

The case for a fixed, four-year term for Australia's federal government



**4 YEAR
TERMS
AUSTRALIA**

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Executive summary

Australia has one of the world's shortest election cycles. This comes at a cost to taxpayers, undermines the government's ability to deliver long-term reform, reduces business productivity and degrades democratic confidence.

This report outlines the benefits of moving Australia's Federal Government to four-year terms with a fixed election date, including:

- **Election cost savings:** creating a level democratic playing field and certainty on the election date, reducing election costs by \$5 billion.
- **Benefits of better policy:** increasing the efficiency and quality of decisions, delivering \$14–26 billion.
- **Private sector confidence:** reducing uncertainty and disruption during election periods, saving \$62 billion.
- **A stronger and fairer democracy:** by removing election date speculation and making it easier for people to participate in elections.

There is public support for change:

- **Only one in ten Australians prefer the current system** of letting the Prime Minister choose the election date in a three-year cycle.
- **61 per cent of Australians support a fixed election date**, compared to just 22 per cent preferring the date being set by the Prime Minister.
- **42 per cent of Australians would prefer four-year terms**, while only 30 per cent prefer the current three-year term.
- **Three in 10 who prefer a three-year term, or have no preference, would switch to four-year terms**, if it was paired with a public holiday for the election weekend.

Change is needed to better equip Australia for modern times:

- **Inconsistency with other levels of government:** All states and territories have moved from three to four-year terms. All except Tasmania have a fixed election date.
- **Increased government complexity:** Federal Parliament passes 10 times more legislation than it did at Federation.
- **Parliamentary congestion:** In the three months before an election, bills receive 45 per cent less debate time in the Senate.
- **More diverse voting patterns:** Increased minor party vote share requires more time to negotiate legislation through parliament.

Recommendations

1. Develop and implement legislation for a fixed election date
2. Engage the public and develop a proposal for a four-year term, including treatment of the Senate
3. Hold a referendum on a fixed term and four-year term



Australia's current parliamentary terms

Australia has one of the world's shortest election cycles

Australia's House of Representatives has a maximum term of three years. Unlike most democracies, this term is 'unfixed'. The Prime Minister has discretion to call a general election at any time within that period. This combination is globally unique: Australia is the only country in the world that combines a three-year term with short notice on the election date. Only three of 87 democracies have parliamentary terms of three years or less (see Figure 1).

In practice, this unfixed system creates political uncertainty. Historically Australian Prime Ministers announce the election date with around five weeks' notice.¹ Reduced notice periods increase governments' re-election prospects,² but reduce the time available for businesses, the public service, and political candidates to plan.

Significantly, a full three-year term has been reached fewer than ten times since Federation, with the average parliamentary term since 1901 being two years and eight months.^{3,4}

The combination of a short maximum term and Prime Ministerial discretion to call early elections means Australia's current system provides limited certainty for political candidates, the public service, and businesses.⁵ Short parliamentary terms leave government with relatively little time to govern and deliver meaningful reform.

¹ Average notice provided for the federal election date since 1984 is 36 days (33 days is the legal minimum).

² McClean, [The element of surprise: election timing and opposition preparedness](#), 2021.

³ Analysis by the Department of Prime Minister & Cabinet, [Our Public Service Our Future](#), 2020 and McKinnon, [Discussion paper: four-year terms for the House of Representatives](#), 2025.

⁴ In recent decades federal governments have increasingly served [full three-year terms](#). However, Tasmania's recent series of [snap elections](#) demonstrates that early calling continues to remain a feature in modern elections.

⁵ Liveris, [Submission to Parliamentary Committee of Electoral Matters](#), 2026.

“ It’s ludicrous you’ve got four-year terms in all the states but the national parliament doesn’t. It’s just crazy. ”



JOHN HOWARD,
[PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA 1996–2007](#)

“ I do not believe it is proper for the prime minister of the day, to simply on the basis of personal whim, to decide what an election date is... It is just wrong. It is entirely appropriate to have fixed four-year terms. ”



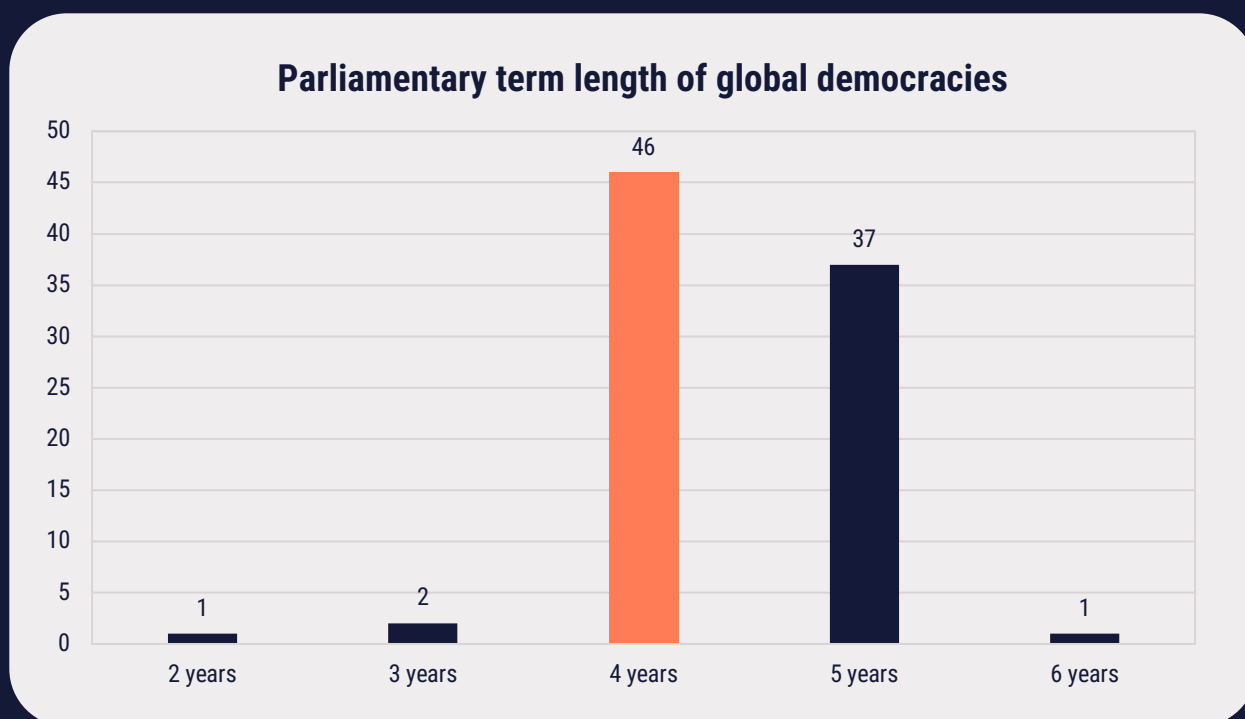
KEVIN RUDD,
[PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA 2007–2010](#)

“ I have said repeatedly and I repeat again today, I support four-year terms and I wish there was four-year fixed terms so that this obsession with dates that begins halfway through a term didn’t continue. ”



ANTHONY ALBANESE,
[PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA, 2022–PRESENT](#)

FIGURE 1: LENGTH OF LOWER-HOUSE PARLIAMENTARY TERMS ACROSS DEMOCRACIES



Source: Mandala and 4 Year Terms Australia analysis of [V-Dem Institute Dataset, 2026](#)⁶

All states, territories and local governments now have four-year terms

The Federal Government has three-year terms because most colonial parliaments had the same at Federation in 1901. Consistency was opted for to improve coordination between levels of government.

Since then, every state and territory government in Australia has moved to four-year terms. All except Tasmania have also moved to fixed terms. Therefore, the original justification of three-year terms - to align election timetables - no longer holds.

“ To create the right conditions for fully effective Federation reform, we need to move to a harmonised election cycle. Firstly, immediately move to four-year fixed terms at Federal level. This gives them more time on reforming and less time on campaigning. ”



DOMINIC PERROTTET,
[PREMIER OF NEW SOUTH WALES 2021–2023](#)

⁶ Cohort includes countries defined as liberal democracies or electoral democracies by the V-Dem Institute in 2026. If cohort is expanded to also include elected autocracies, five of 144 countries have three-year terms (Mexico, the Philippines and El Salvador being added to three-year category).

New South Wales' referendums on fixed and four-year terms

The New South Wales Government moved to fixed, four-year terms through two separate referendums. In 1981, a referendum on four-year terms (with eight years for the upper house) passed with 69 per cent support.

In 1995, a referendum on a fixed term passed with 75 per cent support. The first fixed election date was announced and legislated in 1991, as part of an agreement with three independent members of parliament, which held the balance of power and supported the change.⁷

In both cases, the referendums had multi-partisan support and were held simultaneously with state elections.

Western Australia's campaign for four-year terms at Federation

Western Australia was the only state with four-year terms at Federation in 1901. The WA delegation argued that the [Federal Government should have the same](#), but was overruled by the other states which sought alignment with their own three-year model.

Concerns with the Federal Government's three-year term emerged quickly, with a [1927 Royal Commission](#) recommending it extend 'to at least four years'. A century later, the federal government is the only outlier with three-year terms.

“ There is a general feeling throughout Australia, that the triennial system is rather short... It does not seem unreasonable that members of the House of Representatives should hold their seats for four years. ”



JOHN FORREST,
[PREMIER OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA 1890–1901](#)

“ When I was in opposition a four-year term felt like an eternity. Now I'm in government, I'm much more in favour of four-year terms. I think it provides more certainty. It allows governments to get on and govern rather than worry about the next election. ”



MARK MCGOWAN,
[PREMIER OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA 2017–2023](#)

⁷ Parliament of New South Wales, [Fixed term parliaments, with a commentary on the Constitution](#), 1995.

Parliamentary term comparison

COUNTRY	TERM LENGTH	FIXED TERM (a)
USA	Two (b)	Yes
Australia	Three	No
New Zealand	Three (c)	No
El Salvador	Three (d)	Yes
Mexico	Three (d)	Yes
The Philippines	Three (d)	Yes
Denmark	Four	No
Japan	Four	No
Finland	Four	No
Iceland	Four	No
Spain	Four	No
Norway	Four	Yes
Sweden	Four	Yes
South Korea	Four	Yes
Germany	Four	Yes
Switzerland	Four	Yes
Netherlands	Four	Yes
Austria	Five	No
France	Five	No
Canada	Five (e)	Yes (e)
United Kingdom	Five	No
Ireland	Five	No
Luxembourg	Five	Yes
Belgium	Five	Yes

JURISDICTION	TERM LENGTH	FIXED TERM
Federal	Three	No
NSW	Four	Yes
VIC	Four	Yes
QLD	Four	Yes
WA	Four	Yes
SA	Four	Yes
TAS	Four	No
ACT	Four	Yes
NT	Four	Yes
Local gov.	Four	Yes

(a) There is a wide spectrum of what constitutes 'fixed' or 'unfixed' parliamentary terms. 'Unfixed' has been used in this report to describe parliaments where the political leader can call early elections with very few or no limitations. 'Fixed' refers to systems where a term is unable to change under any circumstances, or 'semi-fixed' terms where early elections can only be held in certain circumstances (e.g. vote of no confidence in the government).

(b) The United States' President does not sit in the House of Representatives and serves a four-year term.

(c) New Zealand has passed legislation to move to four-year terms, subject to a 2029 referendum.

(d) Mexico is currently classified as 'electoral autocracy+', and The Philippines and El Salvador as 'electoral autocracies' by the V-Dem Institute, following recent declines in democratic scores.

(e) Canada's constitutional maximum term is five years, but fixed election date legislation sets an effective four-year term with a fixed date that is sometimes overruled (see [Appendix C, page 36](#)).

“ The four-year term is a much-overdue reform. ”



JOHN HEWSON,
LEADER OF THE LIBERAL PARTY, 1990-1994

Three-year terms and Senate negotiations

Australia's three-year maximum term means governments operate within a compressed legislative window. This is particularly relevant given Australia's Senate structure, where senators are directly elected by voters and regularly oppose or seek amendments to government decisions.

Australian governments often require significantly more time to negotiate and pass legislation through the Senate compared to countries with a single chamber (New Zealand, Nordic countries, South Korea), an appointed upper house that rarely blocks the government's agenda (Canada, Ireland, Malaysia) and/or has constrained power to veto legislation (United Kingdom, France, Spain, Poland, Austria).⁸

The combination of short terms and a powerful Senate means Australian governments must frontload legislative priorities early in the parliamentary term. Major reforms that require extended negotiation or public consultation face timing pressure, as does the implementation phase once laws have passed.

This interaction is further compounded by a growing minor party vote. If trends continue, a single party is unlikely to form a majority in the Senate and potentially more often in the House of Representatives.⁹ This will increase the time required to negotiate new laws in an already compressed legislative window.

Three-year terms and increased complexity of government

Modern governments must navigate significantly expanded parliamentary workloads. The volume of legislation the federal parliament passes per term has grown more than 10 times since Federation; 30 times more when including delegated legislation and legal instruments.¹⁰

This increased workload must fit within a highly constrained schedule, with Australia's federal parliament sitting for often less than half as many days per term as many comparable Westminster governments including Canada, the United Kingdom and Ireland.¹¹

The growing divide between workload and parliamentary sitting days creates significant bottlenecks. Complex, multi-stage bills as well as lower priorities are too often delayed or

⁸ See [Appendix D](#). The [Our Public Service Our Future review](#) estimates 95 per cent of all countries with bicameral systems have parliamentary terms of 4 or more years.

⁹ Minor-party vote has grown from about one in five in 2001 to one in three in 2025. See Grattan Institute, [For the people: future-proofing Australia's democracy](#), 2026.

¹⁰ Mandala and 4 Year Terms Australia analysis of Australian Law Reform Commission term [data](#), 2022.

¹¹ Mandala and 4 Year Terms Australia analysis of Parliament of Australia, [Appendix 15—Chronology of Parliaments](#), 2026; House of Commons Canada, [Appendix 13: Parliaments since 1867 and number of sitting days](#), 2025; House of Commons Library, [Number of sitting days in the House of Commons by session since 1900](#), 2026; Houses of the Oireachtas, [Open data APIs](#), 2026; New Zealand Parliament, [Sessional journals](#), 2026.

abandoned.¹² Reforms are rushed closer to polling day, with bills being debated in the Senate for 45 per cent less time in the three months before an election.¹³

Even when the same party is returned to government after an election, bills must be reintroduced and Senate negotiations restarted, resulting in further delays.

Who could have predicted 90 years ago that the pace of decision-making needed to keep up with the international marketplace would become so hampered by the constant threat of an early election?



BOB HAWKE,
[PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA, 1983–1991](#)

New Zealand referendum for four-year terms

In 2025, New Zealand passed legislation extending its parliamentary term from three to four years, subject to a referendum. The decision followed a recommendation from a [2023 Independent Electoral Review](#) that found a longer term could produce better laws and more effective governments.¹⁴

Critics of the proposed change argue New Zealand lacks many of the institutional safeguards necessary for a longer term.¹⁵ Unlike Australia, it does not have a Senate, codified Constitution or state governments to constrain government power.

The referendum is expected to take place at the same time as the 2029 general election. If it succeeds, Australia would be the world's only liberal democracy with a three-year term.

“I think if a government isn't performing after four years, you'd kick them out - whereas with a three-year term you're often just getting going and then you're into an election year again.”



CHRISTOPHER LUXON,
[PRIME MINISTER OF NEW ZEALAND, 2023–PRESENT](#)

¹² Liveris, [Submission to Parliamentary Committee of Electoral Matters](#), 2026 and McKinnon, [Discussion paper: Four-year terms for the House of Representatives](#), 2025.

¹³ Mandala and 4 Year Terms Australia analysis of Australian Law Reform Commission term [data](#), 2022.

¹⁴ New Zealand Independent Electoral Review, [Final report](#), 2023.

¹⁵ New Zealand Independent Electoral Review, [Final report](#), 2023.

Queensland's successful 2016 referendum on fixed, four-year terms

Queensland held a successful referendum to move to a fixed, four-year term in 2016. Receiving 53 per cent support, the referendum was held on the same day as the 2016 local council elections and was supported by all [parties and independents in parliament](#).¹⁶

Queensland is the only Australian state without an upper house. This simplified the change as there was no requirement to adjust an upper house term length. However, some critics argued it weakened the case for extending Queensland's term as there is less constraint on government power.¹⁷

“Fixed four-year terms will provide the certainty that the Queensland people and the Queensland economy need - that is, more certainty for government, business and community planning and for all Queenslanders. Business and community will know when an election is due.”



ANNASTACIA PALASZCZUK,
[QUEENSLAND PREMIER 2015-2023](#)

2

Benefits of moving to fixed, four-year terms

Parliamentary term length is a balance between accountability and performance. Too long and politicians aren't accountable to voters. Too short and governments are unable to perform effectively.¹⁸ To manage this balance, four-year terms are the most common globally, followed by five years.

While some argue Australia's three-year model keeps government more accountable,¹⁹ there is generally broad support by policymakers that a four-year term will deliver better performing

¹⁶ Hurst & Eaton, [State referendum 2016: fixed four-year terms Yes and No cases presented](#), 2016.

¹⁷ Queensland Finance and Administration Committee, [Inquiry into the introduction of four-year terms](#), 2015.

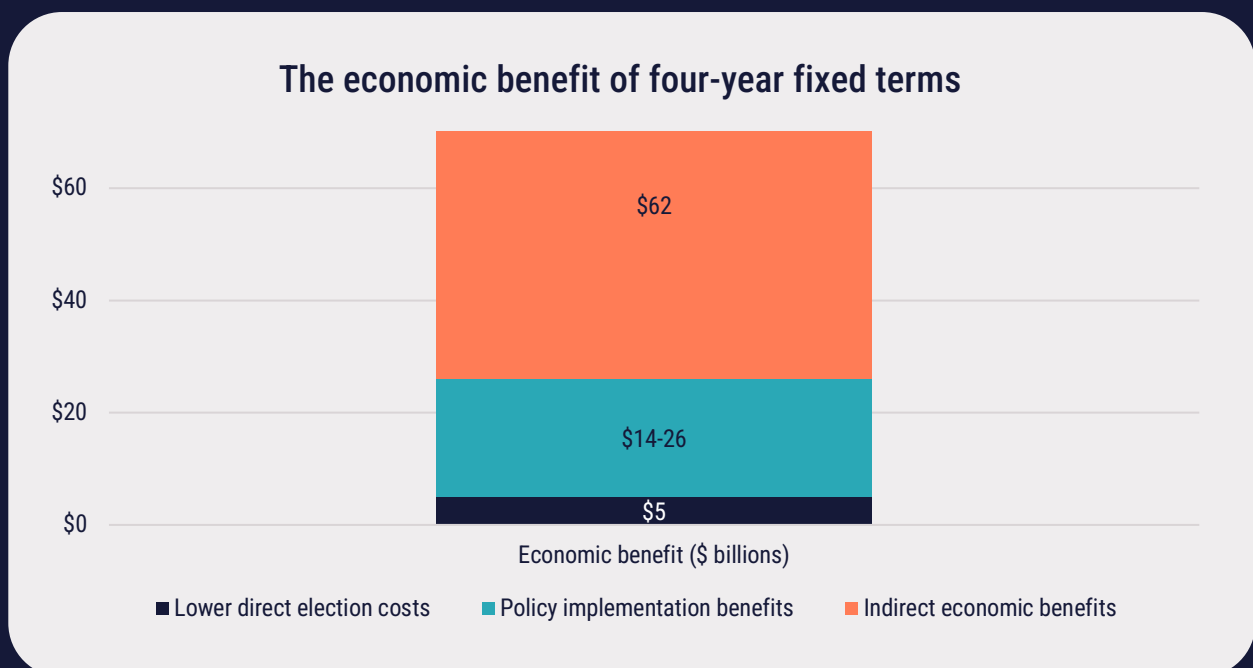
¹⁸ Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Parliaments of the World a Comparative Reference Compendium](#), 1986 in McKinnon, [Discussion paper: four-year terms for the House of Representatives](#), 2025.

¹⁹ See The Australian, [Shouldn't be scared: Abbott on longer terms](#), 2024, Bennett, [Four-year terms for the House of Representatives?](#), 2003 and Institute of Public Affairs, [Submission to Electoral Matters Inquiry](#), 2025 for proponents of three-year model.

governments.²⁰ Australia has robust accountability measures which can accommodate a four-year term effectively. These include a democratically elected Senate, a written Constitution, independent courts, state governments and a free press. Votes of no confidence and other constitutional safeguards can also remove governments early when required.

Moving to four-year terms with a fixed election date provides a better balance of performance and accountability, delivering [between \\$81 and \\$93 billion in benefits over 20 years](#). These benefits are driven by lower election costs incurred by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC), more ambitious policy making, and greater business investment.

FIGURE 2: THE ECONOMIC BENEFIT OF FOUR-YEAR FIXED TERMS



Source: Mandala, [The value of shifting to four-year parliamentary terms](#), 2025 and additional Mandala analysis on the value of shifting to fixed parliamentary terms.

²⁰ 38 Members of Parliament and experts consulted for a report commissioned by McKinnon found four-year terms the third most highly-rated reform out of 34 to improve government performance. See Daley & Krust, [Institutional reform stocktake](#), 2025. For other supporters see Sheppard, [Four-year parliamentary terms](#), 2024.

Election cost savings

Elections are a costly exercise, and this cost has been growing. The 2025 federal election cost taxpayers more than \$674 million, over three times the real cost of the 2001 election.²¹

Reducing the number of elections by shifting from three- to four-year terms will reduce the direct expenditure of elections. It is estimated that this will be worth \$4.6 billion over 20 years, including AEC savings worth \$1.6 billion, the opportunity cost of voters' time worth \$1.5 billion, and political party costs worth \$1.5 billion.

Shifting to fixed elections will create a further cost saving, worth more than \$200 million over 20 years. Currently, the AEC must maintain resourcing to plan for a wide range of election dates.²² Fixed terms would give the AEC certainty to plan election logistics well in advance, reducing its costs.

Over 20 years, the direct election cost savings of shifting to fixed four-year terms will amount to \$5 billion.

Benefits of better policy

Governments globally are 25 per cent more likely to deliver meaningful reform in a non-election year.²³ Moving from a three-year to a four-year term is estimated to provide between \$14 billion and \$26 billion in benefits from improved policy making over 20 years. A four-year term would provide more opportunities for beneficial but potentially politically risky reforms that usually only occur in non-election years.

Moving to a four-year term adds a budget cycle focused on reform and fixing government finances, effectively doubling the number of budgets that can focus on long-term structural reform and balancing the ledger. Under the current system of three-year terms, Australian governments typically deliver three budgets per term. The first is typically used to deliver election commitments and the third prioritises handouts to improve re-election chances.²⁴ That leaves only one budget for fiscal repair and structural reform.

Four-year terms can significantly improve coordination between levels of government. Federal and state governments must work closer together than ever before,²⁵ but their electoral cycles are rarely aligned meaning there is insufficient time to develop and implement shared reform. This has contributed to consistently slow progress on Federation reform.²⁶

²¹ Australian Electoral Commission, [Cost of elections and referendums](#), 2026.

²² Australian Electoral Commission, [Appearance at Committee of Electoral Matters](#), 2025.

²³ Mandala Partners, [The value of shifting to four-year parliamentary terms](#), 2025.

²⁴ Queensland Finance and Administration Committee, [Inquiry into the introduction of four-year terms for the Queensland Parliament](#), 2015 and Twomey, [Will we have a referendum on four-year terms for the Australian Parliament?](#), 2024.

²⁵ Intergovernmental arrangements between these levels of government now reach nearly [\\$195 billion annually](#).

²⁶ Grattan Institute, [Productivity agenda for Australia](#), 2025 and Perrottet, [Valedictory speech](#), 2023.

“ Three-year terms are inefficient. To move to four-year terms should be a no-brainer. Under our current system, within about a year and a half, you start to hit the pause button on doing anything significant because your first consideration is how it might play in the next election. ”



PAUL FLETCHER,
[LIBERAL MP FOR BRADFIELD AND MINISTER
\(VARIOUS\) 2009–25](#)

“ Governments can be more daring and determined if they’re not constantly thinking about the next election, if prime ministers of the day don’t have the tempting trigger to pull that if they have an improvement in their short-term position they’ll race to the polls. ”



BILL SHORTEN,
[LEADER OF THE LABOR PARTY 2013–19](#)

“ We should extend the federal term from three to four years. I’d love to change something on the states. I’d have those off-cycle so they were aligned and all four years. So every two years you have either a state or federal [election] and there’s nothing in between. ”



MATT COMYN,
[CEO OF COMMONWEALTH BANK](#)

“ You will get a much greater connection between senior ministers, treasurers in particular, and the premiers, across the country working together over a longer period of time. ”



DOMINIC PERROTTET,
[PREMIER OF NEW SOUTH WALES 2021–2023](#)

CASE STUDY

NATURE POSITIVE REFORMS DELAYED DUE TO MULTIPLE ELECTIONS

The Federal Labor Government's Nature Positive reforms were a major election commitment unable to pass the Senate throughout 2024.

When a breakthrough in Senate negotiations occurred in early 2025, the Western Australian Premier Roger Cook successfully delayed passage of the laws to prevent their impact on the March state election. The laws were delayed again due to the May 2025 federal election.

Although both state and federal Labor governments were re-elected, the bills had to be reintroduced under a new federal environment minister, requiring new briefings and crossbench negotiations. The legislation eventually passed in November 2025.

This illustrates how the combination of short terms, a directly-elected Senate and misaligned state election schedules can significantly delay major reforms, even when the same governments are returned to office.

CASE STUDY

DECADES OF DELAY ON HIGH-SPEED RAIL

The Federal Government has reviewed a high-speed rail network at least eight times since 1984 without laying a single track. It is a key example of how overly frequent elections and policy changes impede the ability to deliver major long-term projects:²⁷

- A private consortium found the project viable in 1990. The Hawke Government declined to fund it and the consortium folded.
- The Howard Government announced in 1998 that a different consortium had been selected but the project was terminated in 2000.
- The Rudd and Gillard Governments finalised a study in 2013 on the Sydney-Canberra corridor. The Abbott Government closed the advisory group and the project was deprioritised for over a decade.
- The Albanese Government established a High Speed Rail Authority in 2022, with a target construction start date of 2028.

²⁷ Sepasgozar, [Identifying early-stage risks to high-speed rail](#), 2025 and Infrastructure Australia, [Business case evaluation report](#), 2025 outlining high political risk on high-speed rail development.

Private sector confidence

Moving to fixed, four-year terms could realise \$62 billion in indirect benefits over 20 years, largely driven by increased business investment (Figure 2).

On average, business investment in election years falls 2.4 per cent, due to economic uncertainty.²⁸ While some investment is recouped post-election, some investment is forgone due to time-sensitive or irreversible decisions.

“ Our three-year term limits are too short, which means we’re permanently in election mode and governments are in a constant fight for survival.

Whether you blame the 24/7 media cycle, social media: it doesn’t matter. The reality is the world is now completely different and it’s created problems that are now embedded in how we debate the big issues that will define our future. ”



GEOFF CULBERT,
[PRESIDENT OF THE BUSINESS COUNCIL OF AUSTRALIA, 2024](#)

“ Consider a business deciding whether to invest a multi-year project that depends on stable policy settings. If the election date is uncertain and policy direction is contested, the rational choice is often to delay investment. ”



CONRAD LIVERIS,
[ECONOMIST, 2025](#)

²⁸ Jens, [Political uncertainty and investment, causal evidence from U.S. gubernatorial elections](#), 2016.

Big picture: A stronger and fairer democracy

Allowing the Prime Minister to choose the election date undermines democratic fairness. Elections are timed when polling is highest and announced with minimal notice. Even if an election is not called early, the threat alone can destabilise opponents. Globally, incumbents get approximately a 5 per cent bonus on polling day by choosing the election date.²⁹

Uncertainty also deters civic participation. A short and unfixed term makes it less attractive or unviable for many people to run for parliament or volunteer. Voters also cannot plan around a set date, despite Australia being one of the few democracies where voting is compulsory.

Speculation about election timing fills media coverage which provides no meaningful content to inform people's vote. This crowds out policy debate and erodes public enthusiasm for the democratic process.

“ In a six-minute interview with the Prime Minister, one to three minutes can be wasted asking when the election will be held. That time can be better spent talking about the issues that matter. ”



MICHAEL ROWLAND,
[JOURNALIST, 2026](#)

“ Without fixed terms or the opportunity to know when the next election's going to come up, the opportunity for AEC to recruit and to train is limited. ”



HELEN HAINES,
[INDEPENDENT MEMBER FOR INDI, 2019–PRESENT](#)

²⁹ Schleiter & Tavits, [The electoral benefits of opportunistic election timing](#), 2016.

CASE STUDY

TASMANIA'S FREQUENT ELECTIONS UNDER UNFIXED TERMS

Tasmania is the only state without fixed terms, which has led to greater political instability. Tasmania recently had three elections in less than five years (2021, 2024 and 2025).

In the 2021 election, Premier Peter Gutwein held written guarantees of confidence and supply from two crossbench members to form a majority. Despite this, he called an early election, taking advantage of favourable polling during COVID. As Tasmania does not have fixed terms, there was no requirement for the Premier to allow a potential alternative government to be formed from the existing parliament.

The frequency of Tasmania's elections has [led to fatigue](#), delays in government operations and a renewed push to establish a fixed election date.³⁰

“ If there's one thing I think all Tasmanians can agree on after this election we've just had, it's that we should now be putting in place fixed four-year terms. ”



MEG WEBB,
[INDEPENDENT MEMBER OF TASMANIAN PARLIAMENT 2022–PRESENT](#)

³⁰ See submissions by the [Australia Institute](#), [Tasmanian Constitution Society](#) and [Assoc. Prof Richard Herr](#) to the [Tasmanian Parliamentary Inquiry into the 2024 Election](#).

CASE STUDY

NEW ZEALAND'S TRADITION OF ADVANCED ELECTION NOTICE

New Zealand does not have fixed terms but does not suffer the same election date uncertainty as Australia. Since 2011, every New Zealand Prime Minister has announced the election date at the start of the election year, giving around nine months' notice.

Following the introduction of legislation designed to give more certainty around election financing and to avoid timing conflicts with Rugby World Cup hosting duties, the Prime Minister John Key announced the 2011 election ten months in advance.³¹

While there was not, and remains, no legal requirement for New Zealand Prime Ministers to do this, it continues as a political expectation. There is no reason the same expectation could not be placed on Australian Prime Ministers.

“ I could not recall any Prime Minister announcing the election this far out. I didn't want the election overshadowing the Rugby World Cup. ”



JOHN KEY,
[PRIME MINISTER OF NEW ZEALAND, 2008–2016](#)

“ Early announcements allow for planning and preparation by the Electoral Commission, agencies, and political parties, and is, I believe, best practice. That's why in 2020 we announced at the beginning of election year, and I do so again today. ”



JACINDA ARDERN,
[PRIME MINISTER OF NEW ZEALAND, 2017–2023](#)

³¹ New Zealand Parliament, [Electoral \(Finance Reform and Advance Voting\) Amendment Act](#), 2010 and Electoral Commission, [Election date announcement and key dates](#), 2011.

CASE STUDY

JULIA GILLARD PROVIDES ADVANCED NOTICE FOR 2013 ELECTION DATE

In January 2013, Prime Minister Julia Gillard broke precedent and announced the federal election date with [eight months' notice](#). Julia Gillard lost the Labor leadership later that year and the election was held a week before her announced date under Kevin Rudd. No Australian Prime Minister has called an election with advanced notice since.

“Announcing the election date now enables individuals, investors and consumers to plan their year. It gives shape and order to their year... It's not right for Australians to be forced into a guessing game, and it's not right for Australians to not face this year with certainty and stability.”



JULIA GILLARD,
[PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA 2010–2013](#)

3

Public opinion on fixing Australia's Parliament

Australians want four-year terms

While results differ across surveys, the consistent finding is that more Australians prefer four-year terms over the status quo.

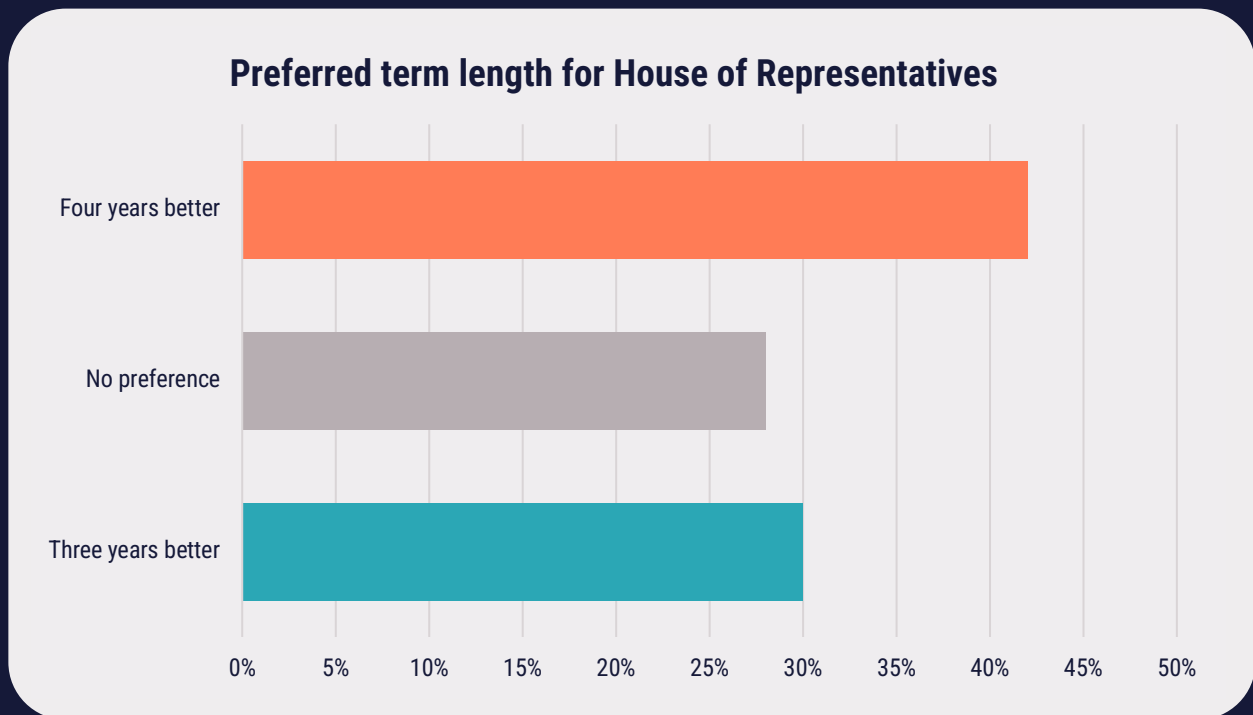
- The Australian Election Study is the leading independent study on voter preferences, conducted by ANU and Griffith University. In 2025 it found that 42 per cent of voters prefer four-year parliamentary terms, compared with 30 per cent for three-year terms (28 per cent no preference).³²
- In 2024 Newspoll found 51 per cent supported a fixed, four-year term with 37 per cent opposed.³³

³² McAllister et al., [The Australian election study](#), 2025.

³³ Benson, [Newspoll: four-year terms backed, but only just](#), 2024.

- A 2024 Resolve Strategic poll found 42 per cent support for moving to a fixed four-year term, compared to 23 per cent opposed.³⁴
- In 2025 McKinnon found 43 per cent support a four-year term compared to 28 per cent who oppose it.³⁵ 57 per cent believed a four-year term would help government make decisions for the long term.

FIGURE 3: PREFERRED TERM LENGTH FOR HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES



Source: [The Australian Election Study](#), 2025

There is strong public support for fixed terms

Support for a fixed election date is consistently strong, and above that of four-year terms. Research by JWS Research for this report found 61 per cent supported fixed terms, compared to 22 per cent for the status quo.³⁶

³⁴ Resolve Strategic, unpublished research, 2024.

³⁵ McKinnon, unpublished research, 2025.

³⁶ JWS Research, True Issues Special Release: National election terms, 2026.

FIGURE 4: PREFERENCE FOR A FIXED OR UNFIXED ELECTION DATE

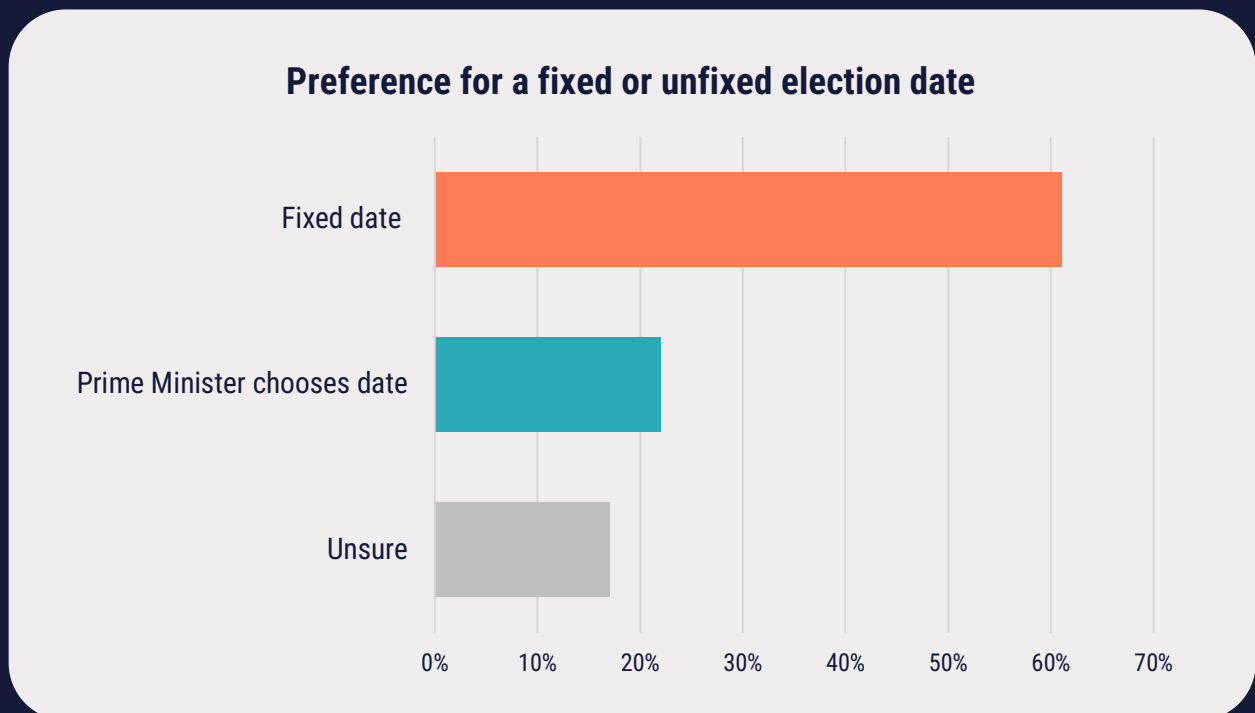
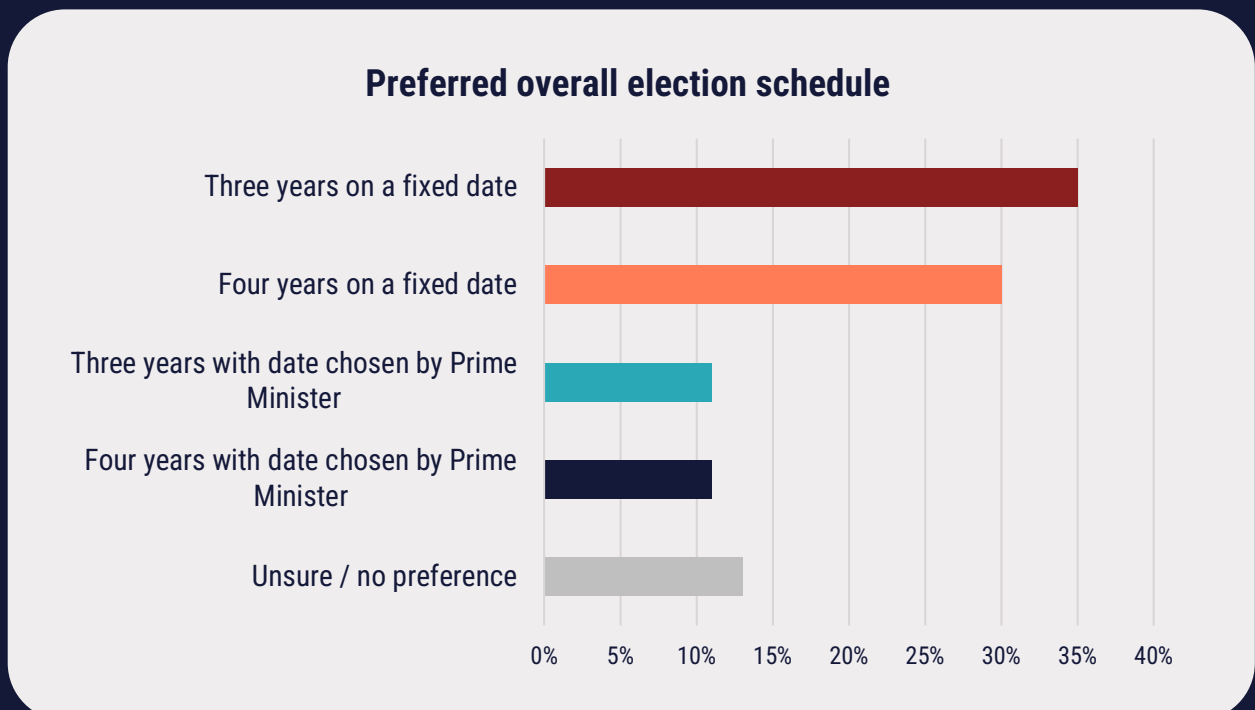


FIGURE 5: PREFERRED OVERALL ELECTION SCHEDULE



Source: JWS Research, True Issues Special Release: National election terms, 2026.

When considering both a fixed term and term length simultaneously, the current model is the least popular with only one in ten Australians preferring our current three-year, unfixed model. The most popular models are a fixed three-year term (35 per cent preferred) and a fixed four-year term (30 per cent preferred).

The prospect of a public holiday significantly increases support for a four-year term. Of those who support a three-year term (or have no preference), 31 per cent would prefer a four-year term if it was paired with a long weekend for the election. This lifts support for four-year terms to 59 per cent.



Pathway to make the change

A fixed election date should be implemented prior to a referendum

Unlike the shift to a four-year term, a fixed election date can be introduced without first requiring a referendum.³⁷ However, this does not fully guard against an early election being called for political benefit.

Unlike a constitutional amendment, a fixed term introduced by legislation alone can be repealed, as has occurred in the UK. Alternatively, it could potentially be overruled by the Prime Minister, which has occurred in Canada (see [Appendix C](#)).

Despite these limitations a legislated fixed term should be introduced ahead of a referendum. Even if there is a question of constitutional validity, a legislated fixed date would likely be effective in practice.³⁸ This would deliver an immediate and meaningful increase to the fairness and certainty of Australia's elections.

Enacting a fixed term would increase the chance of a successful referendum. Referendums are also more likely to succeed when they formalise an existing norm, rather than asking voters to accept major change.³⁹ By demonstrating a fixed term works in practice, a 'Yes' vote would be in support of the status quo.

If legislation for a fixed term cannot be passed prior to the next election, a multi-partisan agreement that any election is announced with at least six months' notice should be considered

³⁷ Michelle Grattan, [Four-year federal terms are too hard, but what about making the three-year term fixed?](#), 2016.

³⁸ A government would be unlikely to challenge the legislation as the political cost of doing so would outweigh the benefits of an early election. Unlike the UK and Canada, Australia's strong, directly elected Senate would also be unlikely to repeal the legislation. Details see Daley & Krust, [Institutional reform stocktake](#), 2025.

³⁹ McAllister, [Elections without cues](#), 2001 and Goot, [Without "bipartisanship" have referendums... ever succeeded?](#) 2025.

(see [New Zealand case study, page 19](#)). While a Prime Minister could readily overrule this convention, it would come with a political cost that would often outweigh the benefit.

Recommendation 1:

Develop and implement legislation for a fixed election date.

“ I would like to see a four year term, because of the short-termism, so that when a government is in power it has time to implement its plans... if you can't get four-year terms then I agree with three-year terms [with a fixed election date]. ”



DR SOPHIE SCAMPS,
[INDEPENDENT MP FOR MACKELLAR 2022–PRESENT](#)

A four year term requires a referendum

The Australian Constitution allows a maximum three-year term for parliament. Unlike a fixed election date, any increase to the three-year term limit can only be achieved via a successful referendum.

Referendums require careful planning and consideration. Any question put to voters requires widespread support, including amongst the public but also throughout Parliament well in advance for any chance of success (see Appendix A for more details).

However, the need for a referendum should not deter important reform. There is overwhelming support for greater political ambition and long-term decision-making.⁴⁰ More Australians want more frequent referendums than those who want fewer.⁴¹

⁴⁰ McKinnon, [Discussion paper: four-year terms for the House of Representatives](#), 2025.

⁴¹ McAllister et al., [Australian Election Study](#), 2025.

An expert review can determine the right model

Several important design questions must be resolved for both fixed and four-year terms. Most importantly, moving the House of Representatives to four-year terms would mean the Senate's six-year term no longer coincides with general elections. This leaves three potential options;

1. Hold a full Senate election every four years (preferred model, see Appendix B)
2. Extend Senate terms to eight years and maintain half Senate elections
3. Keep existing six-year Senate terms and have separate Senate-only elections

For fixed terms, the criteria for when early elections can be held must also be carefully designed (Appendix C).

A constitutional commission, convention or other independent review should be established to develop suitable models for the Federal Government. Bringing together key constitutional experts, it would set appropriate guardrails to maximise the benefits of the reforms and avoid unintended consequences. This process can draw on the models proven at the state level, international examples, and previous federal proposals.⁴²

Recommendation 2:

Engage the public and develop a proposal for a four-year term, including treatment of the Senate.

⁴² In 2017, Federal Liberal MP David Coleman [proposed a draft bill](#) introducing fixed four-year terms, working with key experts on design considerations. It lapsed without proceeding past an introductory stage.

Putting it to the people

Once the details of the reforms are settled, and there is sufficient consensus, the government should hold a referendum on a fixed term and four-year term. These two questions could be held together in one referendum or held separately (referendum strategy is outlined in Appendix A).

Moving to four-year fixed terms would bring Australia into line with global and domestic norms. The benefits would extend to taxpayers, government and business. More broadly, it would strengthen the engagement and confidence in Australia's democracy.

With broad political backing, clear public education, and a fair proposal, Australia can build the consensus needed to modernise its parliamentary cycle.

Recommendation 3:

Hold a referendum on a fixed term and four-year term.

“ There is a constant complaint about the frequency of elections. We must look again at four-year terms. United views on changes like these to the Constitution are hard to achieve, but they must be capable of community debate, without automatic rejection. ”



KIM BEAZLEY,
LEADER OF THE LABOR PARTY 1996–2001
AND 2005–2006

5

About 4 Year Terms Australia

[4 Year Terms Australia](#) is an independent, non-profit advocacy group with a single goal: moving Australia's federal government to four-year terms with a fixed election date.

Marty Gray

4 Year Terms Australia

Acknowledgements: Madeleine McCure, Saša Vanek, Lee Bing Tan and Amit Singh from [Mandala](#); John Scales, Edward Langley and Tom Cameron from [JWS Research](#); David Lang from [Brockwell](#), and also Michael Rowland and Dan Smolich for generously donating their time and efforts to make this report possible.

Appendix

- A: Referendum strategy
- B: Adapting the Senate
- C: Holding early elections under fixed terms
- D: Supporting figures



Referendum strategy

Only eight of 45 referendums have been successful, and it has been nearly 50 years since the last successful referendum.⁴³ Combined with a worthy idea, a successful referendum campaign requires several key elements for a chance at success:

Multi-partisan support and public education must be done in advance

Referendums almost only succeed with multi-partisan support.⁴⁴ For a term length change especially, the reform must be presented as improving the performance of government generally, not as benefiting any political party or politicians in general.

Every successful Australian referendum has also been preceded by sustained community engagement and cross-party messaging.⁴⁵ Voters need time to understand what fixed, four-year terms would mean in practice and why the change benefits the public. This should draw on the broad range of supporters that already exist across the political spectrum.

Questions on unrelated topics should not be included in a referendum

The 1988 referendum on four-year terms failed in part because it was bundled with three unrelated questions, all of which were rejected.⁴⁶ Any future referendum should focus solely on four-year terms and/or a fixed election date.

“It is very important that the proposal be a standalone one. If you try and add something in, you will only complicate it.”



JOHN HOWARD,
[PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA 1996–2007](#)

⁴³ 8 out of 45 referendum questions have passed at 20 voting events. The last [successful referendum](#) was in 1977 on Senate casual vacancies, Territory referendum voting rights, and federal judge retirement age.

⁴⁴ Williams & Hume, [People power: how Australian referendums are lost and won](#), 2024.

⁴⁵ The successful 1946 referendum on social services being the exception, see Goot, [Without “bipartisanship” have referendums... ever succeeded?](#), 2025.

⁴⁶ Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Matters, [Inquiry into the 2004 Federal Election](#), 2005.

A referendum should be held at the same time as the federal election

A referendum held during a parliamentary term often dominates political discourse. Even if there is multi-partisan support in advance, there is the temptation for the opposition and minor parties to take a different position once the referendum campaign begins. This was the case for the 1988 referendum on four-year terms, where the Coalition initially indicated a willingness to support it, but then campaigned against all four referendum questions.⁴⁷

A referendum held alongside an election can reduce the temptation for multi-partisan support to fall apart for political gain. During a term, opposition and crossbench can use opposition to a referendum as a rare opportunity to gain attention and channel voter discontent. However, during an election campaign, their messaging must narrow to voters' key concerns.

Parliamentary term length has not been a top election issue for over 120 years and is unlikely to become one in future. There is little political value in focusing on it during an election campaign. Aligning a referendum with an election should provide the highest chance of success as it is presented as an administrative improvement rather than an ideological debate.

New South Wales and Queensland's successful referendums were held in tandem with state and local elections respectively. Multi-partisanship was sustained and the issues were not prominent points of debate in their respective elections. By contrast, the unsuccessful 1988 federal referendum was held independently of a general election.

Any amendments to the length of parliamentary terms should commence at a subsequent election. This eliminates any advantage to incumbent politicians and reduces opposition due to people disliking the current government.

Fixed terms should be put in place before a referendum on the issue

Uncertainty is the biggest killer of successful referendums. If a fixed term is legislated first, a referendum becomes a vote to keep what is already working, rather than a vote for an untested change. This significantly increases the probability of referendum success.⁴⁸

A referendum asking voters to extend terms to four years without a fixed date is also less likely to succeed and delivers fewer benefits. A fixed term is critical to provide certainty and fairer elections. It is also necessary to allay concerns that a four-year term expands Prime Ministerial power.

Sequencing referendums should be determined by the highest likelihood of success

A referendum on both fixed terms and four-year terms could occur at the same time (as Queensland) or separately (New South Wales). While holding two separate referendums takes significantly longer, it reduces the complexity of each vote. This allows each question to be considered by the public on its individual merits.

⁴⁷ Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Matters, [Inquiry into the 2004 Federal Election](#), and Galligan, [The 1988 referendums and Australia's record on constitutional change](#), 1990.

⁴⁸ McAllister, [Elections without Cues](#), 2001 and Goot, [Without "bipartisanship" have referendums... ever succeeded?](#), 2025.

The decision to combine or separate these questions should ultimately prioritise the one determined to give the highest likelihood of success.

If referendums are held separately, the fixed term question should be put to voters first. Fixed term holds higher public and institutional support, is less complex administratively and can be introduced prior to a referendum to build support. Even without a four-year term, a fixed term delivers significant standalone benefits worthy of a referendum.

WHY BOB HAWKE'S 1988 FEDERAL REFERENDUM ON FOUR-YEAR TERMS FAILED

In 1988, Australians voted in a national referendum to extend federal parliamentary terms from three years to four, put forward by the Hawke Government. It proposed to reduce Senate terms to four years and did not propose a fixed election date.

The measure was one of four questions put to voters in the referendum; alongside recognising local government, rights and freedoms in the Constitution, and broader electoral reform. All four questions were rejected by voters.

Subsequent reviews found the referendum failed for three key reasons. The bundling of multiple constitutional changes into one referendum confused voters; bipartisan support collapsed; and a strong 'No' campaign highlighted that the four-year term would remain unfixed, which could grant the Prime Minister greater control over the Senate.⁴⁹

“ Since the Second World War, Australians have had to vote in Federal elections, on average, every two years... Opposition to the four-year term proposal means support for disrupting the nation with elections far more frequently than even our Constitutional founders would have expected or ever intended. ”



BOB HAWKE,
[PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA, 1983–1991](#)

⁴⁹ Parliamentary Committee on Electoral Matters, [Inquiry into the 2004 Federal Election](#), 2005 and Williams & Hume, [People power: how Australian referendums are lost and won](#), 2024.



Adapting the Senate

Moving the House of Representatives to four-year terms would mean the Senate's six-year term would no longer occur at the same time as general elections. This leaves three potential options:

- **A full Senate election every four years:** shorten Senate terms to four years and have a full Senate vote at every general election.
- **Extend Senate terms to eight years:** with a half Senate vote every four years. Half of the Senate would continue to be re-elected every general election.
- **Maintain existing six-year Senate terms:** Senate elections would often be held independent of general elections.

A four-year Senate term delivers the greatest benefit

The preferred model is to align Senate terms to four years so that House and Senate elections can occur on a single, predictable four-year cycle. This model is expected to deliver the highest improvement in government performance and accountability.

Reducing Senate terms to four years gives all federal politicians the same amount of time to deliver on their mandate before facing re-election. It provides an effective balance between accountability and performance for the government of the day as well as individual senators.

A shorter Senate term can also address concerns around senator defections. Currently senators can leave the party they were elected under and continue as an independent or join another party. This has raised concerns that this does not represent voter intention, with [93–94 per cent](#) of people voting for a party instead of an individual senator (above the line). A four-year term reduces the incentive for senators to defect and the time they can act independently without seeking a new mandate from voters.

Four-year Senate terms would align the terms of state and territory senators. Territory senators currently only serve a three-year term, half that of their state counterparts. Moving to four years would create an equitable system for all jurisdictions.

The main objection to a four-year model is the loss of Senate continuity. The original purpose of the Senate's staggered, six-year terms was to provide a check on government power. With half the Senate elected under different political conditions, it could provide a counterbalance in the event of major electoral swings and help ensure states' rights are protected.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Parliament of Australia, [Odgers' Australian Senate Practice](#), 2022.

The continuity argument made at Federation does not reflect how the Senate operates in practice. Senators have always voted along party lines rather than state lines.⁵¹ The growth of minor-party voting also means party of government is unlikely to also hold a Senate majority, making it a consistently strong check on government power.

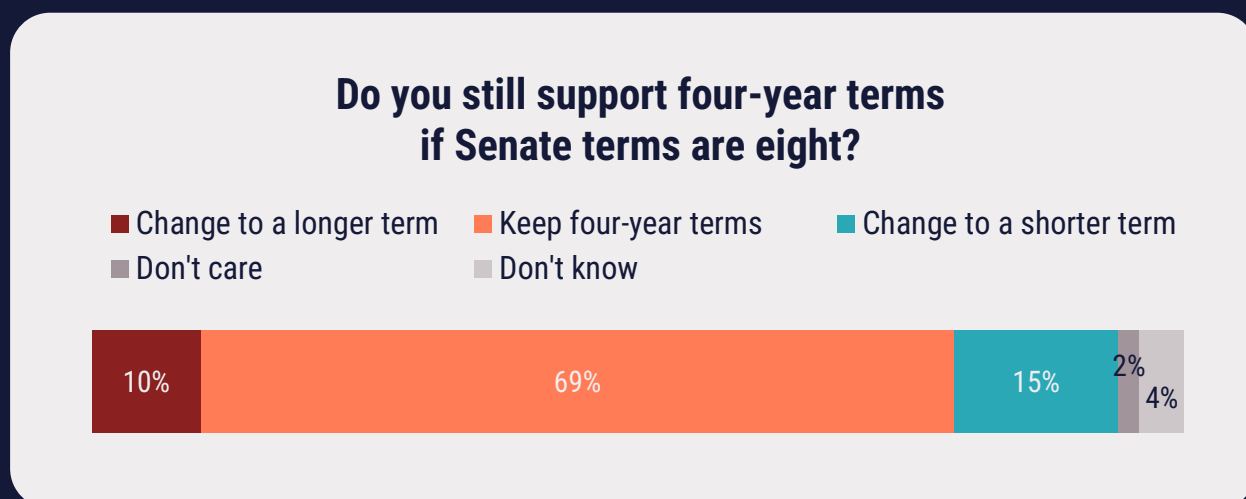
Eight-year Senate terms are a worthwhile alternative

If a four-year Senate term is not achievable, an eight-year Senate term is a worthwhile alternative. It enables synchronised federal elections and minimises changes to the current system. The model has proven effective in New South Wales and South Australia, with limited directly attributable differences in policy-making when compared to the four-year models of Western Australia and Victoria.

The main drawback is voter accountability. While a longer Senate term preserves parliamentary continuity, it extends the time senators have before facing re-election. The benefits of the eight-year model are therefore considered lower than a four-year term, but still significantly higher than the status quo.

A longer Senate term is not a major inhibitor to public support. More than two-thirds of supporters of fixed four-year terms would continue to support the proposal if it meant an increase of Senate terms to eight years.⁵²

FIGURE 6: PUBLIC SURVEY ON SUPPORTING FOUR-YEAR TERMS IF SENATE TERMS ARE EIGHT



Source: JWS, [True Issues public survey](#), 2017

⁵¹ Twomey, [Will we have a referendum on four year terms for the Australian Parliament?](#), 2024.

⁵² JWS Research, [True Issues public survey](#), 2017.

“ If the price of four-year, fixed terms in the House of Representatives is giving senators eight-year terms, I think it’s worth paying. But what would be even better would be to have all the senators coming up at once... and the whole parliament gets reelected every four years. ”



MALCOLM TURNBULL,
PRIME MINISTER OF AUSTRALIA 2015–2018

JURISDICTION	HOUSE TERM	FIXED TERM	UPPER HOUSE
Federal	Three	No	Six
TAS	Four	No	Six
WA	Four	Yes	Four
VIC	Four	Yes	Four
NSW	Four	Yes	Eight
SA	Four	Yes	Eight
QLD	Four	Yes	N/A
ACT	Four	Yes	N/A
NT	Four	Yes	N/A

Maintaining a six-year Senate term should not be considered

Maintaining six-year terms would mean Senate elections would no longer coincide with general elections for the House of Representatives. Standalone Senate elections would occur at varying points during a government’s term. This defeats the primary purpose of the reform of reducing election inefficiency and should not be pursued.



Holding early elections under fixed terms

A fixed term should still allow early elections to break deadlocks or remove dysfunctional governments. It should only limit the Prime Minister's ability to set a date for political advantage. This model is generally referred to as a 'semi-fixed' term.

Australia's mainland states and territories provide a clear template for semi-fixed terms. All have a set date but allow early elections in some circumstances including:

- passage of a no-confidence motion in the Legislative Assembly (lower house)
- refusal to grant supply (i.e. failure to pass the budget/appropriation)
- the Governor exercising reserve powers where no alternative government can be formed

Conditions for early elections must be set carefully. Too broad, and early elections can still be called for political advantage. Too narrow, and parliamentary deadlocks extend unnecessarily. A constitutional convention or independent review of parliament can develop the appropriate conditions for the federal system.

CASE STUDY

UK FIXED ELECTION DATE LEGISLATION EXPERIMENT

In 2011 the UK government passed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, setting a fixed term and requiring a two-thirds parliamentary majority to call an early election. It lasted eleven years before being repealed.

The legislation's failure was due to poor drafting of early election triggers. The two-thirds threshold made it too difficult to call a legitimate early election to break deadlocks, while offering no protection against a government bypassing the Act entirely with a simple 50 per cent majority.⁵³

This occurred in 2019 when Prime Minister Boris Johnson tried repeatedly to call an early election but was blocked by Parliament each time. He eventually used a short, standalone bill to bypass the Act. It was repealed entirely in 2022.

⁵³ Twomey, [Written evidence, UK fixed term parliament act 2011 inquiry](#), 2020.

PARTIAL SUCCESS OF CANADA'S FIXED ELECTION DATE LEGISLATION

Canada passed fixed election date legislation in 2007. However, one year after the law passed, Prime Minister Stephen Harper called an early election to capitalise on political opportunity. A Federal Court found that he had the power to do so.

Despite this early set back, the legislation remains in place. Canada has since held elections on the fixed date in 2015 and 2019, but also early elections in 2008, 2021 and 2025.⁵⁴ It shows that legislating a fixed date increases election date certainty but does not entirely resolve the issue of early elections being called for political reasons.

⁵⁴ An early election also occurred in 2011 but was triggered by a [vote of no confidence](#). This would still be possible under a proposed fixed term model.



Supporting figures

Timeline of changes to parliamentary terms

	Federal	TAS	VIC	SA	WA	NSW	NT	ACT	QLD
Term length	Three	Four	Four	Four	Four	Four	Four	Four	Four
Fixed term	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year changed to four years	N/A	1972	1984	1985	1987	1981	1978	2003	2016
Year changed to fixed	N/A	N/A	2003	2006	2011	1995	2009	2003	2016

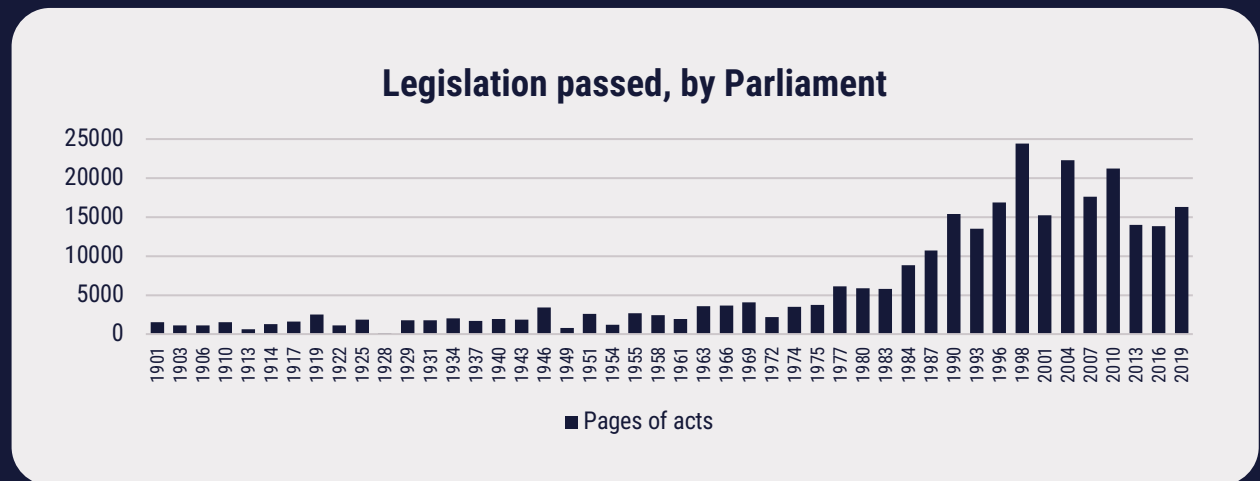
Comparison of Upper House terms and election methods

Jurisdiction	House Term	Upper house terms	Upper house directly elected by voters?
USA	Two	Six	Yes
New Zealand	Three	None	N/A
El Salvador*	Three	None	N/A
Mexico*	Three	Six	Yes
Philippines*	Three	Six	Yes
Australia	Three	Six	Yes
Nordics (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland & Iceland)	Four	None	N/A
South Korea	Four	None	N/A
Spain	Four	Four	Hybrid
Poland	Four	Four	Yes
Switzerland	Four	Four	Yes
Germany	Four	≈ Five (state dependent)	State government delegates
Argentina	Four	Six	Yes
Japan	Four	Six	Yes
Czechia	Four	Six	Yes
Brazil	Four	Eight	Yes
Chile	Four	Eight	Yes
Canada	Five**	Until 75 years of age	No
UK	Five	Life appointment	No
Austria	Five	5-6 (state dependent)	State parliament representatives
Ireland	Five	Five	No
Belgium	Five	Five	No
Italy	Five	Five	Yes

*[The V-Dem Institute](#) classifies Mexico as an electoral autocracy+ and El Salvador and the Philippines as electoral autocracies in 2026

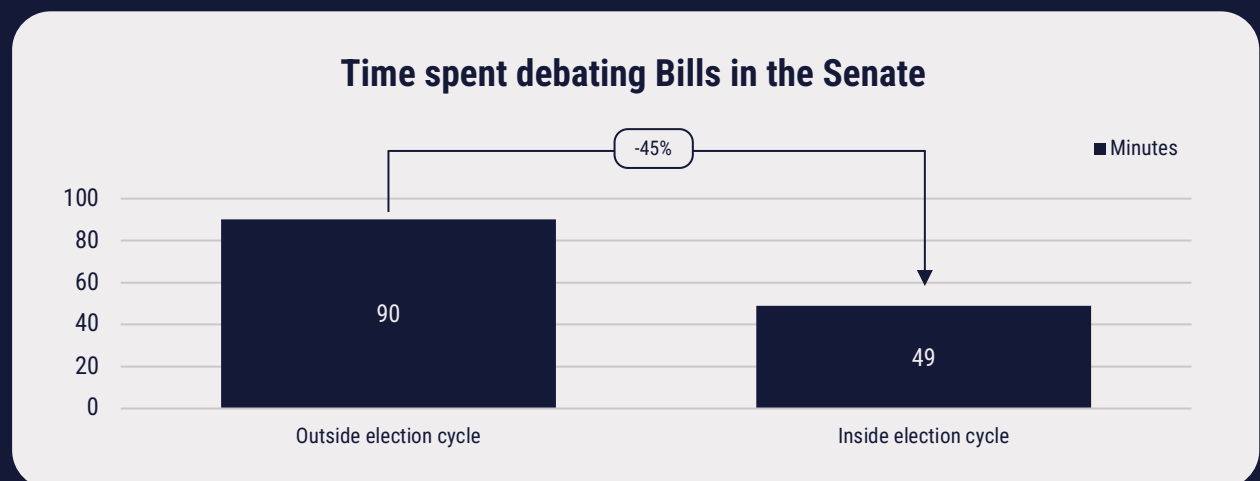
**Canada has a constitutional maximum five-year term but operates on a four-year cycle under legislation.

FIGURE 7: Volume of legislation passed by the Australian Parliament



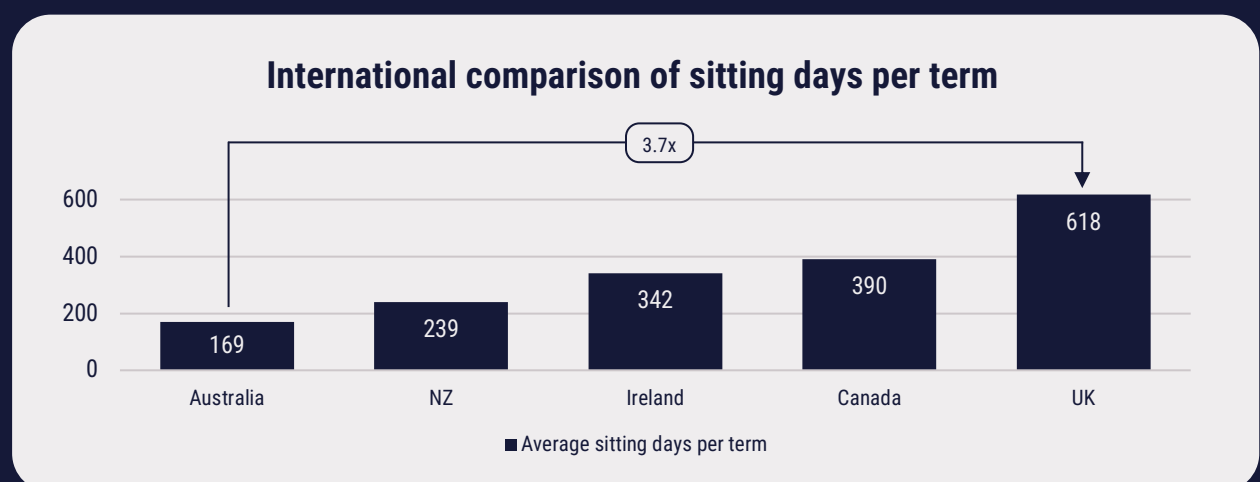
Source: Mandala analysis.

FIGURE 8: Time spent debating Bills in the Senate



Source: Mandala analysis.

FIGURE 9: International comparison of sitting days per term



Source: Mandala analysis.

