

Electoral Newsfile

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FEDERAL ELECTION 2004

Votes and the Count



This edition of Newsfile focuses on the release of results on election night. It also provides a general overview of the way in which votes are cast on the day and how the results are communicated to the Australian media and public on election night.

Voting

The nation votes in several different ways.

Ordinary vote

An ordinary vote is a vote cast in a polling place in the elector's home division on election day. This is the simplest way to vote and the method used by the majority of electors (approximately 84 per cent).

Absent vote

An absent vote is a vote cast by an elector out of their home division but still within their home State or Territory on election day. At the last election there were 851,951 absent votes cast (6.22 per cent of the total votes cast).

Early vote

Electors can cast an early vote in person or by post in the following two ways.

A pre-poll vote is cast before election day at a pre-poll voting centre. A postal vote is cast before election day by post. These types of votes can be cast by an elector who will not be within their home State or Territory on election day, is seriously ill, infirm, unable to leave work, or for religious reasons is unable to attend a polling place.

At the last election there were 516,458 postal votes cast. This represented approximately 3.96 per cent of the total number of votes.

The AEC must wait 13 days after election day to receive postal votes before counting can be finalised. This ensures that electors in remote areas and overseas are not disenfranchised.

Interstate vote on election day

An interstate vote can be cast on election day at an interstate voting centre by an elector who is not within their home State or Territory. At the last election the total number of early (pre-poll) votes cast before election day and interstate votes cast on election day was 610,107. This represented approximately 4.79 per cent of the total number of votes.

Provisional vote

A provisional vote is cast in circumstances where an elector's name cannot be found on the roll or the name has already been marked off the roll. The vote cannot be counted until a careful check of enrolment records and entitlements has been made.

Electors making a postal, early, interstate or provisional vote must complete a declaration giving their personal details. This will be checked by divisional staff before the votes are counted.

Mobile polling votes

AEC mobile polling teams take portable polling places to many electors who are not able to get to a polling place. Mobile polling places are set up in some hospitals, nursing homes, prisons and remote areas of Australia. Mobile polling is carried out around Australia prior to election day and on election day.

AEC WEBSITE

www.aec.gov.au

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The System

The electoral systems used to elect members to the Senate and House of Representatives are different.

The House of Representatives

Candidates for the House of Representatives stand for election in a particular electoral division, and are elected for a maximum three year term.

Members of the House of Representatives are elected using the preferential voting system, with the electors in each division electing one Member to represent them. To be elected to the House of Representatives a candidate must receive an absolute majority (50 per cent + 1) of the formal votes cast in a division.

Initially, all the first preference, or primary votes, for each candidate are counted. If a candidate receives more than 50 per cent of all the formal primary votes, then that candidate is elected. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is excluded from the count and their votes are distributed to the remaining candidates in the count, according to the second preference shown by the voter (the voter's number '2'). The votes are totalled again to see if one candidate has achieved an absolute majority. This process of distributing preferences continues until one candidate has achieved an absolute majority.

The Senate

Candidates for the Senate stand for election in a particular State or Territory. It is a Constitutional requirement that each State is equally represented in the Senate regardless of population. There is a total of 12 Senators for each State who are elected for a six year term. The two Territories are each represented by two Senators who are elected for a three year term equivalent to the duration of the House of Representatives.

Senators are elected by a proportional representation system. To be elected, a candidate must win a proportion of the votes, also known as a quota.

The Senate ballot paper has two sections, an above-the-line and below-the-line section. An elector can either vote above-the-line or below-the-line, but not both. However, if the elector completes both sections formally, the below the line section takes precedence.

Above-the-line: if a voter chooses to vote above-the-line, the number '1' must be written in one of the boxes

above the line. All other boxes on the ballot paper should be left blank.

If an elector votes above the line, the vote will be counted in the way chosen by the group or party, and as notified to the AEC. This is called a group ticket vote and information is available at all polling places and from the AEC website showing how each party or group has decided to have its preferences distributed.

Below the line: if a voter chooses to vote below the line, all the boxes in the bottom section of the ballot paper must be numbered sequentially in the order of the elector's choice.

The Count

The first preference count

At 6pm the doors to all polling places close. There are no 'late votes'. Each polling place manager closes the doors at the stroke of 6pm local time. The counting of the votes then begins.

All stages of the count may be observed by scrutineers who represent the candidates. The scrutineers can look, challenge formality, but are not allowed to touch the ballot papers.

The AEC staff first divide the green coloured House of Representatives ballot papers into piles for each candidate. That is, they look for where the voter has put the number '1' and sort the papers accordingly. These first preference votes are then counted for each candidate.

The polling place manager telephones these results through to the local divisional office where they are entered into the AEC's election night computer system. They are relayed to the AEC's election results system on the website and are also displayed on the tally board at the National Tally Room.

The two candidate preferred (TCP) count

The two candidate preferred (TCP) figures show where preferences have been distributed to the final two candidates in an election.

Based on the information available at the time, the AEC nominates two candidates that it predicts will be the two most preferred candidates. To ensure that the AEC is not seen to be endorsing any particular

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candidate, these names are not publically released until 6pm election day.

The two candidates will, in most cases, be those who finished first and second or represent the parties that finished first and second, at the last general election. However, the AEC will use whatever other objective data is available to assist in making its decision.

In the TCP count AEC staff will look at the ballot papers and sort them into piles for the two candidates according to the order in which voters have given them preferences. For example, if the two nominated candidates are Labor and Liberal then a ballot paper which has '1' Democrats, '2' Independent, '3' Labor and then '4' Liberal will be put on the Labor candidate's pile. Conversely, a ballot paper which showed '1' IND, '2' Liberal (etc) would be put in the 'LP' pile.

This process of conducting a two candidate preferred count on election night is a shortening of what happens in the divisional office after polling day during the formal distribution of preferences. It is designed to give an indication on election night of who is likely to win a particular seat.

At the conclusion of the TCP count, the polling place manager telephones these results through to the divisional office where they are entered into the election night computer system and displayed on the National Tally Board and the virtual tally room website at www.aec.gov.au.

It must be remembered that this count is only an indicative result of the election in a division. It is possible that postal, pre-poll, absent and mobile votes, counted after polling day, could alter the outcome.

In cases where the AEC has incorrectly predicted the two preferred candidates, the TCP results will not be displayed.

Senate ballot papers will be counted by a separate team in the polling place at the same time as the two candidate preferred count is being conducted. First preference votes only are counted on election night.

Senate Count

Senate ballot papers will be counted in the following three categories at scrutines:

1. Those marked formally above-the-line (ATL)
2. Those marked formally below-the-line (BTL)

3. Those obviously informal.

All formal BTL Senate ballot papers are forwarded to a central scrutiny in each capital city for entry into the computerised Senate scrutiny system. The formal ATL and formal BTL votes are tallied by the computerised system, the quota is calculated and preferences are distributed to produce the Senate election results.

The Senate count is more complicated than a count for the House of Representatives. Counting of first preference votes begins on election night but the full count cannot be completed until several weeks after the election.

For further information on the Senate count visit the AEC's website at www.aec.gov.au.

The National Tally Room

The National Tally Room (NTR) is organised by the AEC to provide a central point for the display of election results on election night. The NTR is one of Australia's largest media gatherings with representation from the radio, print and television media.

Election results are transmitted to the NTR from every divisional office around Australia via the computerised election night information system. The results are displayed on rows of computer terminals which are available to the media and members of registered political parties. The results are also simultaneously fed to the television networks who present their election coverage from temporary sets constructed at the back of the NTR.

Election figures for the House of Representatives are also displayed on a manual tally board which dominates the front of the NTR. The tally board provides a backdrop for the television coverage of the election and is read by the many members of the public that visit the NTR.

Virtual Tally Room

On election night the AEC also hosts a website election results system known as the 'Virtual Tally Room'. The site will be updated as votes are telephoned in from the polling place and entered into the AEC's election management system.

People visiting the site on election night will have access to a fully redeveloped system that now provides a much larger range of enquiry screens and content together with refined navigation and a new 'look and feel'. The enquiry screens will provide access to

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progressive House of Representative results for all divisions, state party summaries and national totals. Early figures from the Senate count for all States and Territories will be available as will a comprehensive range of analysis screens. The site will be updated approximately every 5 to 10 minutes on election night and on a regular basis during the weeks to follow.

The election night computer system

Once the votes are counted at each polling place after 6pm, the results are telephoned through to the divisional office where they are entered into the AEC's computer system. Because all of the AEC's Divisional Offices are 'on-line', results data will be available in the National Tally Room (NTR) and from the Virtual Tally Room almost immediately. First results are expected from about 6.30pm (Canberra time).

In communicating the results of the election to the Australian public, members of the media will be assisted by the AEC's computer system, in addition to their own informal channels and computer packages. AEC staff will be available at the NTR in Canberra to provide assistance.

The computer enquiry screens

The AEC provides the television networks with a direct feed of election results from the election night computer system. For other members of the media, access to results is gained through the enquiry screens on the Virtual Tally Room available at the NTR.

The AEC also provides terminals to the political parties at the NTR, and to the Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition at a location of their choice.

The enquiry screens display the results in a number of ways for both the House of Representatives and Senate elections.

Analysing the results and matched polling places

Over many elections, analysts have made an art form of interpreting the progressive figures as they enter the NTR. In the past, as early results became available there were evident biases because of the small size of the sample of results.

In 1990 the matched polling place method was introduced and added another element to election night analysis. The matched polling place method effectively eliminates this bias after approximately 10–15 per cent of the votes are counted in any particular division. At the 2004 election, the AEC's computer system will again provide swings based on matched polling places, as well as the two candidate preferred count.

The matched polling place method relies on the empirical fact that swings to or from political parties or candidates tend not to vary greatly within electoral divisions. While swings can vary significantly across the nation, ie vary from State to State, and also between divisions within States, swings within divisions tend to be consistent across polling places in a particular electoral division.

Therefore, as is quite often the case, the proportion of votes that a candidate receives at polling places within the seat may vary markedly but the change in proportion from the last election is likely to be uniform across those polling places.

For example, prior to using matched polling places, analysis of results may have gone something like this: at the conclusion of one election the government candidate finished with 55 per cent of the first preference vote and the nearest rival had 35 per cent. At the start of counting at the following election a polling place result comes in with the government candidate achieving 45 per cent and the rival also 45 per cent of the vote for that polling place. A reasonable conclusion, ignoring the possible biases mentioned above, would have been that there was a significant swing away from the government candidate — perhaps in the order of 10 per cent.

However, this sort of comparison can be misleading. At every past election the government candidate has always achieved a poorer result from this particular polling place — and better results from others. At this polling place the result has usually been 47 per cent for the government candidate and 43 per cent for the rival — at other polling places the difference was larger.

Using matched polling places rather than the swing of 10 per cent indicated by the earlier method, the AEC can confidently estimate the swing to be more like 2 per cent. On this analysis rather than appearing to lose the seat, the government candidate is likely to retain it.

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Matched polling places and the two candidate preferred count

The matched polling place method is applied in the AEC's election night computer system in two ways: to first preference votes and also to the two candidate preferred (TCP) figures.

For first preference votes, the number of votes for the current election for each candidate is accumulated as each polling place is entered into the system. As each polling place is entered, the system extracts the result from the previous election, and when the divisional results are displayed the percentage of the current votes received by each candidate is compared with the percentage from the previous election for the same polling places. The difference between the two percentages is expressed as a percentage swing to or away from the candidate. (Where an independent candidate, or a political party is contesting a division for the first time, there will be no historical votes and the swings displayed for this candidate will be the same as their first preference percentage.)

The matched polling place method as applied to first preference votes is a useful guide, and in cases where one candidate is likely, on the basis of the matched first preference swing, to get more than 50 per cent of first preferences, it is sufficient to call the result in that division. However, in those divisions where preferences need to be distributed to determine the outcome, the first preference swing is not enough. The use of matched polling places for the two candidate counts works as follows.

As the indicative TCP vote for the current election is entered, the system combines the historical and current TCP votes in the same way as it does for first preferences.

The system calculates a TCP swing on the basis of the sample of polling places entered in the system, and making use of the tendency for swings to be uniform within a division. This swing is then applied to the final TCP result for that division from the previous election, giving us the predicted TCP swing for each candidate.

State of Political Parties at Issue of Writ for the 2004 Federal Election*

House of Representatives

	2001 Election	At issue of writ
LP	68	68
NP	13	13
CLP	1	1
ALP	65	64
GRN	-	1**
IND	3	3
TOTAL	150	150

Senate

	Elected 2001	Full Senate
LP	17	31
NP	2	3
CLP	1	1
ALP	13	27
CLR	1	1
DEM	4	8
HAR	-	1
HAN	-	1
GRN	2	2
IND	-	1
TOTAL	40	76

* NOTE these figures are not notional

** following a by-election in the NSW Division of Cunningham 19.10.02

Further Information

A range of other AEC publications are available including:

- *Candidates' Handbook*: information for candidates in the election
- *Scrutineers' Handbook*: information to assist scrutineers in the election
- *2001 Federal Election Results Map*: a map of all electoral Divisions
- *2004 Electoral Boundaries Map*

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Australian Electoral Commission Contacts

MEDIA LIAISON

Members of the media are asked to use the Media Liaison and Head Office contact numbers listed rather than the general enquiry number 13 23 26 which appears on AEC advertising.

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2004 Federal Election

KEY DATES

Issue of Writ

Tuesday, 31 August 2004

Close of Rolls

8.00pm Tuesday, 7 September 2004

Close of Nominations

12 noon Thursday, 16 September 2004

Declaration of Nominations

12 noon Friday, 17 September 2004

Election Day

8.00am–6.00pm

Saturday, 9 October 2004

Return of the Writ

Wednesday, 8 December 2004
(latest date)

STATE/TERRITORY HEAD OFFICES

The administration of the 2004 Federal Election in each State and Territory is under the control of the Australian Electoral Officer (AEO) for that State or Territory. An AEO for the ACT is temporarily appointed for each election.

AEOs may be contacted on the following numbers.

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AEC WEBSITE

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ENQUIRY SERVICE**

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