

Voting Rights

Historical Background

The quest to gain the right to vote, sometimes known as the franchise (or even suffrage), is one of the most interesting and important in parliamentary history. Many histories of voting rights in Australia commence with its path in Britain. The great *Reform Act 1832* was expected to widely extend voting rights in Britain but most working people felt betrayed and rallied behind their own program for reform, including votes for all men, which they called the 'people's charter'. The supporters of the charter were called 'Chartists' who planned to win these changes by peacefully presenting to Parliament petitions signed by thousands of citizens.

Progress, though, was slow as the requirement to own property was considered important. When representative government began in 1870 in Western Australia, electors to the Legislative Council had to possess property worth at least £50 (\$4000 AUD in today's money) or had to be householders paying an annual rent of £10 (\$800 AUD in today's money) or more. Electors who leased crown land to the same amount of annual rental also qualified.

From 1890 when responsible (self) government was gained, different voting rights prevailed for the Legislative Assembly and the Legislative Council until 1964. Some of the main voting rights' milestones, broadly part of the steps to a more democratic society in Western Australia, include:

- **1893:** For the Legislative Assembly, voting rights were granted to male British subjects (if naturalised of at least one year's standing) who were at least 21 years of age. Aborigines were debarred from voting. For the Legislative Council, there were additional property qualifications including holding freehold property worth at least £100 (\$10 000 AUD in today's money) and other leasehold and rental provisions.

- **1899:** Women were granted voting rights (but could not take a seat in Parliament until 1920).

- **1904:** Plural voting was abolished for the Legislative Assembly. Previously, the law had permitted electors to vote in any Legislative Assembly district in which they had satisfied certain residential property requirements. Some electors had been able to cast as many as 30 votes in one general election. This change meant that an elector was restricted to one vote in one Legislative Assembly district.

- **1911:** Modifications for Legislative Council electors were introduced to require the possession of freehold property worth at least £50 (\$4900 AUD in today's money) and leasehold or householder qualifications of £17 (\$1600 AUD in today's money) annual value.

- **1919:** Compulsory enrolment was introduced for Legislative Assembly elections.

- **1936:** Voting was made compulsory for Legislative Assembly elections. Citizens were subject to a fine if they did not cast a vote and a 'valid, truthful and sufficient reason' was not provided.

- **1962:** Voting rights were granted to Aboriginal people, with voluntary enrolment.

- **1963:** Restricted adult franchise was removed for electors to the Legislative Council with the abolition of property qualifications. Plural voting was also abolished with enrolment and voting being made compulsory for the Legislative Council.

- **1970:** The minimum age for voters was reduced from 21 years to 18 years.

- **1983:** Enrolment and voting was made compulsory for all eligible citizens.



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In summary, the various changes, which have often been keenly debated, mean that voting rights for Western Australian Parliament elections are held by:

- adults who are 18 years of age or older¹; and
- who have Australian citizenship; and
- who have lived at their present address for at least the last month.

As in the past, though, there have always been disqualifications, which prevailed in colonial times and the early years of statehood, which were included in section 18 of the *Electoral Act 1907*.

Some of the disqualifications have included:

- those of unsound mind;
- a mentally impaired person (as defined in the *Criminal Law (Mentally Impaired Accused) Act 1996*;
- those dependent on charitable relief from the State (removed in 1964);
- Aboriginal peoples and others (frequently amended and removed in 1962);
- adults sentenced for a period of one year, temporarily extended in 2008 to comply with commonwealth law; and
- those attainted of treason.

As electoral law provides for both compulsory enrolment and compulsory voting, a citizen's voting rights must be exercised. This helps to account for why there are several provisions in the Electoral Act 1907 to enable a citizen to cast their vote at a general election, by-election or referendum.

The primary methods of voting are:

- ordinary vote: electors cast their votes on election day at a polling booth within the district and region for which they are registered.
- absent vote: electors cast their votes on election day at a polling booth outside the district for which they are registered.
- early vote: electors cast their vote in person or by post prior to polling day. Such electors must have an approved reason to vote early. The rate of early voting has greatly increased in recent elections.

To further assist eligible citizens to cast their vote, the Electoral Commission makes further arrangements such as: Mobile polling: teams visit many hospitals, special institutions and some remote areas in the week before polling day.

- drive-in polling places: a polling place officer can bring ballots upon request to an elector with limited mobility who can cast a vote without leaving their car.
- accessible parking bays: wheelchair accessible polling places are advertised.
- services to assist hearing and vision impaired electors.

For further information on enrolment or voting, see the Western Australian Electoral Commission website: www.waec.wa.gov.au

¹ Note that citizens 17 years of age are permitted to enrol to vote. Citizens are not allowed to vote (despite enrolment) until they are 18 years of age.

