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6 Australia

Early Promise Unfulfilled: The Electoral Representation of Women in Australia

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Introduction

Although Australia was one of the first countries to grant women the right to vote, it was not until much later that women began to gain election to parliament in any significant numbers. The right to vote on the same basis as men was granted to women as early as 1895 in South Australia, with Western Australia following suit in 1900. With the federation of the colonies in 1902, women gained the right to vote in Commonwealth elections, and in the next few years all of the new states followed, the last being Victoria in 1909.[1] However, this early promise was largely unfulfilled and as table 6.1 indicates, it was not until 1943 that the first woman was elected to the national parliament; indeed, South Australia and Tasmania did not have a woman representative in their state lower houses until the 1950s.

One explanation for this discrepancy between granting women the vote and their gaining representation is the electoral system and the strong elements of compulsion embedded within it. These elements of compulsion has led to a system of strongly disciplined parties where dissent is virtually unknown and legislative recruitment is dependent upon party service and loyalty. But ironically, once the parties took the decision to increase the numbers of women candidates, strong party discipline has been a positive influence on women's representation, particularly within the Labor Party when it eventually decided to adopt a quota system. Other explanations for the discrepancy include the egalitarian settler tradition, changes in public opinion,

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Table 6.1 The extension of women's political rights in national and state lower houses in Australia

	*Votes for women**	*First election eligible*	*Right to stand**	*First woman elected*
Commonwealth	1902	1903	1902	1943
New South Wales	1902	1904	1918	1925
Victoria	1909	1911	1924	1933
South Australia	1895	1896	1895	1959
Western Australia	1900	1901	1920	1921
Queensland	1907	1907	1915	1929
Tasmania	1904	1906	1922	1955

* Date of bill gaining assent.

and the role of advocacy groups. The confluence of these factors has helped to increase the electoral representation of women, but in general Australia has not fulfilled its early potential when it granted women the right to vote.[2]

This chapter examines patterns of women's representation in Australia, focusing on the national lower house, the House of Representatives. The first section outlines the operation of the electoral system, while the second section examines the evolution of women's representation in the national parliament. The remainder of the chapter analyses the major explanations for why women took so long to gain parliamentary representation in Australia, following the early extension of the franchise.

The Voting System

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Australia was at the forefront of electoral experimentation (for an account, see Farrell and McAllister 2005; Sawer 2001). As early as 1859 all the Australian colonies had established systems of parliamentary government with adult male suffrage. The secret ballot (still known internationally as the "Australian ballot") was also an Australian invention and was first used in South Australia and Victoria in the mid-1850s. But Australia is also of international significance as the home of two prominent forms of the preferential electoral system—the majority preferential vote (MPV) and the single transferable vote (STV). It was the first country to use these systems,[3] and today it is the largest of only three established democracies—the others being Malta (since 1921) and Ireland (1922)—to use these electoral systems widely for all levels of elections.

The reasons for the adoption of preferential voting lie in nineteenth British debates about electoral reform that heavily influenced the early electoral system designers at the turn of the twentieth century. The system that has

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Table 6.2 House of Representatives electoral systems since 1901

	State	*Electoral system*
1901	NSW, Vic, WA	Single-member plurality (SMP)
	Qld	MPV; using contingent vote
	SA	Block vote
	Tasmania	STV
1903	All states	SMP
1918	All states	MPV

emerged is quintessentially Australian, and apart from its use in Ireland and Malta, the only significant sign of this system taking root outside of Australia has been in fledgling democracies in the Oceania region (Reilly 1997; Reynolds and Reilly 1997). Table 6.2 shows that the use of a plurality electoral system for House of Representatives elections continued until 1918, when preferential voting was finally adopted; it has remained in place ever since.

MPV is a majoritarian electoral system operating with single-seat constituencies in which, to be elected, a candidate has to win at least 50 percent of the vote. If, on the basis of counting the first preferences on the ballot papers, no candidate achieves an overall majority, the candidate with the least votes is excluded, and her ballot papers are distributed among the remaining candidates based on the next preferences indicated on the ballot papers. The process continues until one candidate emerges with an overall majority. MPV is a nonproportional system, with a poor match between vote proportions and seat proportions (Farrell and McAllister 2005: 78ff). What distinguishes it from plurality electoral systems is the expectation that a candidate should have an overall majority of the vote to be elected (Farrell 2001).

The electoral system is characterized by a strong element of compulsion, most obviously in the system of compulsory voting, but also in the requirement that the voter complete all preferences on the ballot paper. Compulsory voting was introduced in Commonwealth elections in 1924 and by 1941 had been extended to all of the states and territories. Although it is an offence not to vote without a valid reason, strong public support for the system means that there are few nonvoters. Another reason for the low level of noncompliance is the design of the system to be as user-friendly as possible. There are few restrictions on acquiring an absentee or postal ballot, voters may cast a ballot outside the constituency in which they are registered, and extensive steps are taken to assist voters with poor English language skills.

In addition to compulsory attendance at the polling place, in order for a vote to count as valid, a voter must complete all preferences on the ballot paper.[4] This peculiarly Australian practice reflects at one level a general political culture that promotes regulation and efficiency and an emphasis

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on citizens' duty (McAllister 2002). At another level, it reflects the legislators' view that the compulsory expression of preferences reinforces the system of compulsory turnout, for "if it were to be conceded that voters have the right to be indifferent in regard to a subset of candidates, it would seem to follow that voters have the right to be indifferent in regard to all candidates" (Reilly and Maley 2000: 44).

Compulsory voting and the compulsory listing of preferences have important consequences for the party system and for the conduct of national politics. The first is the dominance of the two-party system, with Labor opposing a conservative coalition of the Liberal and National parties.[5] Frequent, compulsory attendance at the polls and the associated strong public profile enjoyed by the major parties have generated a high level of party identification. While there has been some degree of partisan dealignment in Australia, it has not been nearly as extensive as that in Britain or the United States (Dalton 2000). Minor parties and independents thus find it very difficult to break into national politics. In turn, the compulsory expression of preferences virtually institutionalizes the Liberal-National coalition, avoiding the dangers (for them) of vote splitting, allowing them to field candidates in the same constituency and increasing the likelihood that one or other of them will succeed in having a candidate elected.

For the political parties, the complexity and compulsory elements of the electoral system have resulted in a high level of party discipline and cohesion. The strength of the parties translates into strong party cohesion in parliament, with parliamentary dissent being almost unknown. To the extent that differing opinions on policy issues exist within the parties, they are expressed in factionalism, most notably within the Labor Party (McAllister 1991). At the same time, aspiring candidates for major office must display strong party credentials, so that having worked full-time for a minister or an elected representative has become virtually a precondition for selection for a winnable seat. The net effect is that each party's elected representatives are strongly partisan and, at least in their parliamentary behaviour, highly disciplined.

Women in the Legislature: Historical Trends

Although Australia's first female parliamentarian was Edith Cowan, who was elected to the Western Australian Legislative Assembly in 1921, just one year after the right to stand was granted, a woman did not gain election to the lower house of the national parliament until 1943—with the election of Enid Lyons representing the seat of Darwin in Tasmania[6] in the House of Representatives.[7] Enid Lyons, who was the widow of Joe Lyons, the prime minister between 1932 and 1939, won the seat for the United Australia Party

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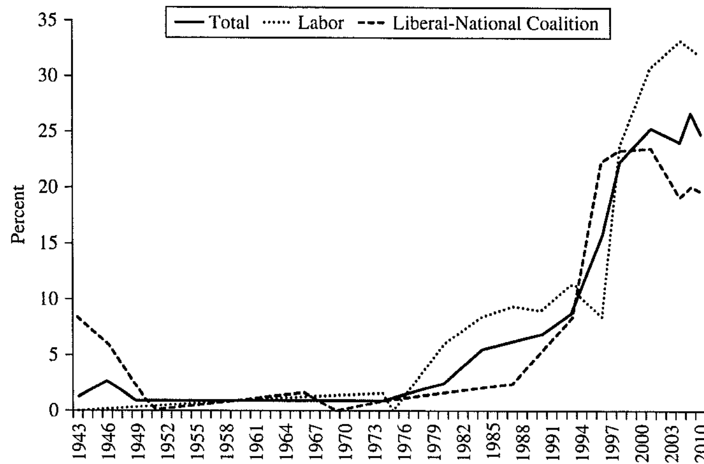

Figure 6.1 Proportion of women members of the House of Representatives since 1943

(the forerunner of the Liberals) and was the only new member of that party to gain election.[8]

The patterns of parliamentary representation among women in the lower house since 1943 are shown in figure 6.1. The trends show the almost total lack of progress in women's representation at each election through the 1950s and 1960s. In the six elections between 1951 and 1963, for example, no women were elected to the lower house. Even in the 1970s there was a dearth of women elected representatives, a period when the other established democracies were significantly increasing their proportion of women elected representatives. Between 1969 and 1977 there was just one woman elected—Joan Child—in 1974, but she lost her seat in 1975, to be elected again in 1980. She remained in parliament until retiring in 1990, serving as Speaker between 1986 and 1989.

From 1980 onward there is a significant increase in the proportion of women representatives—what is sometimes referred to as a "critical mass" (see, for example, Davis 1997; Studlar and McAllister 2002)—by which increased representation in itself accelerates the likelihood that other women will stand and gain election. In 1990, 10 women members were elected for the first time, and that figure has increased steadily ever since, exceeding 20 for the first time in 1996. The 2001 parliament represents the peak representation for women in the lower house, when 38 were elected out of a total of 150. The 2010 election represents a decrease from 2007, with 37 members elected, again from a total house membership of 150.

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For most of the period, there were few differences between the parties in terms of women's representation, albeit from a very low base. However, from the 1980 election onward, Labor has consistently surpassed the Liberal-National coalition in the numbers of women elected representatives in its ranks. Indeed, in every federal election since then, there have been proportionately more Labor women elected than coalition women. The sole exception to this pattern is the 1996 election, when the coalition significantly outnumbered Labor as a result of its winning office after 13 years in opposition. In that election, there were just 4 women out of the 49 members that Labor returned, compared with 18 women out of the total 94 coalition members who were returned.

These patterns suggest that there is a broadly similar pattern in women's lower house parliamentary representation between the parties, with a large rise in representation after 1980—somewhat later than its occurrence in many other countries. That having been said, women have been more likely to gain lower house election for Labor than for the Liberal or National parties. These patterns are the result of a complex interaction between electoral system rules, the strategies adopted by the political parties to increase women's representation, and the role of external agencies such as public opinion and the lobbying activities of the women's movement. The role of each of these factors is examined in detail below.

The Impact of the Voting System on the Proportion of Women in the Legislature

One of the most consistent and robust findings in studies of women's representation is the importance of the electoral system, especially the favourable impact of party list (Norris and Franklin 1997; Matland 1998a). Other factors that relate to the operation of the electoral system include the degree of competition in a constituency. Women have more success in gaining election if the competition for seats is less at the preselection or nomination stage (Darcy, Welch, and Clark 1994), but once nominated, a more competitive party system provides more incentives for parties to search for new voters (Matland and Studlar 1996; Curtin and Sexton 2004). Reduced turnout lowers women's representation (Norris 2001) but of course does not apply to Australia because of the system of compulsory voting.

Australia has used a variety of electoral systems for the House of Representatives during the course of the twentieth century, as outlined earlier. This experimentation owes much to the political debates in Britain around the turn of the nineteenth century, where impending mass suffrage stimulated discussion about electoral reform. Another influence on Australian experimentation was the role of electoral system activists, such as Catherine

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Helen Spence, Inglis Clark, and Edward Nanson, all of whom had a significant influence on the arguments for and against the various systems then under consideration. And a third influence was the experiences of the states, all of which had experimented at various times with electoral system design. Indeed, the first Commonwealth elections in 1901 were conducted using the electoral systems then existing in the states, in the absence of an agreed uniform system (see Uhr 2000).

The role of the electoral system as an influence on women's representation has largely been in the context of promoting strong parties. Compulsory voting and the compulsory ordering of preferences have ensured that the major parties gain strong voter support. In turn, the parties exercise strong discipline among their elected representatives. This has had both positive and negative effects on women's representation. On the positive side, as discussed later, it means that when the parties have decided to adopt quotas for the selection of women candidates (as in the case of Labor), they have been able to enforce the decision across the party membership. On the negative side, when the parties have not regarded women's representation as important (which was clearly the case in the 1950s through to the early 1970s), it has been difficult for advocates to get their message heard.

The Impact of Other Variables on the Proportion of Women in the Legislature

Egalitarianism

Australia's origins as a settler society and the consequent effects on the development of democracy have had a major influence on women's representation. The legacy of the settler society has been a strong emphasis on egalitarianism, which is sometimes identified as encapsulating the distinctive Australian ethos. The notion of equality in Australian society has its origins in the frontier tradition that emerged in the early years of white settlement and in the reliance of the settlers on their friends and neighbours for support—what became known as "mateship" (Ward 1958). This frontier spirit fostered a degree of egalitarianism far beyond that found in the other colonial societies. The result was the creation of a more open, less privileged, and meritocratic society than the one that the settlers had left behind.

Once egalitarianism was firmly established in social relations, demands grew for it to be applied to political institutions as well. Throughout the 1850s, a range of political reforms were introduced in the colonies: by 1859 most of the colonies had introduced universal manhood suffrage; the secret ballot was introduced in all but one of the colonies by 1859; plural voting was abolished in the colonies around the turn of the century; and the principle of

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payment for elected representatives was also established in most of the colonies by 1890. All of these reforms were many decades in advance of their introduction in the other established democracies.

Egalitarianism had a direct influence in fostering women's political rights. The absence of an inherited political culture and inherited privilege meant that women were accepted for what they could contribute, and in the context of a settler society women were regarded as having at least as much to contribute as men. The granting of political rights to women was seen as a logical extension of their social role. In turn, once the principle of gender equality in political rights had been established, implementing it was relatively easy since the change depended simply on the passage of the appropriate legislation. Even then, of course, there was opposition, but not at the level found, say, in Britain or Europe during the same period. The result was, as noted earlier, the granting of universal suffrage to women years ahead of any other country, with the sole exception of New Zealand.

Changing Public Opinion

Public opinion has played a significant role in shaping women's electoral representation. As opinion has become more favorable to women in the public sphere, advocates have found it easier to press their case with the major political parties. Identifying detailed changes in public opinion toward women is problematic, since few survey questions have been asked over an

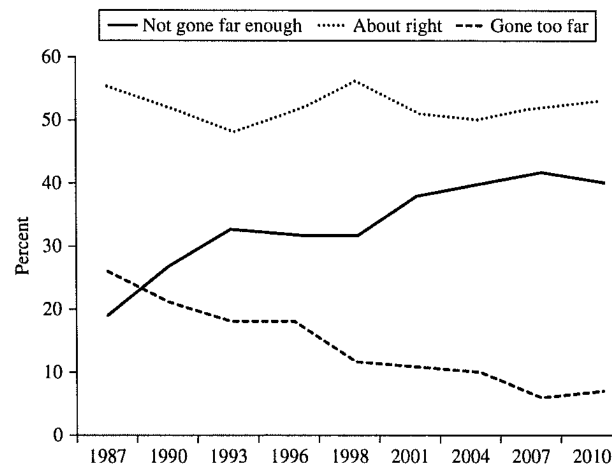

Figure 6.2 Public opinion toward equal opportunities for women, 1987–2010 (percent)

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extended period, and even fewer where the question wordings are consistent. We do, however, have the responses to a question about women's job opportunities, which has been asked consistently in the Australian Election Study from 1987 onward. The question asks whether the respondents felt that the changes in women's job opportunities that had taken place had gone too far, not far enough, or were about right (figure 6.2).

The results suggest a consistent and important shift in opinions on the issue over the 23-year period of the surveys. In 1987 those who thought equal opportunities for women had gone too far exceeded those who thought that they had not gone far enough, although the majority felt the current situation was about right. By 2010, 40 percent—thought that they had not gone far enough, more than double the 1987 figure. Similarly, those opposed to the changes comprised just 7 percent in 2010, compared with more than a quarter of the electorate in 1987. These are very substantial changes in opinions over what is, in public opinion terms, a relatively short period of time and demonstrate the depth to which popular attitudes toward the role of women have changed.

The appointment of Julia Gillard as Australia's first female prime minister in June 2010 also has a major effect on public opinion. With the support of factional leaders in the Labor Party, Gillard replaced Kevin Rudd, the incumbent prime minister, who had been faring badly in the polls. This was the first time that Labor had dismissed a prime minister during their first-term in office. In the subsequent election in August 2010 Labor retained office with the support of a small number of Greens and independents. Labor gained substantially among women voters as a result of Gillard's leadership. For the first time since the polls began, Labor attracted more votes among women than men, by as much as 7 percentage points (McAllister 2011: 115). This represents a major reversal of the traditional gender gap in voting.

Advocacy Groups

Since the early 1970s, Australia has had a highly effective lobby group campaigning on behalf of greater women's representation and on public issues affecting women more generally. Most prominent among these has been the Women's Electoral Lobby (WEL), established in 1972. WEL was very much part of second-wave feminism, and was composed of mostly professional women born in the 1950s who held clear views about promoting the role of women in the private and public sectors. The goal of WEL is to ensure greater participation by women in all aspects of society, and the movement's platform is based on the demands of second-wave feminism: equal pay, equal employment, equal opportunity, free contraception, abortion on demand, and free childcare (Sawer and Simms 1993: 244–245).

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Has advocacy by WEL and similar women's groups played a role both in recruiting women for parliament and in changing the opinions of those who are elected? Evidence from the Australian Candidate Study (ACS), conducted among candidates at each federal election, suggests that it has had a major impact. Each of the studies has asked about prior activity in women's organizations and the support that was provided by such organizations during the course of the election campaign. In the 2004 ACS, for example, 78 percent of Labor women candidates but only 29 percent of Liberal-National women candidates said that they had been "'very active" in women's organizations in their community. It would appear, then, that Labor women candidates had stronger links to women's groups than their Liberal-National competitors, as we would expect.

Quotas

Numerous studies have identified the candidate selection process within political parties as representing the major barrier to the equal political representation of women (Matland and Studlar 1996; Welch and Studlar 1996). Even where political parties were prepared to nominate significant numbers of women candidates, they were often selected for unwinnable seats, and since incumbency is the major attribute determining future election, this creates a vicious circle accounting for future lack of success among women (McAllister and Studlar 1992; Studlar and McAllister 1991). Across a range of countries, the solution to this problem has taken the form of quotas for women candidates, with a certain number of winnable seats being allocated solely for nomination of women (for a review, see Caul 2001).

The Labor Party was the first major Australian party to raise the issue of quotas and to follow it up with concrete policies. Following an internal inquiry in the late 1970s into women's electoral representation in general, a variety of affirmative action measures were considered, including women-only shortlists. The 1981 Labor conference set a target of 30 percent women within the parliamentary party to be achieved by 1990, but did not establish processes to ensure that this target was met, or to monitor progress toward its achievement (Sawer 2000). In the absence of an agreed process, progress was slow. In 1994 a further target of 35 percent of women in winnable seats by 2002 was set, but this time various sanctions were put in place against the state branches if they did not meet the target.

In 2002 the target of 35 percent was further increased to 40 percent, to be achieved by 2012 (Curtin and Sexton 2004). The evidence suggests that quotas—particularly the 1994 quota that, for the first time, identified winnable seats—have been a major factor in increasing Labor representation in the

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House of Representatives. By contrast, the Liberal Party has historically rejected quotas as a matter of principle, and in the 1980s and early 1990s, their representation of women in the lower house lagged behind Labor.

Conclusion

Although Australia was the second democracy to grant women the vote, and one of the first to permit them to stand for national elected office, this early promise was unfulfilled for many years. The first woman was not elected to the national legislature until 1943, and it was not until the 1980s that women's electoral representation began to make any significant headway. In 2010 a major step was taken with the appointment of the first women prime minister, Julia Gillard. No single explanation accounts for this discrepancy between the granting of electoral rights and their implementation, but clearly the electoral system was one factor, and more specifically the elements of compulsion within it that have fostered strong, highly disciplined political parties. This was a negative factor early in the century, but as the social and cultural milieu has changed, it has been a positive factor in the 1980s and 1990s, enabling the Labor Party to implement a quota system without the major conflicts that have surrounded the issue in other center-left parties, notably the British Labour Party.

Other factors in addition to the electoral system have undoubtedly been important. The strong sense of egalitarianism and fairness within the Australian political culture has underpinned the recent successes of women in gaining nomination for winnable seats. A popular belief in equal opportunity and personal success through merit have made it difficult for opponents of change to argue their case, at least publicly. And at the same time, advocacy groups such as the WEL Lobby and changes in public opinion, in turn fostered by political, social, and economic changes in the role of women, have helped to expedite increased women's representation. While the fulfilment of Australia's early promise in the political representation of women has been slow to take hold, future decades look set to accelerate that process.

Notes

* The 1987–2010 Australian Election Studies were funded by the Australian Research Council and are available from the Australian Social Science Data Archive at the Australian National University.

1. The situation with regard to upper houses in the states is more complex, and women's rights were generally granted later, see McAllister (2006) for details.
2. A large part of this chapter is based on previous research conducted by the author (see McAllister 2006; Farrell and McAllister 2005).

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3. MPV was introduced in Queensland in 1892; STV in Tasmania in 1896; MPV for House of Representative national elections in 1918–19; and STV for Senate elections in 1949.
4. This is in the case of MPV elections; for Senate elections, there is the option of "ticket-voting," although that is not covered since our interest is in lower house elections (see Farrell and McAllister 2000).
5. The coalition was formed in 1920 and has remained in existence since then, except for two short periods in 1973–74 and 1987.
6. At this time, Darwin was the name of a seat in Tasmania (as well as the capital of the Northern Territory).
7. In the same election, Dorothy Tangney, the first female member of the Senate, was elected to represent Western Australia.
8. Enid Lyons had previously contested a Tasmanian state seat for Labor, unsuccessfully, in 1925.