

# Four Year Fixed Terms

---

AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS ACTION PLAN  
FOUR YEAR FIXED TERMS  
ELECTORAL MATTERS & PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

*Fixed four-year terms would align Australia with 25 other progressive democratic countries. They would also end the power of the Prime Minister to call elections according to the dictates of political expediency, would increase stability and continuity in the electoral cycle and prevent the unnecessary waste of taxpayers' dollars being spent on having too many elections.*

*"Snap and early elections are called for personal and party advantage, arbitrarily, sometimes capriciously, and always on a partisan basis. Elections held on a pre-determined date ensure stability and responsibility by both Government and the Opposition."*

**Senator Andrew Murray**  
**Spokesperson on**  
**Electoral Matters & Public**  
**Administration**

## Our Action Plan

- Urge that research be undertaken to determine support for fixed four-year terms.
- Continue to support the holding of a referendum to extend parliamentary terms to four years for the House of Representatives and eight years for the Senate.

## History & Constitutional Requirements

The issue of parliamentary terms has been on the national agenda since the first Constitutional Convention in 1891. Initially, the colonies had five-year terms inherited from the British parliamentary system, but by the 1890s, colonies had moved to three-year terms, with only Western Australia having a four-year term.

Ensuing constitutional debates resulted in the four-year proposal being defeated, arguably to harmonise the House terms with the already settled six-year term of the Senate, rather than by any real objection to four-year terms in principle. This decision also meant consistency with the then three-year terms of the States.

Hence, Section 28 of the Australian Constitution sets out that terms of the House of Representatives continue for a maximum of three years from the first meeting of the House, and Section 7 that Senators be chosen for a term of six years and that that term will expire from the beginning of the term of service. The terms of half of the senators expire every three years, so an election for the vacancies must occur within a year prior to the places becoming vacant as set out in Section 13.

Since 1900, there have been many forums calling for an increase in the House term, including the issue being put to referendum in 1988. However, as it was put together with more contentious proposals and as voters were unable to vote 'Yes' for only one part of the package, defeat was essentially ensured.

In more recent times, the Parliament's Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters has given its unanimous support to four-year terms for the House through its investigations into the 1996, 1998, 2001 and 2004 elections.



Other ACTION PLANS are available online at  
[www.democrats.org.au](http://www.democrats.org.au)

Last updated 31/08/2007

# Four Year Fixed Terms

---

The 2004 report canvassed an interesting variant of a three year minimum term with an election to be called in the fourth year, so making the Senate term a minimum of six years, and a maximum of eight.

## Comparison with other systems

Comparisons reveal disparities between Australian jurisdictions and with other bicameral systems throughout the world. The three-year term consistency with the States and Territories has now been lost with all (apart from Queensland's unicameral parliament) having now moved to four-year terms.

A significant majority of democratic jurisdictions overseas employ either four or five-year parliamentary terms for their lower houses. The UK Parliament – the model for our federal electoral system – has a maximum term of five years; Australia is actually in the backward minority of four countries that have terms of three years.

## Advantages of four-year parliamentary terms

1. **Improved policy making** – the frequency of elections has major ramifications for sound government policy. Under our unfixed, three-year terms, governments have difficulty reconciling careful and deliberate policy-making. Because of the trend towards continuous campaigning, there is a tendency instead to adopt short-term expedient policies to ensure electoral success.
2. **Increased business confidence** – the private sector has long complained that the short Federal election cycle has a negative impact on long-term business planning and confidence, and therefore the national economy.
3. **Reduced cost of elections** – a most tangible benefit associated with the introduction of longer parliamentary terms is the associated reduction of costs involved in running elections. Australia should not have held more than 32 elections last century. Instead they held 38, amounting to a significant additional cost of between \$800m and \$1billion in today's money.
4. **Improved debate** – greater time between elections could arguably raise the standard of political debates. More in-depth and genuine cross-party discussions on policy issues would be possible without the influence of a looming election and continuous campaigning in the third year of a term.
5. **Voter dislike of frequent elections** – as Australia has Federal, State and Territory and local government elections, there is public unease, if not irritation, at the frequency of elections. Arguably, this is also linked with an increasing dislike for the highly adversarial nature of party politics.

The Democrats have reintroduced the *Constitution Alteration (Electors' Initiative, Fixed Term Parliaments and Qualifications of Members) Bill 2000*, which advocates four-year fixed terms. It provides a vehicle for the next Government and the Opposition to progress this reform. It is a long-standing Democrat constitutional policy that deserves implementation.



### CONTACT US

(03) 9416 1880

Lv 1, 62 Wellington Parade, East Melbourne VIC 3002  
inquiries@democrats.org.au

Authorised by Jack Evans, 5 Poinciana Place, Wanneroo WA 6065  
Printed by Senator Lyn Allison, Parliament House, Canberra ACT 2600