

Representative democracy

Democracy is the most common form of government in the world today. Former US president Abraham Lincoln said it was 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'.

Where democracy began

Democracy began in ancient Athens around the fifth century BC. (The word 'democracy' comes from the Greek word *demos*, which means 'the body of citizens'.) Adult male citizens gathered around 40 times a year in Athens to decide on important civic issues. They had a direct say in the decision-making process. This form of democracy is called direct democracy.



An artist's view of a meeting of Athenian citizens

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Democracy in Australia

Australia is one of a number of countries today that is a representative democracy. This means that we elect people to represent us in the government of our country. We could not have a direct democracy. Can you imagine what a debate involving all Australian citizens would sound like! Or how large a meeting place would be needed?

So ... how does representative democracy work?

Australia is divided into a number of electorates (currently 150). Each contains about the same number of people (around 81,000). Some rural electorates are very large in area, while those around cities are quite small. In a federal election, citizens of an electorate vote for whom they want to represent them in government — in both the lower (House of Representatives) and upper (Senate) houses of parliament. Election candidates usually belong to a political party.

The political party (or coalition) winning the majority of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives forms the government. The unsuccessful party (or coalition) forms the Opposition. One of the Senate's key roles is to review new or changed laws proposed by the government, once they have been approved by the lower house. The Senate may, after a majority vote, approve them, too. Or it might ask for changes to be made, or reject them altogether. To become law, all proposals (called bills) must be approved by both houses of parliament.

The 2004 Australian federal election

The Liberal–National coalition won 86 of the 150 seats in the House of Representatives in the 2004 election. Hence, it again formed government. Significantly, for the first time in many years, it also won a majority in the Senate. This means that bills passed by a Coalition government are more likely to be also supported in the Senate.



The Coalition's clear win in the 2004 election meant that John Howard was reinstated for a fourth three-year term as Prime Minister.

Use the information in this worksheet and in the sources listed below in the References to complete the following activities.

1. Explain the difference between direct democracy and representative democracy.
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2. To what extent do you think the form of government we have in Australia illustrates Abraham Lincoln's definition? Explain.
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3. The larger the area of the electorate, the greater its political influence. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Explain.
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4. Suggest how ordinary citizens can ensure their particular concerns are at least considered by those responsible for governing Australia. (*Hint: Remember, we have a representative democracy.*)
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5. How many seats did the Liberal–National Coalition win in the 2004 election, compared with the 2001 election? What does this, in broad terms, suggest about the political views of Australian citizens?
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6. Given that 48 per cent of Australian citizens did not vote for the Coalition in the 2004 election, do you think that it is a good thing that it has a majority in both houses of parliament? How does this outcome 'sit' with how you view representative democracy?
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References: SOSE Alive 3, chapter 9, especially pp. 194–5 • SOSE Alive Economy and Society, pp. 100–1