

THE CONVERSATION

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Voters' dislike of politics makes fixed four-year parliamentary terms look appealing

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David Coleman plans to introduce a private member's bill for fixed, four-year terms. AAP/Dan Himbrechts

Liberal MP David Coleman plans to introduce a private member's bill to bring in fixed, four-year terms for the House of Representatives. Currently, our federal lower house is elected to serve up to three years. As Coleman notes:

Author



Jamie Fellows

Lecturer in Law, James Cook University

Since Federation ... the average term has been a little more than two-and-a-half years, as prime ministers have wide discretion to call an election at a time of their choosing.

The House of Representatives is the only lower house chamber in the Australian parliamentary system with non-fixed three-year terms.

In March 2016, Queenslanders voted in a referendum to adopt fixed, four-year terms for members in the state's lower house. Although the result could hardly be described as a landslide endorsement (53% yes; 47% no) the victory is a salient message to those in the federal parliament. People are likely to vote for longer parliamentary terms. They want fewer elections and are dissatisfied with politics.

Pros and cons

In Queensland it was obvious proponents of longer parliamentary terms relied on voter dissatisfaction. They claimed, among other things, fewer elections would:

- “prevent summer holidays being interrupted by an election”
- remove uncertainty for “families who like to plan their travel”
- “for regional and north Queensland, it means the election period is taken out of the wet season”.

To be fair, arguments in support of longer parliamentary terms have merit. They include benefits such as:

- certainty about election dates
- removing the strategic and political advantage of snap elections
- cost savings due to fewer elections
- confidence in the business community
- improvement in public policy outcomes and government decision-making
- consistency with the states and territories.

The chairman of the Australian Institute of Company Directors and boss of the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry **claim longer terms** create stability for business.

Naturally, there are also arguments against extending parliamentary terms. These might include:

- fewer democratic opportunities and loss of voter control
- more complacent governments and politicians
- politicians’ job security ahead of voters’ rights
- no guarantee of better planning and policy.

Hurdles to overcome

Journalist Mike Steketee has described federal four-year parliamentary terms as being the “bridesmaid but never the bride”. This is because the idea of longer federal parliamentary terms never actually reaches the “political altar”.

Even though the “bridesmaid” is much closer to the altar these days, there are still several potential hurdles to overcome. One major hurdle relates to the constitutional difficulty associated with referenda.

Parliamentary terms for the Senate (six years) and the House of Representatives (three years) are established in the Australian Constitution (Chapter 1, Parts 2 and 3). Any alteration to these constitutionally entrenched arrangements must comply with section 128. This requires a referendum in which a majority of people in a majority of states and territories must vote for the change.

Referenda in Australia have traditionally **not fared well**. Only eight out of 44 have passed.

The next impediment relates to private member’s bills – what Coleman plans to introduce. Private

member's bills are notoriously difficult to pass without overwhelming support from other members.

Support for the bill might also be required from the crossbenchers. It would be difficult to know how the Greens or independents might cast their votes.

Since Federation in 1901, around 20 private member's bills have become law – out of more than 450 that have been introduced. Support for the bill might be easy to attract this time, though, given politicians are being asked to vote on their own longevity.

This issue may not get too much traction federally due to differences between state and federal areas of responsibility. Voters might not tolerate a longer time to cast their vote as they would on certain state or territory issues.

For many, Indigenous constitutional recognition, same-sex marriage, taxation reform, asylum-seeker policy and the National Disability Insurance Scheme – to name a few – take precedence over certain state and territory issues.

The question now is whether federal politicians are prepared to force the Australian people to vote on whether they have an extra year in the job (or possibly two years in the Senate's case).

A cynic might say the best way to secure longer federal parliamentary terms at a referendum is to follow Queensland's approach: adopt complete bipartisanship, say very little in the media, and harness the discontent of the electorate.

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