COMMONWEALTH ELECTORAL REFORM

Voting, Suffrage And Political Accountability

A candidate-centred electoral policy for direct voter choice and public accountability

National Policy Proposal

2026

Executive Summary

Australia elects people to Parliament, not abstract party brands. The electoral system should therefore ensure that every parliamentary seat is filled through identifiable support given by voters to a named candidate. A general vote for a political party should not operate as an authority for that party to distribute the voter's preferences through a predetermined list of candidates.

The Commonwealth Senate ballot presently permits above-the-line voting. Under section 272 of the Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, an above-the-line preference for a group is legally expanded into consecutive preferences for every candidate in that group, beginning with the candidate placed at the top of the group. The voter may never have examined, selected or approved those individual candidates. The law nevertheless treats the ballot as though the voter personally numbered them.

This policy replaces party-controlled candidate allocation with candidate-only Senate voting. Every counted preference must be written by the voter beside the name of an individual candidate. Political affiliation remains visible as relevant information, but it no longer substitutes for candidate choice.

The policy also removes the power of parties to determine fixed candidate order, introduces rotation of candidate names, requires transparent and locally democratic preselection, establishes a uniform candidate information service and mandates clear publication of candidate-level election results.

The accompanying Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Candidate Choice and Political Accountability) Bill 2026 gives legislative effect to the core reforms without changing the constitutional composition of the Senate or abandoning proportional representation.

Policy Position

Every elected representative must obtain support that can be traced to deliberate choices made by electors between named candidates. Party membership may inform that choice, but it must not replace it.

The Commonwealth should abolish above-the-line Senate voting and any statutory rule that converts a party or group preference into an artificial sequence of candidate preferences. Preferences should transfer only where the voter personally numbered the receiving candidate.

This is not an attack on voluntary political association. Citizens remain free to join, support and vote for political parties. Parties remain free to endorse candidates and explain their policies. The reform changes who controls the ballot: the voter, rather than the party organisation.

The Democratic Failure

Party Votes Become Candidate Preferences

Federal Senate voters may currently vote above the line by numbering party or group boxes. The Act then treats each group preference as if the voter had numbered every candidate in that group from top to bottom. A vote for a party is therefore transformed into personal preferences that the elector did not write.

Although this process is lawful, legality does not answer the democratic objection. The decisive candidate order is ordinarily determined before polling day by the party and its internal machinery. Voters select the container; the party determines which candidates are packed at the top.

Preselection Controls Political Careers

Where a high ticket position provides the practical pathway to election, aspiring politicians must first satisfy those controlling endorsement and order. That changes the direction of accountability. Instead of relying primarily upon personal standing with electors, candidates rely upon internal party approval, factional support and access to campaign resources.

After election, the same dependence can reinforce rigid party discipline. Parliamentary promotion, committee appointments, future endorsement and campaign assistance remain controlled by party structures. A representative who displeases the party may lose a career even when the representative is serving the electorate faithfully.

The Voter Cannot Separate The Party From Its Candidates

A voter may support a party's general program while objecting to one or more of its candidates. Above-the-line voting does not permit that distinction. The voter must either accept the party-defined candidate sequence or undertake the more demanding below-the-line ballot.

Candidate-centred voting restores the missing choice. A voter could support several candidates from one party, reject another candidate from the same party, and then continue preferences across independents or other parties. The ballot would record the voter's judgment rather than a presumed party instruction.

Equal Suffrage And Meaningful Choice

Equal suffrage requires more than an equal opportunity to deposit a ballot. Electoral rules should give each elector equal control over the political choices attributed to that ballot. If the law invents candidate preferences from a party vote, it transfers part of that control from the elector to the organisation.

Sections 7 and 24 of the Australian Constitution require Senators and members of the House of Representatives to be directly chosen by the people. Article 25 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights protects genuine periodic elections by universal and equal suffrage. Candidate-only voting gives practical force to those principles by ensuring that the candidates credited on a ballot are the candidates actually selected by the voter.

Policy Objectives

- Ensure that every counted Senate preference is expressly allocated by the voter to a named candidate.
  - Prevent a general party vote from being converted into preferences for candidates whom the voter did not individually select.
  - Reduce the electoral power attached to party-controlled ticket positions.
  - Make individual candidates compete for personal support within their own parties as well as across party lines.
  - Strengthen the direct relationship between elected representatives and electors.
  - Make preselection processes visible, locally grounded and democratically defensible.
  - Provide voters with comparable candidate information before voting begins.
  - Preserve proportional representation and voter-controlled preferential voting in the Senate.
  - Retain political party names as information while preventing party identity from operating as a substitute ballot.
  - Increase the political cost of neglecting constituents or relying solely upon party protection.

Core Reform Framework

1. Abolish Above-The-Line Senate Voting

The dividing line and party voting squares should be removed from Senate ballot papers. Every formal Senate vote should be marked beside the names of individual candidates.

Candidates may remain grouped by registered political party for clarity. The registered party name may appear beside each endorsed candidate. The ballot must not contain a separate square through which a party preference is legally expanded into candidate preferences.

2. Require Express Candidate Preferences

A voter should number at least six individual candidates where more than six candidates contest the election. Where six or fewer candidates contest, the voter should number all candidates. Savings provisions should preserve a ballot where at least six consecutive preferences clearly show the elector's intention.

A transfer should occur only to the next continuing candidate personally numbered by the voter. If no further numbered candidate remains, the ballot exhausts. Exhaustion is preferable to assigning a political choice the elector never made.

3. Rotate Candidate Order

Abolishing the party square is incomplete if parties can still secure a large positional advantage by fixing one preferred candidate permanently at the top of every ballot. Senate ballot papers should therefore be printed in approved rotational variants.

Within each group, every candidate should appear in each available position substantially the same number of times. Ungrouped candidates should receive equivalent rotation across the relevant ballot columns. Ballot variants should be distributed randomly and evenly.

4. Preserve Party Identification Without Party Control

Party affiliation is relevant information and should remain visible beside each endorsed candidate. It should be presented consistently and secondarily to the candidate's name. There should be no separate party square and no party logo functioning as an alternative voting target on the Senate ballot.

5. Require Democratic And Transparent Preselection

A registered party seeking to have its name printed beside a candidate should certify how that candidate was selected. Where two or more eligible applicants seek endorsement, the ordinary rule should be a secret ballot of eligible party members enrolled within the relevant electorate, State or Territory.

The certification should disclose the method used, the organisational body responsible, the number of eligible participants, the number who voted, the aggregate result and any intervention by a central executive. If an emergency appointment is necessary because of death, withdrawal or an election timetable, the party should publish the reason.

Failure to satisfy the transparency requirement should not prevent a citizen from standing. It should prevent the candidate from receiving the electoral advantage of a registered party identifier on the ballot until compliance is established.

6. Establish A Uniform Candidate Information Service

The Australian Electoral Commission should publish a neutral candidate information guide before early voting. Every candidate should be offered the same space and the same fields, including relevant employment, community connection, political employment, party status, policy priorities and campaign contact details.

Candidate statements should be clearly identified as supplied by the candidate and not endorsed by the Commission. Uniform presentation would reduce dependence upon party advertising budgets and give credible independents a fairer opportunity to be assessed on merit.

7. Publish Candidate-Level Election Data

Election reporting should begin with individual candidates, not merely party totals. The Commission should publish, in accessible and reusable form, each candidate's first-preference vote, transferred votes received at each count, the point of election or exclusion, and the final composition of each State and Territory result.

This information should remain available as a permanent accountability record. It allows electors to see which representatives attracted genuine personal support and which depended heavily upon later voter-directed preferences.

8. Strengthen Accountability After Election

Candidate-centred election must be supported by accessible information about parliamentary performance. Existing official records concerning attendance, divisions, expenses, interests and committee work should be brought together in a single public profile for each Senator and member.

The purpose is not to reduce representation to crude activity counts. It is to make verifiable information easy to find so that electors can decide whether their representative has remained engaged, accessible and faithful to the undertakings made during the campaign.

What The Policy Does Not Do

- It does not ban political parties or prevent citizens from associating through them.
  - It does not prohibit party endorsements, party names, campaigning or policy platforms.
  - It does not direct how an elected representative must vote in Parliament.
  - It does not replace Senate proportional representation with first-past-the-post voting.
  - It does not permit the Australian Electoral Commission to assess the political merits of a candidate statement.
  - It does not make elected office conditional upon wealth, occupation, property ownership or educational status.

Why First-Past-The-Post Is Not Used

The policy shares the objective behind first-past-the-post proposals: only candidates who receive direct voter support should benefit from a ballot. However, first-past-the-post is not required to achieve that objective and would create new distortions.

In a single-member electorate, first-past-the-post can elect a candidate supported by less than half of voters. In a multi-member Senate contest, a block or plurality system could allow the largest organised party to win a disproportionate number of seats and could punish independents and emerging parties through vote splitting.

Candidate-only preferential voting is the stronger solution. It preserves proportional outcomes while ensuring that every transfer follows an instruction written by the elector beside a named candidate.

Current System And Proposed System

Feature	Current Senate System	Proposed Candidate-Centred System
Voting target	Party/group above the line or candidate below the line	Named candidates only
Candidate order	A group may request a specified order	Names rotate substantially equally
Meaning of party vote	Converted by law into preferences for all candidates in the group	No separate party vote exists
Transfer control	Partly determined by statutory expansion of group votes	Only to candidates personally numbered by the voter
Party information	Party name and logo may anchor the group vote	Party name remains beside each endorsed candidate
Preselection disclosure	Limited public explanation required	Standard certification and aggregate results published
Candidate information	Fragmented and campaign-budget dependent	Uniform AEC-hosted candidate guide
Election reporting	Party and candidate data available in different forms	Candidate-level results placed at the centre

Expected Benefits

- Candidates must develop personal standing rather than relying solely upon the party brand.
  - Voters can support a party while rejecting an unsuitable candidate from that party.
  - Party executives lose the capacity to turn a high ticket position into an almost guaranteed parliamentary career.
  - Independents and lower-ranked party candidates can compete on merit for direct preferences.
  - Representatives have a stronger reason to remain visible and responsive to electors.
  - Internal party contests become more transparent and less capable of being disguised as unanimous endorsement.
  - The result is easier to defend as the product of choices made by voters between actual people.

Risks And Safeguards

Risk	Safeguard
Higher informal voting on a larger candidate ballot	Require only six consecutive candidate preferences, retain intention-saving rules and fund a clear national education campaign.
Very large Senate ballot papers	Permit grouped columns, consistent party labels, accessible electronic information and carefully designed ballot variants.
Voter confusion caused by rotation	Print prominent instructions explaining that candidate order varies and publish sample ballots before polling.
Administrative and printing complexity	Provide at least 12 months for implementation, controlled testing and independent assurance.
Branch stacking before preselections	Apply membership qualifying periods, disclose participation totals and require auditable secret ballots.
Central party intervention disguised as an emergency	Require written reasons, narrow exceptions and immediate public disclosure.
Candidate statements containing unlawful material	Allow the Commission to reject defamatory, discriminatory or otherwise unlawful content without judging political viewpoints.
Weakening of party coherence	Retain party endorsement and affiliation while making personal electoral support the final determinant.

Implementation Plan

1. Pass the Commonwealth Electoral Amendment (Candidate Choice and Political Accountability) Bill 2026.
2. Provide a minimum 12-month implementation period before the candidate-only ballot applies to a Senate election.
3. Require the Australian Electoral Commission to test ballot rotation, accessibility, scanning, scrutiny and recount procedures.
4. Publish draft ballot designs and undertake public usability testing, including with voters with disability and voters from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

5. Issue regulations prescribing uniform candidate information fields, word limits, deadlines and accessible formats.
6. Train polling officials and scrutineers in the candidate-only formality rules.
7. Run a national education campaign explaining that every preference must be placed beside a named candidate.
8. Conduct an independent review after the first two general Senate elections held under the reforms.

Measures Of Success

- Every counted preference is attributable to a number personally marked beside a named candidate.
  - No Senate ballot is expanded by law into preferences for unmarked candidates.
  - Candidate position is distributed substantially equally across ballot variants.
  - Registered parties publish complete preselection certificates on time.
  - Candidate information is available before early voting and in accessible formats.
  - The informal voting rate remains within an acceptable range after implementation.
  - Candidate-level first-preference voting becomes more dispersed within party groups.
  - Electors demonstrate improved understanding of the candidates seeking to represent them.

Legislative And Constitutional Basis

The Commonwealth Parliament has authority to prescribe the method by which federal elections are conducted, subject to the Constitution. Sections 7 and 24 require direct popular choice. The proposed Bill changes the statutory form of the Senate ballot and the conditions under which party endorsement information is printed; it does not alter the number, term or constitutional qualifications of Senators or members.

The preselection requirements operate as conditions attached to the electoral benefit of a registered party label. A person remains free to nominate even if a party does not obtain or retain that ballot entitlement. This design supports transparency while avoiding an additional constitutional qualification for candidacy.

The reforms engage political participation, expression, association and privacy. They strengthen political participation by making candidate choice direct. Any burden on party administration is confined to transparent selection processes and information necessary to verify compliance.

Conclusion

Political accountability begins with electoral dependence. A representative who owes election primarily to party placement will naturally remain attentive to the people controlling that placement. A representative who must earn personal support from voters has a stronger reason to remain attentive to the community.

Australia should retain the organisational benefits of political parties without allowing them to own the voter's ballot. Party affiliation should inform a choice, not manufacture one. Every candidate elected to the Senate should be able to point to preferences deliberately recorded by citizens beside that candidate's name.

The governing principle is simple: the voter chooses the person, the voter controls every preference, and the party cannot convert a general endorsement into parliamentary careers for candidates the voter never selected.

Sources And References

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