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Australian Ballot

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Electoral Behavior**



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GENERAL EDITOR



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Australian Ballot

THE CORE IDEA of the Australian Ballot is to remove control over the machinery of elections from private organizations, notably political parties, and to place such control in the hands of the state, which acts in a neutral manner on behalf of the public. A fairly administered secret ballot was introduced in 1856 in Victoria, Australia.

Paradoxically, while the Australian ballot was adopted in Australia, and spread to the United Kingdom, Italy, and other European countries, it is principally in the United States that it has come to be known by this name. While political historians have confirmed that forms of confidential voting actually pre-date its 1856 arrival in Australia, the terminology has not changed.

The adoption of the Australian Ballot meant that ballot papers were to be printed and distributed by the state and that they would only be made available under controlled conditions governing the time and location of the administration of the election. Specific regulations required that each ballot paper be marked with some official sign so that individuals could not remove them from a polling place and use them in another location. Allowing this would facilitate a kind of electoral fraud in which the perpetrator could create a chain where pre-marked ballots were given to voters, who then picked up a blank ballot while surreptitiously inserting their pre-marked ballot into the box, and then returned to the perpetrator with the unmarked ballot ready to be pre-marked for the next voter, and so on. This technique was referred to as the Tasmanian Dodge. Other requirements were for all candidates, parties, and propositions to appear on a single ballot and for voting to take place in secret.

The Australian Ballot was an essential step in the development of democratic elections. Until these reforms, voting took place by voice or show of hands and under conditions that were invariably rigged to favor one side. Corruption, bribery, drunkenness, and acts of violence were common, explaining why democratic decision-making came to be known as the manly act of voting. The electoral system was vulnerable, not merely to fraud and intimidation, but also to disorganization and inefficiency. Reformers, notably the British Chartists of the 1830s to 1850s, and the American Populist Party of the 1870s and 1880s, demanded free and fair elections.

The idea of the Australian Ballot spread rapidly in the United States, and between 1888 and 1893 all American states beyond the south adopted its core principles. While the adoption of its principles restricted the capacity of political parties to manipulate the outcomes of elections, many among the party elites joined with reformers in welcoming centralization and regularization. The absence of uniformity was not only frustrating to the aspirations of legitimate contenders, but it was also becoming expensive for the political parties to administer elections. A public system meant public spending.

SEE ALSO: Ballot Controversies; Ballot Issues; Corruption and Democratic Elections.

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