Democracy in Australia

Australia is a stable democratic society with a skilled workforce and a strong economy. Its society supports citizens through a system of governance that maintains the rule of law.

This means the people have many opportunities, such as the right to own property and be employed. Citizens have control over the money they earn, which can be used to live a secure, happy and healthy life.
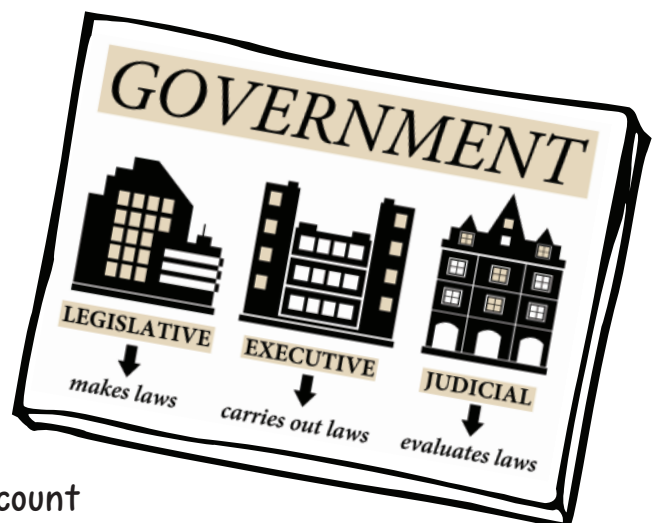
With a population of around 25 million people, Australia is the only nation to govern an entire continent and is the sixth largest country in the world in land area. Australian society is comprised of its indigenous peoples, country born citizens, and migrants that have come from over 200 countries.

Australian democracy includes:

- Governing responsibilities which are shared between the national government and the state governments.

- Three branches of power to provide checks and balances in order to make each branch accountable to the others.

- A system of government, where members of parliament are elected by the citizens

- Compulsory voting for citizens over the age of 18 years. Voting is fair and transparent. All adult Australian citizens can vote regardless of their race, religion, gender, or class. This is called universal adult suffrage.

- A Constitution that provides a fundamental plan of how Australia will be governed. Changes to the Constitution can only be approved by majority of the population through a national referendum.

- Proposed laws are checked and refined between the House of Representatives and the Senate. The separation of powers enables laws to be tested through a court system, which is separate from the government and government departments.

The strength of this system enables power to be spread across different groups in Australia's society, therefore preventing one person or group from dominating the nation.

GOVERNMENT

LEGISLATIVE
makes laws

EXECUTIVE
carries out laws

JUDICIAL
evaluates laws

Democracy is about all citizens having a say in decisions and holding the decision makers to account

The development of representative democracy in Australia

There have been many key events in history that reflect how representative society has developed in Australia. Each decade saw the colonies struggling to form their own systems of government based on principles surrounding the rule of law. Wealthy land owners and ex-convicts (*emancipists)* found each other working together to achieve individual freedom of liberties and rights for the benefit of all people. Below are some of the turning points that have marked Australia's road to becoming a democracy:

Active and engaged citizens can effect changes in a society

1788 A printing press arrives with the First Fleet. It provided citizens with opportunities to become aware of critical issues, promote public debate, and wage political campaigns. By 1803, the first newspaper was published.

1819 Emancipists write a petition to the British Parliament concerned about the lack of an effective and fair legal system.

1854 The Eureka Rebellion. Miners clashed with government troops over inequitable mining licences. Their tragedy represented a stance against police corruption and brutality at Bakery Hill, Victoria.

1870 First Payment for Members of Parliament was introduced in Victoria eliminating unfair practice of only wealthy men becoming members of parliament.

An inclusive and equitable society

1868 Convict transportation to Australia finally ends.

1898 Federation constitution referendums begin (1898, 1899, 1900). Edmund Barton is appointed Australia's first Prime Minister in 1900.

1901 The Commonwealth of Australia is proclaimed on 1 January. A constitution is created, and a federation of Australia is formed from the six separate self-governing colonies of New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland, Tasmania, Victoria, and Western Australia.

Free and transparent elections available to everyone

1820s A council was created in New South Wales to advise the governor. Members were appointed by the British Parliament, which still had power over any decisions the council or governor made. By 1830s, South Australia had their own council selected under the same arrangements.

1843 First parliamentary election for NSW. Ex-convicts were eligible to vote and stand for election.

1856 South Australia introduces a one man one vote rule. Before then, wealthy landowners were entitled to multiple votes.

1855 – 1857 Australian colonies became self-governing. Constitutions and Bicameral parliaments were established in New South Wales, South Australia, Victoria, and Tasmania.

1856 Secret ballot is introduced in South Australia and Victoria. This important element ensured votes were free from interference.

1901 First federal parliament opened 9 May at the Royal Exhibition Building in Melbourne, Victoria.

1894 Female suffrage granted in South Australia.

1924 Compulsory voting is enforced throughout the nation.

VOTE HERE!

1963 Universal suffrage is achieved. The right to vote is given to all citizens regardless of race, gender, income, wealth, or social status.

The rule of law - everyone is equal before the law

1787 The first Charter of Justice is created for New South Wales Courts of Criminal and Civil Jurisdiction.

1788 The first civil case is determined. A convict couple successfully sue the captain of their transport ship over a lost package.

1824 The first trial by jury was held. A jury is a primary instrument of justice in a democratic society.

1903 The High Court was established to interpret the constitution and resolve disputes between federal and state parliaments. Three judges resided, including Sir Edmund Barton.