



# AIATSIS

AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF ABORIGINAL  
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## Sources – electoral rolls and voter records

It's a common belief that the 1967 Referendum gave Indigenous people the right to vote. This isn't true. Aboriginal people could vote before 1967, but many didn't know their rights or were discouraged from voting. You can read more about the Referendum here -

<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australian-1967-referendum>

Laws about who could and could not vote changed over time and differed between the states. For example, Point McLeay mission in South Australia got a polling station in the 1890s. Aboriginal men and women voted at Point McLeay in South Australian elections and voted for the first Commonwealth Parliament in 1901.

Also, many Aboriginal people were granted exemption from the protection and welfare laws and exercised their right to vote. Others managed to avoid the protection and welfare system and/or were able to hide their Aboriginality to gain the same rights as any other citizens.

For these reasons, it is worth checking if your ancestors ever enrolled to vote. You might find out the family's residential address or track changes of address over time. Electoral rolls can also help identify other adult family members living at the same address. If you have non-Aboriginal ancestry in your family, finding those people on an electoral roll might help you to locate Aboriginal ancestors.

## What are electoral rolls?

Electoral rolls are lists of people who registered to vote in state, territory or federal elections. They are updated before every election and may provide information such as:

- address
- occupation
- age
- other people registered at the same address
- other people who were neighbours or lived in the same area.



## What information do you need to search for electoral rolls?

To start researching you need to know:

- the name (most importantly, the surname) of the person you are researching
- the electorate, town or general area where they lived. However you can still search for your ancestors if you don't know where they lived, it is just much more time consuming. Early Electoral Rolls listed people alphabetically for each electorate, rather than for the entire state as is the case these days, so you may need to scan through multiple electorates to find them.

## Where do you find electoral rolls?

### Historical electoral rolls

- Electoral rolls can often be searched at your local library, state library or family history society.
- The [National Library in Canberra](https://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/finding-electoral-rolls) <https://www.nla.gov.au/research-guides/finding-electoral-rolls> keeps microfiche of the Commonwealth electoral rolls from 1901 to present. Some of these may be slightly imperfect. The library also holds a limited number of state electoral rolls on microfiche for the time prior to Federation in 1901. They provide a limited look-up service if you can't visit the library.
- Most State Libraries have electoral rolls for various states and territories. These can be printed volumes or microfiche or a combination of media.
- [Ancestry.com.au](https://www.ancestry.com.au) provides access to scanned and searchable electoral rolls mostly covering the period 1903-1980 for each state and territory except South Australia for which only a very small number of rolls are available. For a full list of the electoral rolls currently on Ancestry go to <https://search.ancestry.com.au/search/db.aspx?dbid=1207>

### Current electoral roll

You can view an electronic copy of the current Commonwealth electoral roll (e-roll) at any office of the Australian Electoral Commission. See the [AEC website](https://www.aec.gov.au) for more information.

## Other resources

- Voting rights and Aboriginal people (Creative Spirits)  
<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/selfdetermination/voting-rights-for-aboriginal-people>
- [Indigenous Australians – electoral timeline](https://www.aec.gov.au/indigenous/milestones.htm) (Australian Electoral Commission)  
<https://www.aec.gov.au/indigenous/milestones.htm>