

Democratic Audit Talking Point: Voter Turnout

When assessing the health of democracy, one of the indicators often referred to is voter turnout. Australians tend to be fairly complacent on this score, because of the high turnout which is feature of compulsory enrolment and voting—for example, around 95 per cent of registered voters vote in federal elections. There are reasons, however, to disturb this complacency.

First, the very low voter turnout for elections in which voting is not compulsory—for example, elections for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and for local government in Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania.

Second, Australia's high voter turnout for parliamentary elections evaporates if we measure voter turnout against the voting age population rather than against registered voters. Compared with countries such as Germany, New Zealand or the United Kingdom, we appear to have a relatively low proportion (86 per cent) of our voting age population enrolled, so our turnout against voting age population comes down to around 82 per cent.*

Proportion of adults enrolled 1997

• Australia	• 86.1
• Germany	• 92.5
• New Zealand	• 94.0
• United Kingdom	• 97.1

Source: *International IDEA Handbook on Democracy Assessment* The Hague: Kluwer, 2001: p.54.

The main reason for the relatively low proportion of the adult population on the roll is the million permanent residents who are not citizens. Australia currently excludes permanent residents who are non-citizens from parliamentary voting rights.** This means that the Australian political nation is significantly less inclusive of those who live within its territory (and are expected to pay its taxes and obey its laws) than is the case with its neighbour, New Zealand. In New Zealand permanent residents are able to enrol and vote for parliamentary as well as other elections.

Should Australia follow the example of New Zealand and extend political rights to permanent residents?

* IDEA, *Voter Turnout from 1945–1997: A Global Report*. Stockholm, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance.

** Permanent residents can vote in local government elections in South Australia and Tasmania.