the arguments presented by the speakers. Groups resoundingly nominated that compulsory voting was a benefit to democracy in Australia and ensured a consistent level of high turnout of voters. Ensures rights and responsibilities are upheld. Need to maintain access to the democracy sausage.

**NT** Voting should be kept compulsory, voting age should be reduced to 16 on a voluntary basis for those between 16 and 18. Distrust in the system could also be flagged through the electoral process. There is a need to increase the diversity of representation which could allow greater buy in from voters.

**VIC** Mixed results from Victoria with a mix of pro, con and neutral positions put to the convention. The impact of media on voting could be negative if voting was voluntary. Levels of apathy in voters can influence an outcome if all must undertake their right to vote. Resource allocation could suffer through voluntary voting and impact minority groups adversely. Compulsory voting assists in maintaining egalitarian society.

**ACT** Argument against, voter attendance does not equal voter engagement. Argument for, the privilege of having a vote should not be undersold.

**SA** A decrease in voter turnout will result if voting is not compulsory. Scenarios like the United States could be in play if voting was not compulsory. It allows for greater representation of all voters. Donkey votes are more likely to occur if voters are under educated about the political system, removing compulsory voting would not address this. Compulsory voting should not be removed in one scenario such elections yet remain for a referendum.

**TAS** Agreement that compulsory voting should be maintained and allowing greater representational government. Incentive to learn more about the political system, however, there is recognition of a level of donkey votes, which is a small proportion of all votes

**WA** Compulsory voting should be upheld. This allows for an improvement in political understanding in the population. It is a fundamental human right to have access to voting and compulsory voting allows broader representation.

**Soapbox Session:**

Students had the opportunity to participate in a soapbox session in which they were able to speak freely on issues of relevance of compulsory voting. Approximately 30 students shared their thoughts, arguments and beliefs and contributed to enriching the experience of all delegates. Some of the main topics raised included:

- Rights of minority groups.
- Should all have the right to vote as those who are educated are more likely to lead to an appropriate outcome
- Political participation enhanced through compulsory voting
- Potential for class divide if compulsory voting is abandoned
- The implementation of civics and citizenship education for all Australians.
- Need to focus on an increase in the level of education to inform a voters

## 4. The Vote

Delegates voted either 'YES' or 'NO' to the question:

Australia should continue to have compulsory voting?

The vote results were as follows –

Voting results from **102** students were:

National Tally Board	Formal YES	Formal NO
New South Wales	33	2
Victoria	23	5
Western Australia	10	1
South Australia	9	3
Tasmania	6	1
Australian Capital Territory	2	0
Northern Territory	7	0
<b>NATIONAL TOTAL</b>	<b>90 (88%)</b>	<b>12 (12%)</b>

## 5. Convention Outcome

This Communiqué was presented to Senator Sue Lines, President of the Senate who will present the Convention Communiqué to the Parliament for incorporation into Hansard.