

# **Electoral Laws (Restoring Electoral Fairness) Amendment Bill 2025**

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Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee  
Parliament of Queensland  
Brisbane QLD 4000

Dear Committee Secretary

**IPA submission to the inquiry into the Electoral Laws (Restoring Electoral Fairness) Amendment Bill 2025 (Qld)**

This submission has been prepared to share Institute of Public Affairs research with the Justice, Integrity and Community Safety Committee of the Parliament of Queensland as it considers the Electoral Laws (Restoring Electoral Fairness) Amendment Bill 2025 (the Bill).

The stated policy objectives of the Bill are to improve and restore fairness and equality to the regulation of elections in Queensland and to increase public confidence in Queensland's electoral process. While the IPA commends these objectives, reform must extend beyond administrative or technical changes

Any consideration of electoral fairness must extend to the electoral system as a whole so that it better reflects the genuine and deliberate choices of voters. Removing compulsion and giving Australians more power over their vote will not only enhance election fairness, but will enhance democratic participation and engagement, thereby reinforcing public confidence in elections.

Specifically, the IPA recommends that Queensland abandon compulsory preferential voting and reintroduce and extend optional preferential voting (OPV) for state elections.

Compulsory full preferential voting undermines electoral fairness

Australia's system of compulsory full preferential voting is highly unusual among established democracies. Outside Australia, preferential voting is rare, with adoption in Papua New Guinea's National Parliament, the largely ceremonial Irish presidency, and in a small number of U.S. state elections. The broader Anglosphere overwhelmingly relies on first-past-the-post elections.<sup>1</sup>

Compulsory full preferential voting undermines fairness because it compels a person to express electoral preferences that may not support in order to participate in the electoral process. A person that only supports one candidate is not able to express that support on the ballot without also ranking their preferences among the other candidates. Often the ballot of a voter that supports a minor party or independent candidate will eventually be counted as a vote for one of the major parties.

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<sup>1</sup> William Coleman, *Twelve Ideas For Reinvigorating Australian Democracy* (Institute of Public Affairs Research Report, March 2025).

Compulsory full preferential voting is based on a flawed premise that government can compel democratic engagement and participation

The rationale underlying compulsory preferential voting is that being required to attend a polling place and fill out the full ballot will encourage citizens to become more engaged in the democratic process. The evidence suggests otherwise: polling commissioned by the IPA in 2024 found that a majority of Australian voters do not carefully consider their preference allocations, instead relying on how-to-vote cards distributed by political parties.<sup>2</sup>

This means election outcomes are influenced by preference arrangements negotiated between party elites, rather than by the considered choices of individual voters. Compulsory preference allocation exacerbates this problem by forcing voters to rank candidates they neither know nor support. This creates a perception that election outcomes are not decided by the community but are engineered through procedural complexity managed by a select few.

Optional preferential voting addresses this directly by allowing voters to support only those candidates they genuinely endorse and to withhold preferences where they see fit.

Optional preferential voting is essential to restoring electoral fairness and public confidence in elections

Optional preferential voting allows electors to choose how many preferences they allocate on a ballot paper. Full optional preferential voting would allow voters to rank all candidates or none at all (a preference for none of the candidates). Partial optional preferential voting would require an elector to mark the ballot for at least one candidate.

Partial optional preferential voting is currently used in New South Wales state elections, demonstrating that it is a workable and credible alternative within the Australian electoral context. It was also previously used in Queensland state elections from 1992 to 2015, and is currently used in Queensland local elections. In elections for mayors, and for councillors in single member divided councils, electors may vote for one, some, or all candidates on the ballot paper. This approach recognises a fundamental democratic principle that the voter, not the electoral system or political parties, should control the extent of their participation. There is no principled reason why Queenslanders should be trusted with this discretion at the local level but denied it at the state level.

By adopting full optional preferential voting for state elections, Queensland would restore electoral fairness by maximising voter autonomy, encourage genuine political engagement, and enhance public confidence in the election process and outcomes.

We thank the committee for the opportunity to make this submission and welcome further discussion about the provisions of the Bill or broader issues relating to electoral fairness.

Kind regards,

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<sup>2</sup> Institute of Public Affairs, *Attitudes Towards Democracy In Australia* (March 2025).