

## FACT SHEET 22

# The secret ballot and the 'Australian ballot'

## Open voting

In Britain and Australia, elections were originally held in the open, at 'hustings' (i.e. temporary platforms set up for the occasion). Speeches would be made by candidates. In those days, only men who owned property or had a certain income could vote. They would tell the polling official, out loud before the crowd, who they voted for and it would be recorded in a book. Lists of who voted for which candidate were sometimes published afterwards. This meant that people could be pressured or influenced to vote in a particular way by their employers, landlords, customers and neighbours. It also meant there was lots of corruption. People could be bribed to vote in a particular way, and watched to ensure they did so.

In Australia, voting would often happen outside pubs. Candidates ended up 'treating' potential voters with free alcohol, so it often became a rowdy, and sometimes violent, affair.

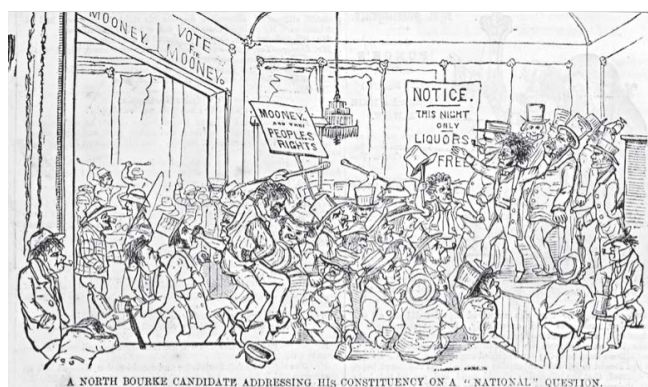
Entertainment was laid on as well, including performances by bands. The voter would write the names of the candidates they wanted to vote for on a piece of paper, sign it, bring it to the polling station and hand it to the electoral official, who would then ask them to say out loud who they voted for. As the day wore on, the crowds would become drunk and sometimes riots occurred. People were injured and in 1843 two men were shot during election violence.

## The introduction of the secret ballot

The voting system was first changed in the colonies of Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia in 1856. New South Wales followed in 1858, Queensland in 1859 and Western Australia in 1877.

These colonies introduced a system under which people could vote according to their conscience, without anyone else knowing how they voted.

In the 1800's some people opposed this change. They argued that people should have the courage to vote openly and should not hide behind secrecy



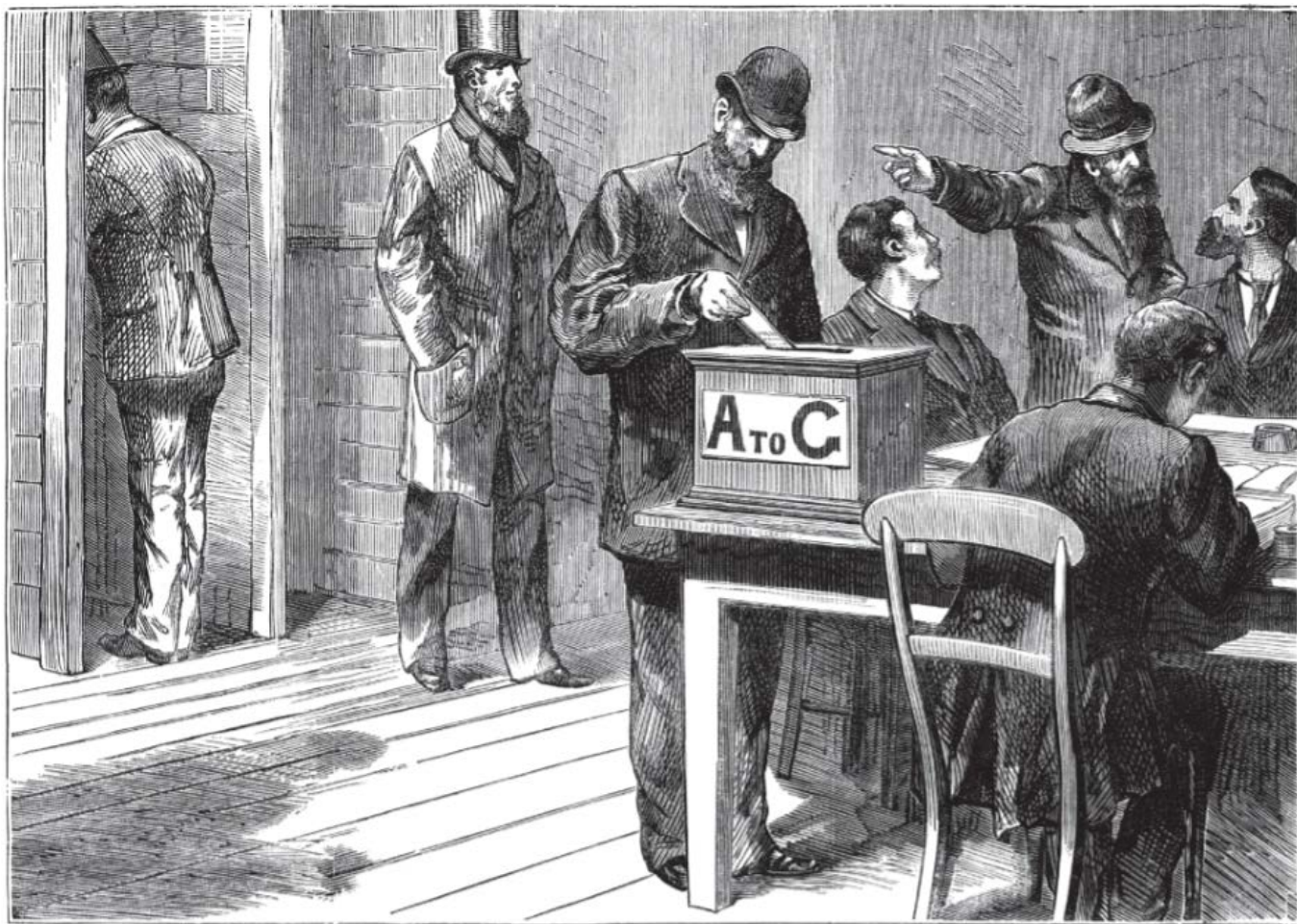
*The candidate Booth, standing on a stage, waving his arms and speaking to a riotous crowd|1855  
Source: State Library of Victoria*

in giving their vote. If voters could conceal their vote, they might vote in their own selfish interests, rather than in the public interest. It was thought that people would be more likely to vote in the public interest if they did so under the scrutiny of the public.

As for elections in the mid-1800s, some argued that even though the franchise was limited to a small proportion of the people, having open elections meant that anyone could turn up to watch it happen, and by their cheers, heckles and applause, they could influence those who were able to vote. It made the system more participatory. The obvious reply to this argument, however, was that it would be more participatory if more people were allowed to vote.

Once the franchise was indeed widened to include most males, this made it more likely that pressure and influence would be applied, particularly when workers had to vote in front of their employers. On the other hand, it also meant that men could sell their vote to the highest bidder, corrupting the electoral system.

In South Australia, the move to a secret ballot happened in the same year that the right to vote was extended to all men 21 years and older. In addition to reducing the likelihood of intimidation (i.e. bullying) and bribery affecting electoral results, one of the greatest attractions of the secret



*Interior of Polling Booth | 1880*  
 Source: State Library of Victoria

ballot was ending the drunkenness and disorder associated with elections. As one politician noted, no one would bother to buy a drink for a voter if he could not check whether it resulted in the voter casting their vote in a particular way.

### **Innovation in the practice of the secret ballot**

The innovation of the secret ballot in Australia, in contrast to earlier versions in France, Switzerland and some States in the United States, was that the voter did not provide his own ballot paper, or use ballots provided by the political parties. Party ballots were usually coloured so that people could still tell which party a voter was voting for. Instead, the government provided the ballot papers to the voters at the polling booth, and they all looked the same.

The ballot papers contained a printed list of all the candidates, and the voter then crossed out the ones they did not want elected. This made it easier for those with limited literacy to vote, as they did not have to write out (and correctly spell) the

names of candidates. But in the United States it was seen as preventing people who couldn't read from voting. It was easier for them to vote by saying a name or handing in a ballot prepared by the party they supported.

The other innovation was that voting was brought indoors, at government provided polling stations. The government set up separate private stalls within the polling station for voting, along with the pen and ink to mark the ballot. Once a voter had finished marking his vote on the ballot, the voter then folded it and placed it in a sealed ballot box. All of this was now run by the government, rather than the candidates, who had previously paid for and constructed the hustings and printed their own ballot papers.

In these ways, Australia developed many key aspects of the modern idea of the secret ballot. South Australia later added the innovation of swapping from pens and ink to pencils, as this was less messy and speeded up the process. It also introduced the idea of marking a box beside a candidate's name, rather than crossing out names.



Voting day

Source: Australian Electoral Commission

## Voting in Parliament is not by secret ballot

Two types of voting are used in the Australian Parliament to make decisions on proposed laws and other issues—a ‘vote on the voices’ and a ‘division’.

When a decision needs to be made in either of the houses, members of parliament cast their vote by saying ‘aye’ or ‘no’. The Presiding Officer announces the result after listening to the response. If no-one challenges the result, the matter is decided. If the result is challenged by more than one member of parliament, a division is called.

During a division, members of parliament move to either side of the Presiding Officer’s chair to show how they are voting.

In the House of Representatives, the Speaker does not vote unless the result is a tie, in which case the Speaker has the casting vote to decide the matter. In contrast, the President of the Senate may always vote along with other senators. This arrangement was included in the Constitution to make sure all the states have equal representation when votes are taken in the Senate. If there is a tied vote in the Senate, the question is resolved in the negative – lost – because a majority vote has not been achieved.

## The ‘Australian secret ballot’ spreads across the world

The method of ensuring that the secret ballot was more effectively secret is often known as the ‘Australian ballot’.

It was adopted in New Zealand in 1870 and in Britain in 1872. In Britain it reduced the costs of election campaigns because ‘treating’ (otherwise known as bribing, influencing or vote-buying) was no longer practical. Canada adopted the Australian ballot in 1874 and Belgium did so in 1877.

In the United States, the Australian ballot was used from 1888. Elections in the mid-nineteenth century were often violent affairs, with supporters of one party attacking voters for the other side on their way to vote. Eighty-nine Americans were killed at the polls during election day violence. The Australian ballot was effective at ending the violence and making the voting system fairer.

Today, not all electors vote in person at polling venues. The Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918 (Electoral Act) and the Referendum (Machinery Provisions) Act 1984 (Referendum Act) ensure votes are to be ‘marked in private’ and that there are numerous ways to have our vote count.



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