

Representation in the Legislative Assembly

This topic explainer explores the role of representatives in the ACT Legislative Assembly, how they get their jobs, and how government is formed.

🎯 Learning goals

- We are informed about democracy through school, media, and official sources, and participate by voting and engaging with elected representatives.
- Election results determine how many seats parties and independents win, shaping who forms government and how decisions are made in the Assembly.

☰ Curriculum links

Year 8 AC9HC8K01
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The role of our representatives

Canberrans' territory-level representatives are called **Members of the Legislative Assembly** (MLAs). They have three main roles as our representatives:

- **Consider and make laws:** MLAs debate and vote on bills – draft laws – for the ACT.
- **Speak up for the people of the ACT:** MLAs talk with people across the ACT and listen to their concerns and ideas, raising important issues in the Assembly on their behalf.
- **Scrutinise the government:** MLAs closely examine the work of the government by asking questions about its decisions and how public money is spent to benefit Canberrans.

How do MLAs get their jobs

MLAs get their jobs as our representatives by being **elected**.

On the third Saturday in October every four years, Australian citizens over the age of 18 living in the ACT vote across five electorates for candidates to represent them using the [Hare-Clark electoral system](#). The top five candidates in each electorate become MLAs in the Assembly, totalling 25 members.

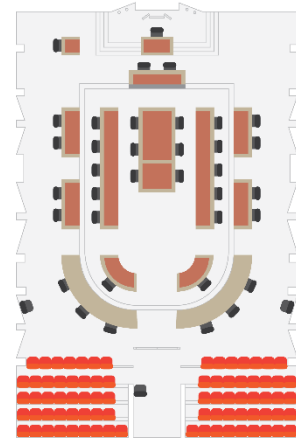
People who stand as candidates for the Assembly often belong to political parties, who are organisations made up of people with shared ideas of beliefs. Candidates who do not belong to a political party as called ‘independents’.

The Assembly chamber

After being elected, MLAs meet on sitting days in the Assembly chamber to do their work.

The chamber is shaped like a horseshoe, a common layout in Westminster-style parliaments, with specific seating places:

- The Speaker sits on a raised platform at the front.
- The government sits on the benches on the Speaker’s right.
- The opposition sits on the benches on the Speaker’s left.
- The minor parties and independents on the curved benches at the back of the room.



The largest two parties in the Assembly usually become the government and opposition. All other parties are called ‘minor parties’

Forming government in the ACT

After an election, a government needs to be formed. This depends on the make-up of parties and independents elected to the Assembly:

- If more than half of the elected members are from one party, a **majority government** can be formed.
- If no party has more than half of the elected members but two or more parties working together do, a **coalition government** can be formed by signing a formal agreement to share power.
- If no party has more than half of the elected members and none want to share power, a **minority government** can be formed by the party with the informal support of over half the elected members.

In a minority government, the crossbench holds the balance of power. This means they can determine whether something in the Assembly chamber passes or fails depending on how they vote.



Did you know there has only been one majority government in the Assembly’s history. The Sixth Assembly (2004–08) had a majority government with nine of the then 17 MLAs (there were seven opposition members and one minor party member).

If no government can be formed among Assembly members over a prolonged period, section 16 of the *Self-Government Act 1988* (Cwth) – the ACT’s constitution – allows the Governor-General to dissolve the Assembly and call for a new election. This is a very serious power of last resort and has never been used in the ACT’s history.

Classroom activities

There are a two-part in-class activity associated with this topic available on our website:

- [Activity: **Negotiating parties and government**](#) (📄 PDF 155KB)

Other resources

There are a range of other helpful resources available on this topic, the best of which we have compiled below:

- [\[ACT\] Factsheet: **The Westminster System down under**](#) (parliament.act.gov.au🔗)
- [\[ACT\] Factsheet: **Hare-Clark electoral system**](#) (elections.act.gov.au🔗)
- [\[Federal\] Factsheet: **Minor parties**](#) (peo.gov.au🔗)
- [\[Federal\] Factsheet: **Independents**](#) (peo.gov.au🔗)
- [\[Federal\] Activity: **Negotiating a minority government**](#) (peo.gov.au🔗)