



Voting in the Community Online Program

Background Notes

Democracy

Democracy can be described as “rule by the people”. The concept originates from the Greek words “demos” (people) and “kratos” (rule or power).

In a democracy like Australia, all eligible citizens who are 18 years and older have the right to vote for elected representatives. We choose representatives at a federal, state and local level.

Voting in a democracy is a way of making decisions as a group. There are simple and more complex forms of voting. The most simple is “first-past-the-post”.

Voting

First-past-the-post voting

This is a method of voting used when voting for local government in Australia. Eligible citizens enrol and elect a representative by choosing their preferred candidate from a list of candidates on the ballot paper.

The voter will place a tick in the box by their preferred candidate. The candidate with the highest number of ticks is the winning candidate. This candidate becomes “first” or “first-past-the-post.”

Student leaders in schools are often elected as faction captains or head boy or head girl using the first-past-the-post method of voting. This style of voting is used in the “Voting in the Community” program.

Preferential voting

In Australia an example of when we use preferential voting is for federal elections when voting for candidates in the House of Representatives. Voters are required to rank all of the candidates in order of preference. Placing a number one against a particular candidate on a ballot paper is referred to as the first preference or primary vote.

To win the election a candidate must receive a majority of votes (at least 50% plus one vote) cast in their favour. If there is no candidate with an absolute majority of primary votes, the candidate with the least votes is eliminated and their votes are redistributed amongst the remaining candidates according to the number two preference on the ballot papers. The process of elimination continues until a candidate secures an absolute majority.

Voting in the Local Community

Local government elections

Local governments include a Mayor or Shire President and councillors. Local governments can be called cities, towns or shires according to the population size.

In local government, the councillors represent the community’s interests by passing on electors’ views, complaints and problems to the local council. To be a councillor in local government, candidates must qualify according to the *Local Government Act 1995* and complete a nomination form.

Local government elections are held every two years for half of the council.

Making and Following Rules

Rules

Rules are informal instructions or codes of behaviour. They tell people what to do and provide expectations that all members of the community need to follow. There can be consequences (rewards and punishments) for obeying or not obeying the rules. Every community has rules. There can be classroom rules, whole school rules, rules for sports clubs and rules at home.

Rules are important because community members need to follow them and behave in a similar way if they want to have a harmonious community. We follow rules for order, safety and fairness.

Australia's Constitution

A constitution is a set of rules which explains how something should be run. Lots of different groups can have a constitution, from local sporting clubs to whole countries.

Australia has a constitution which came into effect in 1901. Australia became a Federation and the Constitution came into effect. The Australian Constitution defines the roles and responsibilities of Federal Parliament, the Executive Government, the High Court and other federal courts.

In order to change the Constitution a referendum must be held. This is a special vote where all eligible Australian citizens vote “yes” or “no” to the advised changes. Since 1901 there have been 45 attempts to change the Constitution and only eight referendums have been successful.

Local government constitution

The Local Government Act 1995 acts as a constitution for local government in Western Australia, describing how elections should be conducted, the functions of local governments and provides a framework for how local governments should manage their finances and administration.

For further information:

- Electoral Education Centre: <https://www.elections.wa.gov.au/EEC/resources>
- <https://www.dlgsc.wa.gov.au/local-government/local-governments/council-elections/an-introduction-to-local-government>
- <https://www.aec.gov.au/learn/preferential-voting.htm>

