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Elections, By-Elections and Referendums

Elections

The conduct of regular and fair elections is one of the central features of a modern representative democracy.

For many citizens voting is one action that they recognise as being political.

In Western Australia general elections are constitutionally required for both Houses of the Parliament at least once every four years.

By-elections may also be necessary for the Legislative Assembly, and the filling of 'casual vacancies' for the Legislative Council may take place.

Referendums may also be conducted to assess electoral opinion.

Roles of Elections

Elections fulfil many roles including:

- selection of representatives to Parliament;
- determination of which political party, coalition or 'alliance' will either govern or be in opposition;
- provision of a guide for the direction of policies to be pursued in Parliament and government;
- education of voters on public issues; and
- provision of a 'safety valve' enabling electors to record their voice in a peaceful, constitutionally approved form.

The outcomes of elections are closely dependent upon who exercise voting rights, which voting systems are employed and the division of the electorate into constituencies. In Western Australia the latter are called districts in the Legislative Assembly and regions in the Legislative Council.

2008 State Election (State Wide Totals)				
Party	Legislative Assembly		Legislative Council	
	Seats	% Vote	Seats	% Vote
Liberal	24	38.39	16	39.60
Labor	28	35.84	11	36.14
Greens	-	11.92	4	11.08
National	4	4.87	5	5.32
Independent	3	4.35	-	1.47
CDP	-	2.58	-	2.32
Family First	-	1.95	-	2.52
CEC	-	0.11	-	0.27
One Nation	-	-	-	0.63
Daylight Saving	-	-	-	0.61
New Country	-	-	-	0.05
Total Seats	59		36	
Informal vote %	5.32		2.83	
Turnout %	86.48			

Compiled by Antony Green for the WA Parliamentary Library

By-elections

A by-election is an election held to fill a vacancy in the Legislative Assembly between elections. Such elections may result from death, resignation, absence without leave, a Court of Disputed Returns decision, disqualification or ineligibility of a member. Between 1890 and 1947 the Constitution required that when a member was appointed as a minister it was necessary for the member to re-contest the seat in a by-election.

By-elections, apart from filling a vacancy in Parliament, are often regarded as significant indicators of the current electoral standings of the political parties. The poll ratings of party leaders can be affected by the performance of their party candidates in by-elections.

Historically, it has been normal for a 'swing against the governing party' with turnout typically lower than for a general election. As by-elections normally create media interest this provides the candidates with a higher than normal media profile.

Referendums

In Australia a referendum, a referral by Parliament of a policy or proposed law to the electors, is required to formally amend the Commonwealth Constitution.

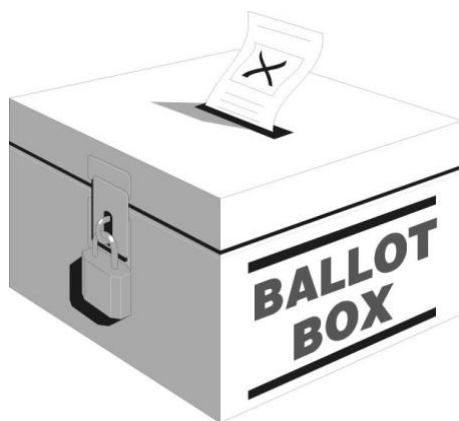
To achieve a formal change to the Constitution the proposition must be accepted by a majority of voters in a majority of States.

Only 8 amendments out of 44 attempts have achieved the double majority to change the Constitution.

Referendums in Western Australia are not necessary to amend the State Constitutional documents unless the proposal is to abolish the Office of Governor or abolish or reduce the size of the Legislative Assembly or Legislative Council.

When referendums are conducted they are usually advisory. One very significant referendum in Western Australia's colonial history took place on 31 July 1900 when the voters decided to be constitutionally an 'Original State' in the Federation.

On 8 April 1933 voters decided to secede (withdraw) from the Federation. Of course this was only an advisory poll as Western Australia ultimately remained in the Federation.



Other referendums conducted in Western Australia have been about local option and prohibition questions as to whether the sale of alcoholic beverages should generally be permitted to the public.

In conjunction with the 2005 general election one referendum question sought direction to the parliament and government about extended retail trading hours on weekdays, with another referendum question focused on retail trading on Sundays. Both referendums resulted in strong 'no' votes.

One very contentious matter which has gone to referendum on four occasions has been whether daylight saving should be adopted during the summer months. On 8 March 1975, 7 April 1984, 4 April 1992 and 16 May 2009 the electors of Western Australia have rejected daylight saving with a very similar voting pattern of about 55 per cent 'no' and 45 per cent 'yes'. Country region electors have strongly rejected the four trials.

Pattern of Regional Voting for Fourth Daylight Saving Referendum, 16 May 2009:

2009 Daylight Saving Referendum		
Region	Yes (%)	No (%)
North Metropolitan	55.46	44.54
South Metropolitan	51.35	48.65
East Metropolitan	44.89	55.11
Metropolitan Total	50.60	49.40
South West	34.61	65.39
Mining and Pastoral	34.11	65.89
Agricultural	17.15	82.85
Country Total	29.96	70.04
State Wide Total	45.44	54.56

Source: www.waec.wa.gov.au

Visit the Western Australian Electoral Commission website at www.waec.wa.gov.au for more information on elections, by-elections and referendums.