

The Queensland Referendum and Fixed Four-Year Parliamentary Terms:

Why the 'Yes' Vote Won (Vol 2: Issue 1)

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On Saturday 19th March 2016, Queenslanders voted in the quadrennial local council elections. At the same time, a referendum was held on the question of fixed four-year parliamentary terms. Queenslanders were asked to decide on whether they should join the other Australian states (with the exception of Tasmania) and territories by adopting fixed four-year parliamentary terms. Up until the referendum, Queensland and the Commonwealth House of Representatives were the only Parliaments in Australia still using non-fixed three-year parliamentary terms. Even all local councils throughout Australia have adopted the quadrennial electoral cycle.

The results of the referendum are surprising. Although not an avalanche of support for extending the term, Queensland voters did express a clear majority opinion in favour of fixed four-year terms, thereby giving (or some might say, 'gifting') an extra year of job security for state politicians - for seemingly very little in return.[\[1\]](#)

Why the 'Yes' Vote?

What attracted voters to the idea of fixed four-year parliamentary terms? Perhaps it was not so much an attraction to anything in particular—more a perfect storm of voter apathy mixed with just the right dose of political spin and manipulation.

At the top of the list has to be voter apathy, or, as I have expressed elsewhere, the "burgeoning groundswell of disenchantment of politics".[\[2\]](#) The Queensland Government was—as is the case with all political parties—acutely aware that many people have a dislike for politics and voting in general. What better way, then, to harness this sentiment than to use it as the basis for holding fewer elections—and that's exactly what they did. In its report entitled *Inquiry into the introduction of four year terms for the Queensland Parliament*, the Finance and Administration Committee, noted at 3.1.5 "voter dislike of elections" was:

Anecdotally, a further argument often cited in favour of longer parliamentary terms is that Australians dislike the frequency with which they are required to vote. There is also an increasing disengagement of the voting public from politics in general, something that has been linked to a distaste of the perceived constant campaigning and polling within the electorate. Fewer state elections may reduce this political apathy to some extent.[\[3\]](#)

The proponents of the 'Yes' vote then conveniently conflated the "apathetic" argument with the costs that would be achieved if fewer elections were held as the basis for one of their arguments.[\[4\]](#) This was indicated in the 'Yes' Statement of Argument: "Fewer Elections Means Queenslanders Save Money – a yes vote would result in fewer elections and costs savings for Queenslanders".[\[5\]](#) Two arguments in one!

Other arguments that the ‘Yes’ campaign used to justify an extended term, contained a number of sensible propositions. For example:

- More certainty around timing of State general elections;
- fixed term takes the politics out of election timing and prevents the government of the day trying to take advantage of calling a snap election; and
- Policy development would be less driven by short-term political considerations and governments could act with a longer-term view.[\[6\]](#)

However, there were other arguments that were less convincing and should have given rise to concern:

- prevent summer holidays being interrupted by an election and remove uncertainty for the tourism industry, event organisers and families who like to plan their travel;
- For Regional and North Queensland, it means the election period is taken out of the wet season, which can prove difficult for regional communities exercising their right to vote;
- The current maximum three-year term for Queensland’s Legislative Assembly was introduced in the 1890s;

and the one that really should have made people sit up and take note ...

- The introduction of fixed four-year terms for the Legislative Assembly **is supported by both major parties** and by the two Independent Members.[\[7\]](#)

Rarely have electors in Queensland seen such a display of camaraderie between the Liberal/National coalition and Queensland Labor in support of parliamentary reform.[\[8\]](#) Why wouldn’t the fact that both parties were “lock, stock and barrel” on the issue of extending the parliamentary term attract greater scrutiny?

There was very little reporting from the Queensland media regarding such an important reform. One reason for this is probably due to the fact that not only did both major political parties support the reform, but so too did industry groups and the trade unions.[\[9\]](#) There was no real news story to report; no controversial angle or burgeoning political chasm exposed by polarised views for which news outlets could report. Parliamentary reform is one of those topics that would receive very little attention from the greater public and it is for this reason that the ‘No’ campaign received very little coverage. In fact, so little was the media coverage during the lead up to the council elections, it is doubtful whether all Queenslanders even knew a referendum was taking place. Most of the media coverage at this time was concentrated on the local council elections and the constant speculation in Canberra over the federal election date in that jurisdiction.

The problem with apathy is that it leads to inattentiveness and injudiciousness. It was the manifestation of these traits that permitted the seriousness of the question being posed, to slip past much of the electorate. How else could people fail to see the irony that it was just last year where voters vehemently registered their frustration with the Newman Government—had a fixed four-year cycle existed at the time, that Government may still be in power now.

Footnotes:

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[1] For the results of the Queensland referendum, see, Electoral Commission of Queensland website: < <http://results.ecq.qld.gov.au/elections/state/REF2016/results/summary.html> > the results published by the ECQ indicate that the 'Yes' vote received 53.04% and the 'No' vote received 46.96%.

[2] Jamie Fellows, 'The States Have Gone that Way, But Fixed Four-Year Federal Terms are Unlikely' (2016) *The Conversation* (in press).

[3] Parliament Finance and Administration Committee, Parliament of Queensland, *Inquiry into the introduction of four year terms for the Queensland Parliament, including consideration of Constitution (Fixed Term Parliament) Amendment Bill 2015 and Constitution (Fixed Term Parliament) Referendum Bill 2015* – Report Number 16 (2015) 23.

[4] Electoral Commission of Queensland, *Statement of Argument: The 'Yes' Case* (2016)

< https://www.ecq.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/45652/2016-State-Referendum-yes-arguments.pdf >.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Chris O'Brien, 'Queensland referendum to decide fixed, four-year parliamentary terms', *ABC News* (online) 4 December 2015 < <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-12-04/queensland-politics-fixed-four-year-terms-put-to-referendum/7002512> >

[9] Sarah Vogler, 'Queensland Referendum Results: we reveal how the 'yes' was won', *The Courier Mail* (online) 21 March 2016 < <http://www.couriermail.com.au/news/queensland/queensland-referendum-2016-results-we-reveal-how-the-yes-was-won/news-story/9503f338d5d0b938eea95dcc94a4006f#load-story-comments> >.