Suffrage in Queensland: who, when, where

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When doing research, electoral rolls can be very useful but we need to be aware of who was eligible to vote at various times and the traps that can catch us out.

Early voting was based on property ownership but that changed until it became universal and compulsory.

**Adult male suffrage**

- 1855 saw the granting of the right to vote to all male British subjects 21 years or over in South Australia
- 1857 – this right was extended to Victoria
- 1858 – New South Wales; the right was lost to Queenslanders in 1859 when the colony separated from NSW
- **1872 – Queensland (after 1871 a maximum of one vote was allowed in any one electorate)**
- 1893 – Western Australia
- 1896 – Tasmania became the last colony to grant universal male suffrage

**Adult female suffrage**

The right of women to vote began to be recognised in Australia in the late 1800s. The following is a time line for women’s suffrage:

- 1861 Property owning women in South Australia – local elections
- 1864 Victoria (accidentally – was granted to all rate-payers), corrected by an amendment to the Act in 1865
- 1895 South Australia
- 1899 Western Australia
- 1902 New South Wales; and **Federally**
- 1903 Tasmania
- 1905 Queensland
- 1908 Victoria

**Non-white suffrage**

Electoral officials had the power to decide who was an “aboriginal native” and who was not – some were allowed to vote (usually only if they lived like white people) and others refused.

- Once the colonies were established - Indigenous men were not specifically denied the right to vote but they were not encouraged to enrol
- **1885 – Queensland Elections Act 1885 specifically excluded “Aboriginal natives”**
- 1893 – Western Australia likewise
- 1895 – South Australia legislated that all adults could vote
- 1901 – following federation legislation restricted Aboriginal voting rights in federal elections, for a time Aborigines could vote in some states and not others
- 1925 – some non-whites were allowed to vote
  - all Indians in Australia became eligible to vote
- 1949 – some indigenous people gained the right to vote
  - those who had completed military service
  - those who had the right to vote in their own state (did not include Queensland)
- March 1962 – **Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918** amended
  - indigenous people could enrol to vote at Commonwealth elections if they wished
  - it was not compulsory to enrol
- 1962 – right to vote at state/territory elections extended to indigenous people in Western Australia and Northern Territory
- 1965 – indigenous people gained the same voting rights as other Australians
  - **Queensland followed the other states allowing voting in State elections**
- 1984 – compulsory enrolment/voting for indigenous people
  - (History of the indigenous vote, Australian Electoral Commission, 2006)

**Early electoral rolls**

Many of the earliest “rolls” are available to us through the National Library of Australia’s Trove site (http://trove.nla.gov.au) – lists of electors and electors asking potential candidates “to allow themselves to be nominated”. These rarely have much detail apart from the name of the person and the electorate.
State electoral rolls
Where available these are more informative than the earlier rolls. You are likely to find the following details:

- Name
- Qualification - on the basis of property
  - Residence
  - Household
  - Freehold
  - Leasehold
- Situation of residence of property in respect of which qualification arises
- Age
- Place of abode
- Occupation
- Particulars of qualification
- Date when claim received

Be aware that people could have multiple votes (eliminated by the 1905 Elections Act Amendment Act when the property qualification was abolished)!!

Commonwealth electoral rolls
Women were eligible to vote in Commonwealth elections. For example, in the first Queensland roll (1903) 44 percent of those registered to vote were women.

Information available:
- Name
- Address
- Occupation (omitted after 1983)
- Sex
- Division and Subdivision

In some states the rolls also indicate whether the elector was on the state roll (marked by an asterisk).

Compulsory enrolment / compulsory voting
Be aware when enrolment became compulsory – they may not have enrolled until they had to.

- Compulsory enrolment, federal elections – 1911
- Compulsory voting for
  - Federal elections – 1924
  - Queensland – 1915 *(first place in the British Empire to introduce compulsory voting)*
  - Victoria – 1926
  - NSW and Tasmania – 1928
  - Western Australia – 1936
  - South Australia – 1942

Change in the “adult” age
The voting age was reduced from 21 to 18 years in 1973 (Australia) and 1974 (New Zealand)

Access to records
Check in the following places – all have electoral rolls available. Be aware that annotated rolls and some lists in newspapers record people who have died and/or left the district.

- Newspapers
- State / National archives
- Ancestry.com, be aware that the more recent additions to their collection are not transcribed and return mostly unrecognisable results
- Findmypast.com
- Archive Digital Books Australasia
- Queensland FHS CDs – fully indexed and searchable Commonwealth rolls
- Toowoomba & Darling Downs FHS – colonial rolls
Tips

Don’t just look at a single roll with a single spelling.
- Examine both State and Commonwealth rolls
- Search as many rolls as are accessible to track movements and changes in occupation
- Look for variant spelling (I know, because I have been involved in indexing many rolls, that names are often recorded incorrectly)
- Use the information from indexed rolls to follow up on rolls which are not indexed
- Use a disappearance from a roll to hint at movement or death (annotated rolls)

Traps

To make best use of electoral rolls you need to be aware of some pitfalls and how to work around them.
- Be aware of whether your person was actually qualified to vote in the period you are looking
- Check whether enrolment was compulsory when you are searching
- If a person didn’t change address then there was no need to update information – occupation may have changed so you will need to look for other records as confirmation
- Be aware that the roll may not record occupation/sex correctly!!
- Be aware of whether the rolls you examine are transcribed or have been “indexed” by some other method
- Names are not necessarily in alpha order
- Different addresses for married couple – they may not have bothered updating details since they got married!

References


