Australian Politics 101

A simple guide to who represents you, how they are elected, and how to contact them

FEDERAL
Canberra · the whole country

STATE
Perth · My state

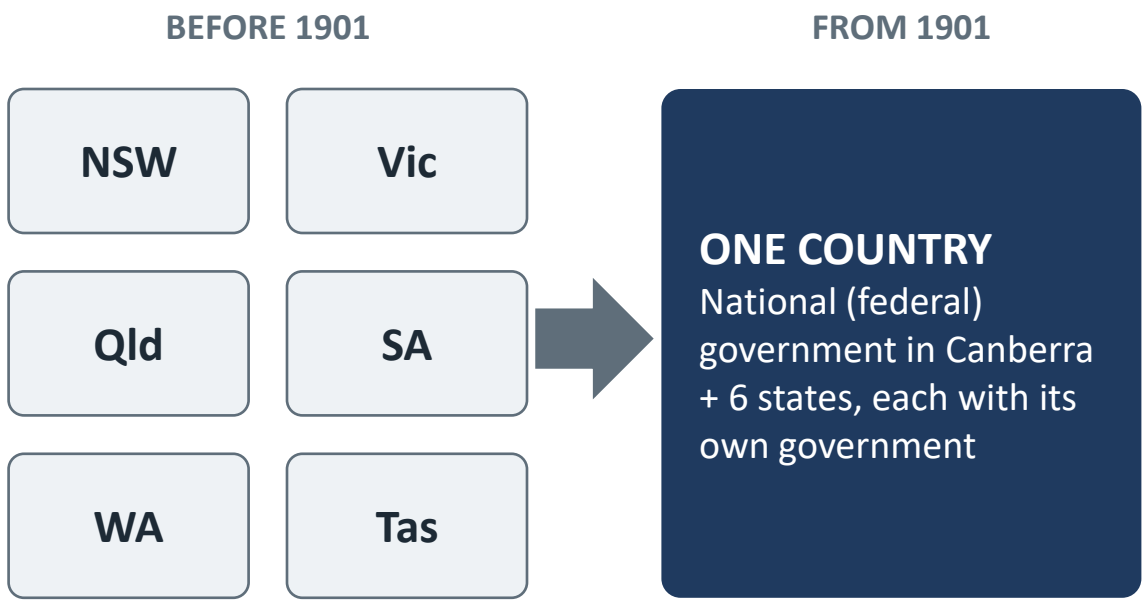
LOCAL
Your council · your suburb

Three levels. Three sets of politicians.

Prepared using AI. AI makes mistakes. DYOR. For reference only

What does “Federal" mean?

- Before 1901, Australia was six separate colonies, each with its own government.
- In 1901 they agreed to join together as one country. Joining like this is called a federation.
- "Federal" simply means the national level.
- The Constitution lists what the national government controls. The states keep the rest.



Note on Human Rights: Australia does not have a national human rights framework. It is the only liberal democracy without a national Human Rights Act making us an outlier among comparable democracies.

3 Levels of Government

FEDERAL Canberra · 1 parliament	**Looks after** Defence · Immigration · Tax · Medicare · Foreign affairs · Phones and internet
STATE Perth (WA) · 8 state and territory parliaments	**Looks after** Hospitals · Schools · Police · Public transport · Most roads
LOCAL Your council · no parliament	**Looks after** Rubbish · Parks · Local roads · Building approvals · Dog registration

Rule of thumb: the bigger the issue, the higher up the level.

Legislative responsibilities are shared: eg Tax

MONEY

FEDERAL collects about 81% of all tax: income tax, company tax and GST.

GST and grants

STATE runs most services (hospitals, schools, police) and raises smaller taxes: payroll tax, stamp duty, land tax.

LOCAL councils charge rates and receive grants.

EXAMPLE: HOUSING

FEDERAL

Sets the national target (1.2 million new homes by June 2029) and helps pay for it.

STATE

Writes the building and planning rules, using a national building code.

LOCAL

The council approves your actual build.

Like a franchise: head office collects most of the money and shares it. The owners run the shopfronts and charge some fees of their own.

What is a parliament?

A parliament is a group of elected people who debate and vote on laws.

- At the national level Australia has one parliament in Canberra.
- At the regional level we have 8 parliaments including six state and two territory (ACT and NT).
- Local councils do not have parliaments.

Most parliaments have two rooms, called houses. Queensland, the ACT and the NT have only one.

1 National · Canberra

8 Regional · 6 states + ACT + NT

0 Local councils

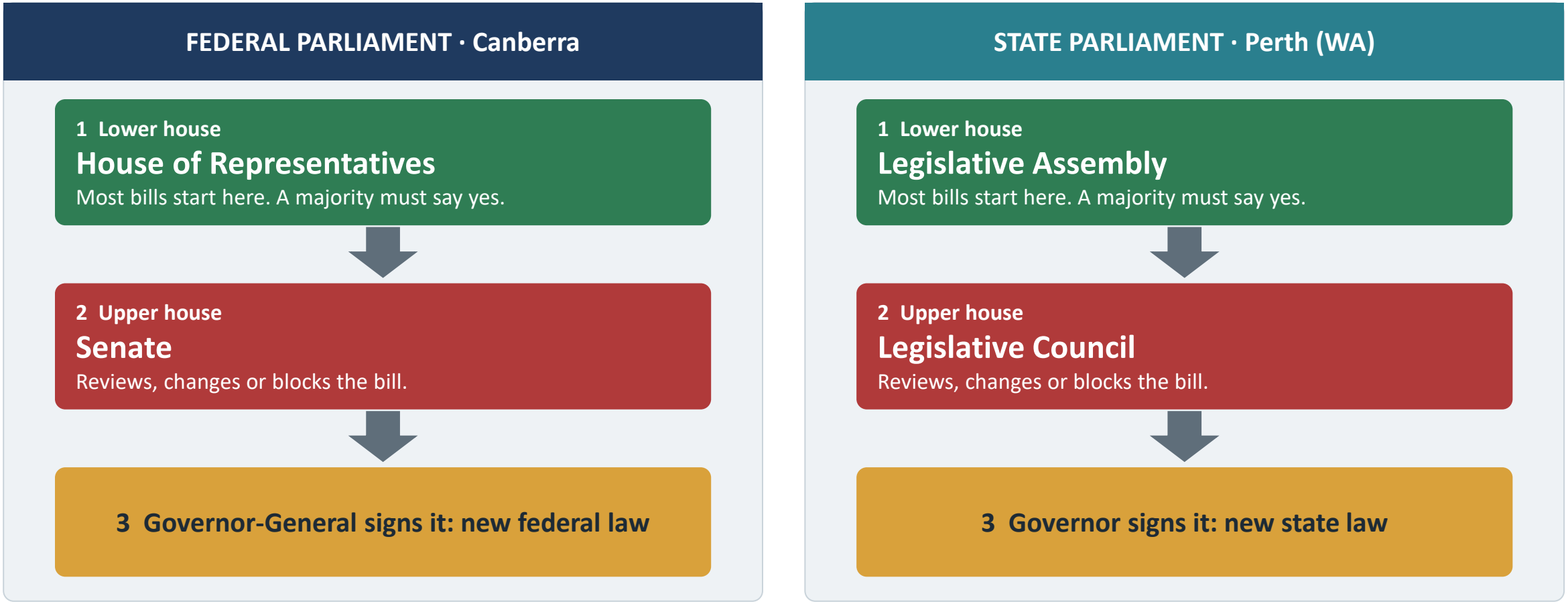
Federal vs State: the big picture

	FEDERAL · Canberra		STATE · Western Australia (example)	
	LOWER HOUSE House of Representatives	UPPER HOUSE Senate	LOWER HOUSE Legislative Assembly	UPPER HOUSE Legislative Council
Members	**150 MPs**	**76 senators**	**59 MLAs**	**37 MLCs**
Each one represents	One local electorate	A whole state (12 per state, 2 per territory)	One local electorate	The whole state
How they are elected	One winner per electorate. Need over half the votes. Number every box.	A team for the whole state. About 1 in 7 votes wins a seat. 6 seats up at a time.	One winner per electorate. Need over half the votes. Number every box.	A team for the whole state. About 1 in 38 votes wins a seat. All 37 seats up together.
Term	Up to 3 years. Date not fixed.	6 years. Half re-elected every 3 years.	4 years. Fixed March date.	4 years. All re-elected together.
Forms the government?	Yes. The Prime Minister sits here.	No. It reviews and can block.	Yes. The Premier sits here.	No. It reviews and can block.

Green = lower house, red = upper house (matching the real chambers). WA is the state example; other states differ in detail. The ACT and NT each have 2 senators.

How a law passes: two rooms

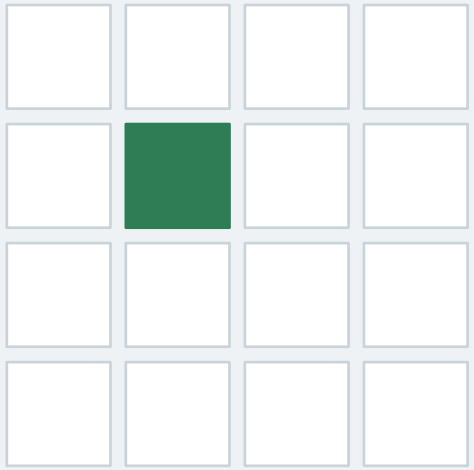
A proposed law is called a bill. It must pass both rooms of its own parliament.



Two separate buildings, two separate sets of laws. A bill passing in one does not pass in the other.

MP vs Senator

MP: one local patch



Represents

One electorate

You have

Exactly 1

Job

Your local voice

WA has 16 federal electorates. You live in exactly one.

Senators: the whole state



Represents

The whole state

You have

12 (every state has 12)

Job

State-wide voice. Reviews laws.

Everyone in the state shares the same 12 senators.

Your MP is your local branch manager. Senators are the state head office.

How MPs are elected

1. You vote for one local candidate by numbering every box: 1 for your favourite, then 2, 3 and so on.
2. First choices are counted. If someone has more than half, they win.
3. If not, the candidate with the fewest votes drops out and their votes move to each voter's next choice. This repeats until someone passes half.

Your first choice counts first. Later numbers only matter if it is knocked out.

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Division of Exampleville

Number the boxes 1 to 4 in order of your choice

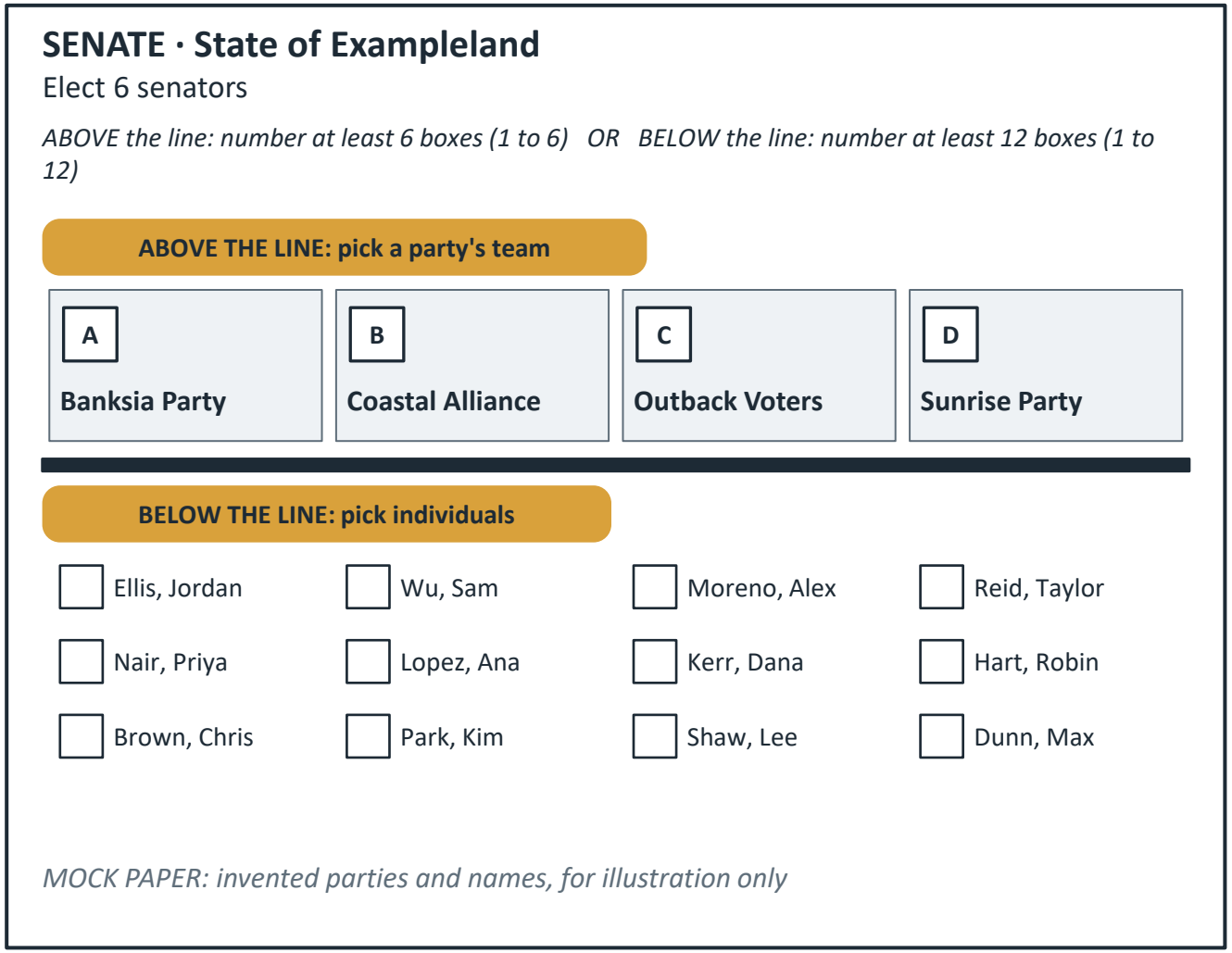
1	**Ellis, Jordan**	Banksia Party
3	**Wu, Sam**	Coastal Alliance
4	**Moreno, Alex**	Outback Voters
2	**Reid, Taylor**	Independent

MOCK PAPER: invented names, for illustration only

How senators are elected

1 in 7 votes wins a seat

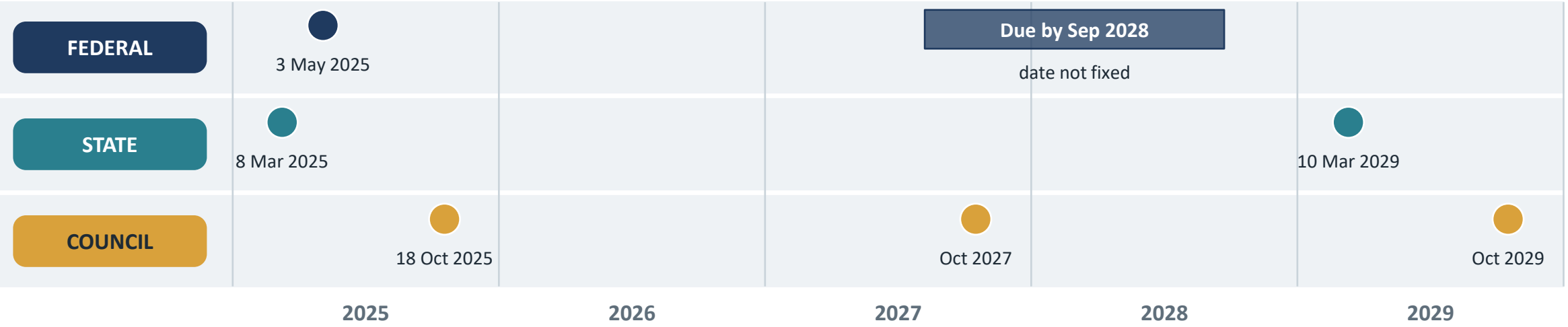
- The whole state is one electorate. Everyone votes for the same senators.
- 6 seats per state are up at a normal election. The other 6 come up 3 years later.
- You need a share of the vote (about 14%), not a majority.
- Above the line = a party's team. Below the line = individuals.
- Smaller parties can win seats here, so the Senate often looks different from the House.



How many elections, and how often?

Level	Ballot papers	How often	Compulsory?
Federal	2 (House + Senate)	At least every 3 years. Date not fixed.	Yes
State (WA)	2 (Assembly + Council)	Every 4 years. Fixed March date.	Yes
Local council	1	Every 2 years (half the council). October.	No (in WA)

Also: by-elections (when one seat becomes empty) and referendums (to change the Constitution).



In 2025 a WA voter went to the polls three times in eight months: state in March, federal in May, council in October.

What am I actually voting for?

1 Small paper: one local person

You choose one MP (or MLA) for your electorate. Number every box.

2 Big paper: a team for the whole state

You choose senators (or MLCs). Pick a party above the line, or individuals below it.

3 Your number 1 matters most

Later numbers are a back-up plan. They only count if your first choice cannot win.

4 How-to-vote cards are only suggestions

Parties hand them out at the polling place. You can number the boxes however you like.

How many politicians represent you?

Western Australia example

13

Federal
1 MP + 12 senators

38

State
1 MLA + 37 MLCs

+

Local
Your local councillors

About 51 politicians represent you, plus your councillors. That means you are never short of someone to contact.

Who can change a law?

1

The same parliament

Only the same parliament can change or repeal its own law.

2

The High Court

It can strike a law down if the law is unconstitutional (the parliament did not have the power to make it).

3

The clash rule

If a state law clashes with a federal law, the federal law wins. A state parliament cannot overturn a federal law.

Takeaway: write to the level of government that controls the issue.

Who should I contact?

FEDERAL issue	**Your MP and your state's senators**
STATE issue	**Your MLA and the state's MLCs**
LOCAL issue	**Your councillors**

Not sure? Start with your MP at the right level. Their office can point you on.

Making your message count

1. Keep it short and polite.
2. Cover one issue only.
3. Say you live in their electorate.
4. Say exactly what you want them to do.
5. Ask for a reply.

Where to find your representatives

1	**Find your federal electorate**	**electorate.aec.gov.au**	Search by suburb or postcode. If you see two results, check the address you are enrolled at.
2	**Find your federal MP and senators**	**aph.gov.au > Senators and Members**	Each page shows their contact details. Senators are listed by state.
3	**Find your state MPs**	**parliament.wa.gov.au > Find your MP**	Search by surname, electorate, postcode or suburb. Other states: search "[your state] parliament find your MP".
4	**Find your councillors**	**Your council's website**	Search for your council name, then "councillors".

Politicians choose their own contact method (web form or email), and there is no central email list. Always check the official page.

Worked example: East Perth

You live in

East Perth

postcode 6004

FEDERAL	**Your MP:** Perth · Patrick Gorman (Labor)
FEDERAL	**Your senators:** All 12 WA senators
STATE	**Your MLA:** Perth · John Carey (Labor)
STATE	**Your MLCs:** All 37 WA MLCs
LOCAL	**Your council:** City of Perth

Politicians change after elections. Confirm your federal electorate at electorate.aec.gov.au (some suburbs sit in more than one) and check the official pages for current members.

Cheat sheet (screenshot this)

What is "federal"?	The national level. Six colonies joined as one country in 1901.
How many parliaments?	9: one national, six state and two territory. Councils have none.
MP vs Senator?	An MP covers one local patch. Senators cover the whole state.
What is a "house"?	One room of a parliament. A bill must pass both rooms.
Lower vs upper house?	Lower: where the government is formed. Upper: reviews and can block.
How are MPs elected?	One winner per electorate. Over half the votes. Number every box.
How are senators elected?	Whole state votes. About 1 in 7 votes wins a seat. 6 seats at a time.
How often do we vote?	Federal: at least every 3 years. WA state: every 4 (March). Council: every 2 (October).
Who do I contact?	Federal issue: MP and senators. State: MLA and MLCs. Local: councillors.
Where do I find them?	electorate.aec.gov.au · aph.gov.au · parliament.wa.gov.au · your council site

Sources and checking

- Australian Electoral Commission (aec.gov.au): House seat numbers, Senate voting, find my electorate
- Parliament of Australia (aph.gov.au): how Senators are elected, contacting Senators and Members
- Parliament of Western Australia (parliament.wa.gov.au): Legislative Council, Perth electorate, find your MP
- WA Electoral Commission and Dept of Local Government (elections.wa.gov.au, dlgsc.wa.gov.au): state and council elections
- Australian Treasury (treasury.gov.au): National Housing Accord and building rules
- ANU Crawford School and NSW Treasury: tax shares and how GST is distributed

Facts checked November 2026. Names, seat numbers and dates can change after elections, so always confirm on the official site before relying on them.