

TOPICS AND INVESTIGATIONS

What's your vote worth?

What's your vote worth? allows students to explore key features of the electoral system such as compulsory voting and the voting systems used to elect representatives to federal and state and territory parliaments. It also examines why voting is important, the democratic principles which underpin a democratic electoral system and the role of redistributions in ensuring the equality of citizens' votes.

Introductory activity

RESOURCES

BLM 1 Hypothetical – student election

FROM THE MARGIN

VOTER TURNOUT

Approximately 93% of eligible electors voted in the 2010 Australian federal election.

In the USA, where voting is not compulsory, approximately 61% of eligible electors turned out for the 2008 presidential election which was close to a record high.

In a 'think, pair and share' exercise, ask students to consider their experiences of voting, especially in relation to interactive television programs, which allow audiences to express their opinions of contestants or participants through voting. Have students outline or describe the method of voting used, taking care to record the details of the procedure. They might ask, for example: Who votes? How many times can they vote? Who counts the votes? Is there a cost for voting?

Maintaining the pairs, ask students to use their knowledge of voting in formal elections to compile a list of key principles or stages of an election. Their list could include details such as enrolment, voting once, voting in private, compulsory voting, 'one vote, one value', and so on. Once students have compiled this list, ask them to compare



Fig 22: Voting in an election

it to the process they described for voting in an interactive television program. This comparison may be made using a Venn diagram, or by ticking the shared features on the list.

Once the comparison is complete, ask students in a class discussion to consider the fairness of each process, and to contribute to a class list of voting principles.

Using **BLM 1** students work in groups to complete the activities and present their findings. Ask students to use their findings to supplement or modify the class list of voting principles.

Students should now be able to propose definitions for 'secret ballot', 'one vote, one value' and 'preferential voting', as well as definitions for any other principles they suggest are needed for the conduct of a free and fair election.

This knowledge can now be applied to a review of the current voting provision for student elections in your school. Have students propose amendments to these voting provisions and prepare a set of recommendations for the school's Student Representative Council to consider.

Investigation

How and why do Australians vote?

In this investigation students explore compulsory voting, the importance of participation in a democracy and the reasons why it is important for people to enrol to vote. They examine the voting systems used to elect representatives to the federal parliament as well as to state and territory parliaments. The investigation also asks students to evaluate the principles that underpin democratic elections including 'one vote, one value', equality of representation, fair representation, majority rule and representation of minorities.

RECOMMENDED LEVELS

UPPER SECONDARY

MIDDLE SECONDARY

LOWER SECONDARY

UPPER PRIMARY

THE INVESTIGATION AT A GLANCE	
Background briefings for teacher reference	Australian Electoral Commission; Democracy; Electoral division; Full preferential voting; House of Representatives; Representation; Senate
Suggested classroom teaching time	Activity 1: The value of a vote (80 minutes) Activity 2: Profiles of Parliament (80 minutes) Activity 3: Voting systems (80 minutes)
Indicators of student achievement	Understand electoral law relating to voting in Australia Analyse the voting systems used in federal elections and in the states and territories Evaluate the impact of voting systems used on the outcome of elections and representation in parliament
Related Discovering Democracy Units	Lower Secondary: Should the People Rule? Middle Secondary: Getting Things Done

ACTIVITY 1

The value of a vote

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- Who can vote in Australia?
- What are the arguments for and against compulsory voting?
- How do citizens enrol to vote?
- Why should young people enrol to vote?

RESOURCES

- BLM 2** Young people and the vote
- Enrolment: www.aec.gov.au/Education/Democracy_Rules/web_links.htm
- Voting: www.aec.gov.au/Education/Democracy_Rules/web_links.htm
- CD-ROM Animation** History of Voting
- CD-ROM Interactive** The History of Voting Game



Gathering information

Read through **BLM 2** with students. Explain to them that they will be researching information about voting in order to evaluate the material on the BLM.

Discuss with students their current understandings of the following:

- > Who can vote?
- > How do you enrol?
- > What are the arguments for and against compulsory voting?

Divide the class into groups and ask them to use the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) website to research who can vote, how citizens enrol to vote, the purpose of the electoral roll and the reasons for and against compulsory voting.

Have students research voting knowledge and the voting attitudes of your senior school population as well as attitudes to lowering the voting age to 16. Develop a simple class survey that could be used by all groups in the class.

Identifying and analysing

Have student groups report back to the class and discuss the following:

- > What arguments are there for and against compulsory voting? (Have students, in turns, present an argument for or against compulsory voting.)
Which arguments are most convincing to students?
- > Who is eligible to enrol to vote?
- > How do you enrol?
- > What is provisional enrolment?
- > How does provisional enrolment encourage increased participation of eligible voters?

ACTIVITY 2

Profiles of Parliament

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- How do citizens vote for the House of Representatives and the Senate?
- How are the votes counted?
- What role is played by the AEC in conducting democratic elections?

RESOURCES

- **BLM 3** Voting for the House of Representatives and the Senate
- www.aph.gov.au (House of Representatives>Introduction)
- www.aph.gov.au (Senate>Introduction)
- Counting the Votes: www.aec.gov.au/Education/Democracy_Rules/web_links.htm
- Election Results: www.aec.gov.au/Education/Democracy_Rules/web_links.htm



Fig 23: Mobile polling makes voting accessible to all electors

Revisit the material on **BLM 2**. Discuss the arguments put forward by young people about voting. Consider the following:

- > How do the 'Yes' arguments differ from the 'No' arguments?
- > What reasons are offered for lowering the voting age?
What is your opinion about this issue?
- > What suggestions do you have that might convince young people to enrol to vote?

Presenting findings

Have student groups use the knowledge gathered through local research to develop:

- > a report to the AEC on attitudes to voting among students at your school
- > a letter to the newspaper arguing the case for or against voting for 16-year-olds
- > an advertising campaign to inform students at school about voting.



RESOURCES (Cont.)

CD-ROM Animation Counting Your Vote

CD-ROM Animation Election Day

CD-ROM Interactive Quiz 2 – The Constitution – Are you a whiz?

CD-ROM Interactive History Challenge – Test your knowledge

CD-ROM Interactive Voting Challenge – What do you know?

Gathering information

As a preliminary activity to researching the voting systems used in the House of Representatives and the Senate, have students research the role and functions of the two federal houses of parliament. Information should be arranged under the following headings:

- > Name of house (as well as other names given to this house)
- > Who is represented?
- > Number of representatives
- > Terms of office of members of parliament and senators
- > Roles and functions.

Provide students with a copy of **BLM 3** and the spreadsheets of party federal election results from the AEC website.

Read through **BLM 3** with students. In pairs students investigate the electoral systems – the process of voting and the process of counting the vote, as well as the latest election results.

Identifying and analysing

Bring students together to report on their findings and discuss:

- > How does the electoral system used for the House of Representatives support the principle of majority rule?
- > How might minor parties and independents influence the outcome of an election?
- > What are the principles of Senate voting?
- > Why might Senate elections take a long time to finalise?
- > What might be the advantages for a democracy of having a range of parties represented in the Senate?
- > What are the implications for democracy when the same political party has a majority in both houses of parliament?

Presenting findings

Have students use the results of their research and discussions to produce an information guide on one on the following:

- > voting for the Senate
- > voting for the House of Representatives.

Students should include charts, diagrams, photographs and illustrations to explain and analyse each of the voting systems, including the ways that votes are counted.

FROM THE MARGIN

HUNG PARLIAMENT

Capital punishment was abolished in Australia so this does not refer to hanging parliamentarians! It's a term used to describe a parliament in which no political party or coalition of parties has a majority in the House of Representatives.

The term is becoming more applicable to modern parliaments, as minor parties and independent candidates are increasingly holding the balance of power in minority governments.



Fig 24: The Australian Senate

ACTIVITY 3

Voting systems

FOCUS QUESTIONS

What voting systems are used in the States and Territories?
How voter-friendly are websites with information on voting?

RESOURCES

- **BLM 4** States' and Territories' voting systems
- Electoral Council of Australia: www.eca.gov.au/systems/index.htm
- State and Territory electoral authority websites:
 - ACT: www.elections.act.gov.au
 - NSW: www.elections.nsw.gov.au
 - NT: www.nt.gov.au/nteo
 - Qld: www.ecq.qld.gov.au
 - SA: www.ecsa.sa.gov.au
 - Tas: www.tec.tas.gov.au
 - Vic: www.vec.vic.gov.au
 - WA: www.waec.wa.gov.au

CD-ROM Animation History of Voting

CD-ROM Animation Counting Your Vote

CD-ROM Interactive The History of Voting Game

CD-ROM Interactive Voting Challenge – What do you know?

CD-ROM Interactive Teacher's Toolbox (see Getting Government)



FROM THE MARGIN

WESTMINSTER SYSTEM

Westminster is the place where the British Government sits, so the Westminster system refers to the procedures of the British Parliament which were adopted by Australia at the time of Federation and are still in use today.

Gathering information

Provide students with a copy of **BLM 4**. Divide students into eight groups, each to research one state or territory. Refer them to the websites listed above as well as the parliamentary websites which can be found by using a search engine and typing in search terms such as 'Northern Territory Parliament'.

Ask students to find out the following:

- > a brief history of the parliament
- > symbols of government (such as coats of arms, colours, bird and flower emblems)
- > length of parliamentary terms
- > numbers of representatives in house(s) of parliament
- > numbers of electorates and the ways they are organised
- > nature of the voting systems used.

Identifying and analysing

Discuss with students the similarities and differences among the states and territories, as well as differences between the state and federal systems. What accounts for these differences and similarities?

How do the voting systems of the states and territories uphold democratic principles and values such as majority rule and representation of minorities, fair representation and 'one vote, one value'?

Presenting findings

Ask students to present their understandings in groups on a series of posters for the classroom. Have them include the aspects in the research list above. Their presentations should include visual aids, charts and images such as state coats of arms and symbols, and timelines of key electoral events.

Investigation

How do electorates change over time?

A fair electoral system ensures that each citizen's vote has equal value and that voters have, as near as possible, equal representation. For the House of Representatives each state and territory is divided into electoral divisions. The number of electoral divisions is determined by the population in each state and territory. To ensure equal representation, the boundaries of these divisions have to be redrawn or redistributed periodically. This rearrangement of electoral division boundaries is called a 'redistribution'.

In this investigation students analyse the characteristics of Australian electorates, investigate the redistribution process and analyse how democratic values are evident in these processes.

RECOMMENDED LEVELS

UPPER SECONDARY

MIDDLE SECONDARY

LOWER SECONDARY

UPPER PRIMARY

THE INVESTIGATION AT A GLANCE

Background briefings for teacher reference	Australian Electoral Commission; Democracy; Electoral division; Redistribution; Representation
Suggested classroom teaching time	Activity 1: Electorates (80 minutes) Activity 2: Redistributions (80 minutes) Activity 3: Issues (120 minutes)
Indicators of student achievement	Analyse the characteristics of their own and other Australian electorates Understand the process and importance of redistributions in maintaining a democratic electoral system Explain the ways that local issues can influence the way people vote
Related Discovering Democracy Units	Lower Secondary: Should the People Rule? Middle Secondary: Getting Things Done

ACTIVITY 1

Electorates

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What is an electorate?
- In what ways do electorates vary across Australia?
- What is taken into account when determining electoral boundaries?

RESOURCES

- **BLM 5** Analysing the data
- Copies for each student of the map and description of the electorate in which your school is located:
www.aec.gov.au/Education/Democracy_Rules/web_links.htm
- **CD-ROM Animation** Counting Your Vote



FROM THE MARGIN

OVERSEAS VOTING

Eligible Australians living, working or holidaying overseas can still vote in a federal election. In the two weeks leading up to election day, Australians overseas are able to visit their nearest Australian embassy, consulate or high commission and vote in person.

Gathering information

Provide students with a copy of the electorate map and AEC information about the electoral division in which your school is located.

Discuss with students the sorts of information that can be obtained about electorates in Australia. These include size (area), enrolment (numbers of electors), demographic rating (see table), products and industries, and seat status. Ensure that they understand the meaning of each of these terms.

Students then examine the map of the electorate. Discuss with them the considerations that appear to have been made in drawing up the electoral boundaries (such as major roads or geographic features, suburb boundaries).

Have students in pairs construct a spreadsheet or table with the following column headings:

- > Electoral division
- > State or Territory
- > Size (area)
- > Enrolment
- > Demographic rating
- > Products and Industries
- > Seat status
- > Characteristics of boundaries.

Using the AEC website, the pairs complete the spreadsheet or table columns for six or seven individual electorates. Use the alphabetical list of House of Representatives electorates from the AEC website to allocate groups of electorates to students. Ensure a variety of electorates from all states and territories and that all student pairs examine different electorates.

Once students have completed their spreadsheet or table, arrange for them to aggregate their information into a master database, which can then be given to all students. This can be used electronically by all students to sort information.

DEMOGRAPHIC RATINGS FOR ELECTORATES	
Inner metropolitan:	Situated in capital cities and consisting of well-established built-up suburbs
Outer metropolitan:	Situated in capital cities and containing large areas of recent suburban expansion
Provincial:	Outside capital cities, but with a majority of enrolment in major provincial cities
Rural:	Outside capital cities, and without a majority of enrolment in major provincial cities

Identifying and analysing

Provide students with a copy of **BLM 5** and a copy of the aggregated student data.

Use the questions on **BLM 5** as the basis for discussion with students about their own findings and the findings of other students.

Discuss with students the correlations found in the data. For example, how does the size of an electorate correlate with the other characteristics such as enrolment, demographic rating, products and industries, and seat status?

Where students offer generalisations, encourage them to use the spreadsheet or table to come up with evidence and examples. For example: 'Electorates with the largest size (area) have the demographic rating "Rural". This can be seen in the electorates of X, Y and Z.'

Presenting findings

Place students in small groups to develop and present a poster, an electronic presentation or a report to inform an audience about the characteristics of their electorate and other Australian electorates.

Reports should discuss each of the characteristics on the database. Students should sort information on the database to provide evidence for their report and they should provide examples of particular electorates in their presentations, as well as charts, images and diagrams if appropriate.



Fig 25: Schools and other public buildings are used as polling places on election day

ACTIVITY 2

Redistributions

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What is a redistribution?
- When do redistributions occur?
- How do redistributions contribute to fair and equal representation?

RESOURCES

- **BLM 6** Federal redistributions
 - Redistributions: www.aec.gov.au/Education/Democracy_Rules/web_links.htm
- CD-ROM Animation** Counting Your Vote



Fig 26: Polling official checking for the voter's name on the electoral roll for his division

Gathering information

Ask students to provide reasons why the enrolment in electorates might change over time. A useful way to approach this is to ask students about population changes in the state or territory, and in their local area. For example, have there been any new housing estates or apartment complexes in the inner city areas or has there been a decline in rural populations? Why might these changes have occurred?

Ask students to suggest reasons why it might be important for a democratic electoral system to have enrolments in electorates with approximately equal populations.

Provide students with a copy of **BLM 6**.

Divide students into groups where they can read and discuss the BLM and access computers to obtain further information from the AEC website. Their task is to explain to the rest of the class:

- > the conditions under which a redistribution occurs
- > the process of redistribution, including determining the quota
- > the factors the redistribution committee takes into account
- > the ways that the public can take part in this process.

Identifying and analysing

Have student groups report back to the class.

Discuss with students:

- > rules covering redistributions
- > meanings of the factors that redistributions must take into account, for example: What is meant by 'community of interest'?
- > ways that people can have input into the process.

Presenting findings

Ask students to imagine that there has been a significant population increase (or decrease) in their electorate and a redistribution has been announced. This means that part of their electorate boundaries will be redrawn.

Have students prepare a newspaper article (which includes a map of their electorate) for the general public, to explain the goals of the redistribution and how redistributions contribute to a fair and representative electoral system. The article should also clarify the process of redistribution and invite input from local people.

ACTIVITY 3

Issues

FOCUS QUESTIONS

- What issues might concern people in our electorate?
- What issues might concern people in different types of electorates?
- What issues might affect the way that people vote?

RESOURCES

- **BLM 7** Electorate issues
- Division Profiles: www.aec.gov.au/Education/Democracy_Rules/web_links.htm
- Your Guide: www.yourguide.com.au (portal of rural newspapers from all over Australia)
- Newspapers: www.onlinenewspapers.com

Gathering information

Using the AEC website, download a range of division profiles for two electorates as per the following demographic ratings: inner metropolitan, outer metropolitan, provincial and rural. Students may choose to concentrate on electorates in their state or territory or choose any electorates Australia-wide.

Provide copies of these profiles to students in groups. Have them look at the demographic rating and products and industries in these electorates. For each type of electorate ask students to hypothesise about the issues that might affect the way that people in these electorates might vote. For example, a rural electorate with a dairy industry might be interested in the price of water, or an outer metropolitan electorate might be interested in home loan interest rates.

Have students report back on their hypotheses.

List their suggestions on four charts labelled 'Inner metropolitan', 'Outer metropolitan', 'Provincial' and 'Rural'.

Ask students in pairs or groups to test their hypotheses by researching issues in the local newspapers of one of these electorates. Each

group should collect and analyse four newspaper articles and record them in **BLM 7**.

Identifying and analysing

Have student groups report on their findings to the class and discuss:

- > What issues are important in each of the electorate demographic categories?
- > What issues do different electorate types have in common and what issues are different?
- > What issues might be important in determining the ways that people vote in each of these electorates?

Presenting findings

Have students present their findings in a feature newspaper article or report. Ask them to consider an audience and purpose for their writing.



Fig 27: Voters' interests can be determined by their location and the communities in which they live

Going further

RESOURCES

- **BLM 8** Voting issues survey

Have students develop a questionnaire and interview some members of their community about their voting habits and the issues that affect the way they vote in elections.

Develop, with the class, a common class survey sheet for students to use.

Decide the best way of conducting this research with the class. Students may be more comfortable conducting interviews in pairs. (Face-to-face interviews are ideal but there may be opportunities for telephone or email interviews as well.) Talk with students about the ways they can locate interviewees and the protocols of interviewing – such as politeness, guarantees of anonymity, and so on.

Inform parents or other members of the community about this activity through the school newsletter. Provide students with a proforma letter from the school that will enable them to approach members of the community and which outlines the purpose of the research and guarantees the anonymity of the interviewee. Offer to provide participants with the results of the survey.

Data analysis generated by the interview could include:

- > age and voting interests
- > gender and voting interests
- > occupation and voting interests
- > background and voting interests
- > party affiliation and voting interests
- > location in the electorate and voting interests
- > analysis of the most important issues for voters in your community
- > interest in politics and voting in your local community.



Fig 28: Voters' interests can be determined by their age, gender and occupation

Consider having the class compile their combined results into a class booklet. This could be used as the basis for:

- > an article for the local newspaper or school newsletter
- > a presentation to the senior students at the school
- > a presentation to the local council
- > a presentation to your local Member of Parliament.

Students could focus on the following questions:

- > What issues are most important in our electorate?
- > Do issues differ with gender, age and occupational background? What is the nature of these differences?
- > What should be the most important considerations for a person seeking to represent your electorate?
- > Are political parties important to voters?

Alternatively use the survey sheets (**BLM 8**) to conduct the interviews.