

THE CONVERSATION



The states have gone that way, but fixed four-year federal terms are unlikely

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Queensland is set to join all other states, territories and local councils (with the exception of Tasmania) in having fixed four-year parliamentary terms. AAP/Dan Peled

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Queensland recently voted in favour of a move from non-fixed three-year parliamentary terms to a fixed four-year term for its Legislative Assembly.

The “yes” vote won with a clear – but not huge – majority. Queensland is set to join all other states, territories and local councils (with the exception of Tasmania) in having fixed four-year parliamentary terms.

The House of Representatives is now the only lower house chamber in the Australian parliamentary system with non-fixed three-year terms. Should it follow suit?

Why Queensland voted yes

The Queensland result – just over 53% voted “yes” – is not exactly a resounding endorsement of fixed four-year electoral cycles. But it is an extraordinary result nevertheless, given that the state’s voters turned on the Newman government in 2015 after only one term.

If not for the three-year parliamentary term, the Newman government might still be in power. So what persuaded the majority of Queenslanders to gift future governments an extra year in office – particularly when Queensland does not have an upper house and therefore lacks the checks and balances that other states enjoy?

The answer could lie somewhere in the burgeoning groundswell of political disenchantment

with politics in general among voters, no doubt spurred on by recent politicking in Canberra relating to the uncertainty of a double-dissolution election and confusion over the budget date.

For those who voted “yes” in Queensland, the attractiveness of a fixed date – even at the expense of ceding the opportunity to vote sooner rather than later in future elections – was too good an opportunity to pass up.

For many, the idea of fewer elections was appealing. This would spare them the monotonous political spin that precedes elections. Ironically, the attractiveness of not having to vote may have provided the basis for the successful “yes” campaign.

Advantages and disadvantages

In Australia, arguments in support of fixed four-year parliamentary terms have traditionally focused on the certainty and the economic benefits associated with knowing the election’s timing in advance.

In a report to state parliament, the Queensland Finance and Administration Committee noted a range of benefits for fixed four-year terms. These included:

an improvement in public policy outcomes and government decision-making;

an improvement in business confidence and economic activity;

a reduction in election costs;

an enhancement in the quality and effectiveness of parliamentarians; and

the reduction of political manipulation of election dates.

The veracity and extent of these benefits are questionable. Opponents of longer parliamentary terms argued in the report that no research has been undertaken that definitively shows any substantial benefits in other Australian jurisdictions with fixed four-year terms.

The report also said no credible research had been conducted in Australia showing that a shorter election cycle has the detrimental economic impacts some have claimed.

The report provided a detailed and cogent list of arguments detailing the disadvantages associated with longer parliamentary terms. These include:

the lack of good governance and an erosion of democratic principles;

the reduction in the accountability of parliament to its electors;

a longer period to wait for electors to voice their disapproval by the democratic process;

the inappropriateness for a unicameral parliament (in Queensland’s case);

insufficient safeguards for the parliamentary process; and

a less representative parliament.

In 2008, Canadian academics Christian Leuprecht and James McHugh concluded:

... evidence for the apparent democratic merits of a fixed election cycle is found to be less conclusive than its proponents acknowledge.

They claimed the real intentions behind longer parliamentary terms are politically motivated.

This might explain why both major parties in Queensland were uncharacteristically united on this issue. Rarely does an electorate witness the unbridled camaraderie that existed between the LNP and Labor in the lead-up to the vote. Perhaps this should have been cause for concern.

Will the push go federal?

The question remains as to whether the House of Representatives will follow the states and local councils and adopt fixed four-year parliamentary terms.

The lure of an extra year in power is attractive. But it is highly unlikely that the Commonwealth will explore this option any time soon, no matter how appealing it may seem.

One reason for this is because, in fixed-term election cycles, the incumbent loses the discretionary power to call the election. With that goes any advantage gained from having the ability to go to the polls at a time of the government's choosing.

A second, more important reason why the current parliament will not explore a national referendum on a fixed four-year parliamentary term is because the federal government may soon be holding a referendum on constitutional recognition of Indigenous peoples and a plebiscite on same-sex marriage.

It would require a very convincing argument to persuade voters that an extra year of job security for federal politicians is a higher priority than Indigenous recognition in the Constitution, and legalising same-sex marriage.



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