Parliamentary terms in well established democracies mostly have a maximum duration of four or five years, with a smaller number being longer or shorter. Parliamentary terms may be fixed, with some or no provision for bringing the term to an early end in extraordinary circumstances. Alternatively, parliamentary terms may be flexible, with elections able to be called at any time up to the expiry of the term.

The date of expiry of a parliamentary term may be determined in relation to a specified event, e.g. the date of the first meeting of the current parliament, or the next fixed election date. Alternatively the old parliamentary term may expire when the new parliament is elected or first meets. Generally, polling day is determined in relation to another event, e.g. within a certain number of days after nomination day, or it is a fixed calendar date, e.g. the first Thursday in May. It may be possible to vary a fixed polling date in special circumstances. Extraordinary circumstances that may give rise to an early end to a fixed term parliament include the adoption by parliament of a resolution to dissolve, inability to fill the post of head of government, or inability to form a new government following a vote of no confidence in the previous government.

A new parliament may meet on a specific day of the year, or within a certain number of days after a specified event, e.g. polling day or the declaration of results. Alternatively, the date of the first meeting may be set by proclamation, or be decided by parliament.
Introduction

Parliamentary terms in well established democracies mostly have a maximum duration of four or five years, with a smaller number being longer or shorter. They may be fixed, with some or no provision for bringing the term to an early end in extraordinary circumstances, or there may be flexibility as to when the term ends, up to the point of its expiry. This paper outlines the range of mechanisms for ending the parliamentary term, setting the election date and beginning the new parliamentary term in use in Australia, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Ireland, New South Wales, New Zealand, Norway, Scotland, South Africa, Sweden, the United Kingdom and Victoria. In all of these jurisdictions the government must have the confidence of Parliament to be able to govern.

For each of the jurisdictions the outline includes:

- the length of the parliamentary term;
- the ending of the parliamentary term;
- polling day and, if fixed, any provision for variation;
- if the term is fixed, any provision for an early election;
- the first meeting of the new Parliament;
- the pattern of general elections held since 1990.

In the case of bicameral parliaments, only the lower house is included.

Overview

Of the parliaments covered by this paper, those of Australia and New Zealand have three-year terms, those of Ireland, South Africa and the United Kingdom five-year terms, and the others four-year terms. In Australia, Ireland and New Zealand, and in Denmark subject to one restriction, elections may be called at any time up to the end of the parliamentary term. In Canada the election date is fixed, but the Governor General retains discretionary power to dissolve Parliament. Norway has a fixed parliamentary term with no provision for an early election, while in the other jurisdictions the parliamentary term is fixed, but an early election may be called in extraordinary circumstances.

The date of expiry of the parliamentary term may be on a specified day prior to the fixed election date, as in New South Wales, the United Kingdom and Victoria, or it may be determined in relation to a preceding event, e.g. the return of the writs in New Zealand, or when the parliament first met in Australia and Ireland. In Finland, Norway and Sweden the parliamentary term lasts until the new parliament is elected or first meets.

Where there is flexibility in calling an election, there may be specific requirements regarding polling day, e.g. in Australia and New Zealand it must be a Saturday within a set number of days after nomination day. When the parliamentary term is fixed, the polling day is also generally fixed, e.g. the first Thursday in May in Scotland and the United Kingdom, although in Norway it may be any Monday in September and in South Africa the date is set by the President within a 90 day limit. It may be possible to vary a fixed polling day in special circumstances.

Events that will give rise to an early end to fixed term parliaments include an inability to fill the post of head of government, in Scotland, South Africa and Sweden, or an inability to form a new government following a vote of no confidence in the previous government, in New South Wales, the United Kingdom and Victoria. In Scotland, South Africa and the United Kingdom, parliament may also adopt a resolution to dissolve. In Finland the President may order an early election on the proposal of the Prime Minister, while in Sweden the government may order an early election. Other triggers also exist. An early general election may cause the electoral clock to be reset to the start of a new full term or, as in Scotland and Sweden, the new term may be shortened and last only until the next ordinary general election is scheduled to be held.
The new parliament may meet for the first time on a specific day of the year, as in Norway, or within a certain number of days after polling day, as in Denmark and Ireland, or the declaration of the results, as in South Africa. Alternatively, as in Canada and the United Kingdom, the date of the first meeting may be set by proclamation, while in Finland it is decided by parliament.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jurisdiction</th>
<th>General elections since 1990</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australia</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Term**: 3 years from the first meeting of the House and no longer, but may be sooner dissolved. | March 1990  
Oct. 1996  
Nov. 2001  
Oct. 2004  
Nov. 2007  
Aug. 2010 |
| **End of old Parliament**: The Governor-General may by proclamation or otherwise dissolve the House of Representatives. |                             |
| **Polling day**: Saturday; not less than 23 days nor more than 31 days after the date of nomination. |                             |
| **First meeting of new Parliament**: Parliament shall be summoned to meet not later than 30 days after the day appointed for the return of the writs. |                             |
|                  | *Commonwealth of Australia Constitution Act, s.5, 28; Commonwealth Electoral Act 1918, s.157, 158* |
| **Canada**       |                             |
| **Term**: 4 years, following the polling day for the last general election.¹ | Oct. 1993  
June 1997  
Nov. 2000  
June 2004  
Jan. 2006  
Oct. 2008  
May 2011 |
| **End of old Parliament**: The Governor General is empowered to dissolve Parliament. |                             |
| **Polling day**: Third Monday in October, subject to the Governor General’s discretionary power to dissolve Parliament.² |                             |
| **Polling day variation**: If the Chief Electoral Officer believes that the designated Monday is unsuitable, including by reason of its being in conflict with a day of cultural or religious significance or a provincial or municipal election, they may recommend to the Governor in Council that polling day instead be the Tuesday immediately following the designated Monday, or the Monday of the following week. If the Governor in Council accepts the recommendation, an order will be made to that effect. Such an order must not be made after 1 August in an election year. |                             |
| **First meeting of new Parliament**: The Governor General shall from time to time summon and call together the House of Commons. |                             |
|                  | *¹ The term is set by the Canada Elections Act. The Constitution Act 1867 provides for 5 years from the day of the return of the writs, subject to sooner dissolution by the Governor General, and no longer.*  
*² A fixed polling day was introduced in 2007, with the first fixed date set for 19 October 2009.*  
*Constitution Act 1867, s.38, 50; Canada Elections Act, s.56.1, 56.2; Letters Patent Constituting the Office of Governor General of Canada, 1947, art. VI* |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Parliament (in English)</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>End of the old Parliament</th>
<th>Polling day</th>
<th>First meeting of new Parliament</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>(Folketinget)</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>The Prime Minister must ensure that a general election is held before the term expires. The Queen may issue writs for a new election at any time, except when a new ministry has been appointed and the Prime Minister has yet to appear before the Folketing.</td>
<td>Set by royal public notice. Since 1990 polling day has been on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday.</td>
<td>A newly elected Folketing shall assemble on the 12th weekday after the day of the election, unless previously summoned by the Queen.</td>
<td>The Constitutional Act of Denmark, s.32, 35; Parliamentary Election Act, s.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>(Eduskunta)</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>The term of the Parliament lasts until the next parliamentary elections have been held. Once Parliament decides to conclude its work for the term, the President shall declare the work of the Parliament finished for that term.</td>
<td>Third Sunday in April.¹</td>
<td>Parliament convenes at a time decided by Parliament. Following an extraordinary election, Parliament meets on the first day of the calendar month that begins next after 90 days from the promulgation of the election order, unless it has decided on an earlier date.</td>
<td>The Constitution of Finland, s.24, 26, 33; Vallag, s.107, 189</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Polling day was changed from the third Sunday in March in 2010.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Ireland</strong> (Dáil Éireann)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Term:</strong> 5 years from the date of the Dáil's first meeting.¹</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>End of old Parliament:</strong> The President shall dissolve the Dáil on the advice of the Taoiseach [Prime Minister], but may in his or her absolute discretion refuse to dissolve the Dáil on the advice of a Taoiseach who has ceased to retain the support of a majority in the Dáil.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Polling day:</strong> Not later than 30 days after the dissolution of the Dáil. The day, appointed by order of the Minister for the Environment, must be not earlier than the 17th nor later than the 25th day (excluding Sundays, Good Friday and public holidays) after the issue of the writ. Since 1990 polling day has been on Wednesday, Thursday or Friday.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>First meeting of new Parliament:</strong> The Dáil must meet within 30 days of polling day.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The term is set by the Electoral Act, 1992. The Constitution provides for a maximum term of 7 years.

*Constitution of Ireland, art. 13, 16; Electoral Act, 1992, s.2, 33, 96*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>New South Wales</strong> (Legislative Assembly)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Term:</strong> 4 years, unless sooner dissolved.¹</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>End of old Parliament:</strong> A Legislative Assembly expires on the Friday before the first Saturday in March in the fourth year after the return of the writs.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Polling day:</strong> Fourth Saturday in March</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Polling day variation:</strong> The Governor may dissolve the Assembly within 2 months of its due expiry date if the election would otherwise be held during the same period as a Commonwealth election, during a holiday period or at any other inconvenient time. In such a case polling day must be no later than the 40th day from the date of the issue of the writs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early general election:</strong> The Governor may dissolve the Legislative Assembly by proclamation if:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• a motion of no confidence in the government, of which at least 3 clear days' notice has been given, is passed and within 8 days following that motion a motion of confidence has not been passed in the then government; or</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• the Assembly rejects an appropriations bill for the ordinary annual services of the government or fails to pass such a bill before the time that the Governor considers the appropriation is required; or</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• despite any advice of the Premier or Executive Council, the Governor could do so in accordance with established constitutional conventions.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Early general election polling day:</strong> A day not later than the 40th day from the date of the issue of the writs.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First meeting of new Parliament:</strong> The Governor may, by proclamation or otherwise, summon and call together a Legislative Assembly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The term was changed from a maximum length of 4 years to a fixed length in 1995.

*Constitution Act 1902, s.23, 24, 24A, 24B*
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Zealand</td>
<td>(House of Representatives)</td>
<td>3 years, unless sooner dissolved, from the day fixed for the return of the writs, and no longer.</td>
<td>The Governor-General may by proclamation dissolve Parliament.</td>
<td>Saturday; not earlier than the 20th day nor later than the 27th day after nomination day.</td>
<td>Parliament shall meet not later than 6 weeks after the day fixed for the return of the writs.</td>
<td>Oct. 1990 Oct. 1996 Nov. 1999 July 2002 Sept. 2005 Nov. 2008 Nov. 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>(Stortinget)</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>The Storting shall remain in session as long as it deems necessary, but its proceedings shall terminate not later than the last weekday in September.¹</td>
<td>A Monday in September, as fixed by the King, in the last year of the Storting's term.</td>
<td>The Storting shall as a rule assemble on the first weekday in October.</td>
<td>Sept. 1993 Sept. 1997 Sept. 2001 Sept. 2005 Sept. 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scotland</td>
<td>(Parliament)</td>
<td>4 years, from the year of the previous ordinary general election. If an extraordinary general election is held within 6 months of the day of the next ordinary general election, that ordinary general election shall not be held.</td>
<td>Parliament is dissolved at the beginning of a minimum period, determined by order of the Secretary of State for Scotland, before polling day. Since 1999 minimum periods have been between 21 and 28 days.</td>
<td>First Thursday in May</td>
<td>Polling day variation: If the Presiding Officer proposes a day that is not more than one month earlier or later than the first Thursday in May, Her Majesty may by proclamation dissolve Parliament and require the poll to be held on the day proposed.</td>
<td>May 1999 May 2003 May 2007 May 2011</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ The dissolution of the Storting by the King was ended in 1990.

*New Zealand* (House of Representatives)  
**Term:** 3 years, unless sooner dissolved, from the day fixed for the return of the writs, and no longer.  
**End of old Parliament:** The Governor-General may by proclamation dissolve Parliament.  
**Polling day:** Saturday; not earlier than the 20th day nor later than the 27th day after nomination day.  
**First meeting of new Parliament:** Parliament shall meet not later than 6 weeks after the day fixed for the return of the writs.  

*Constitution Act 1986*, s.17, 18, 19; *Electoral Act 1993*, s.139

*Norway* (Stortinget)  
**Term:** 4 years  
**End of old Parliament:** The Storting shall remain in session as long as it deems necessary, but its proceedings shall terminate not later than the last weekday in September.¹  
**Polling day:** A Monday in September, as fixed by the King, in the last year of the Storting's term.  
**First meeting of new Parliament:** The Storting shall as a rule assemble on the first weekday in October.  

¹ The dissolution of the Storting by the King was ended in 1990.

*The Constitution*, art. 54, 68, 80; *Valgloven*, s.9-1, 9-2

*Scotland* (Parliament)  
**Term:** 4 years, from the year of the previous ordinary general election. If an extraordinary general election is held within 6 months of the day of the next ordinary general election, that ordinary general election shall not be held.  
**End of old Parliament:** Parliament is dissolved at the beginning of a minimum period, determined by order of the Secretary of State for Scotland, before polling day. Since 1999 minimum periods have been between 21 and 28 days.  
**Polling day:** First Thursday in May  
**Polling day variation:** If the Presiding Officer proposes a day that is not more than one month earlier or later than the first Thursday in May, Her Majesty may by proclamation dissolve Parliament and require the poll to be held on the day proposed.
**Extraordinary general election:** If the Presiding Officer proposes a day for the holding of a poll other than as above, Her Majesty may by proclamation dissolve Parliament and require an extraordinary general election to be held. The Presiding Officer will make such a proposal if:

- Parliament resolves by a majority of two thirds or more that it should be dissolved; or
- Parliament does not, when required to do so, nominate one of its members within 28 days for appointment as First Minister.

**Extraordinary general election polling day:** The day proposed by the Presiding Officer and required in the proclamation.

**First meeting of new Parliament:** Parliament shall meet within the period of 7 days beginning immediately after polling day.

*Scotland Act 1998, s. 2, 3, 12, 46*

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**South Africa (National Assembly)**

**Term:** 5 years

**End of old Parliament:** The President must, before or after the expiry of the term of the Assembly, issue a proclamation calling and setting dates for an election.

**Polling day:** The President, after consultation with the Electoral Commission, sets a day which must be within 90 days of the date the term expired. Since 1999 polling day has been on Wednesday.

**Polling day variation:** The Electoral Commission may request the President to postpone the polling day, provided that the postponement is necessary for ensuring a free and fair election and the day will still fall within the required period of 90 days.

**Early general election:**

- The President must dissolve the Assembly if the Assembly adopts a resolution, supported by a majority of its members, to dissolve, and 3 years have passed since the Assembly was elected.
- The Acting President must dissolve the Assembly if there is a vacancy in the office of President and the Assembly fails to elect a new President within 30 days after the vacancy occurred.

**Early general election polling day:** The President, or Acting President, after consultation with the Electoral Commission, sets a day which must be within 90 days of the date on which the Assembly was dissolved.

**First meeting of new Parliament:** The first sitting of the Assembly must take place on a date determined by the Chief Justice, but not more than 14 days after the election result has been declared.

*Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, s.49, 50, 51; Electoral Act 73 of 1998, s.17, 21*

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*April 1994
June 1999
April 2004
April 2009*
Sweden (Riksdagen)

Term: 4 years¹

End of old Parliament: Each election is valid for the period from the date on which the newly elected Riksdag convenes to the date on which the Riksdag elected next thereafter convenes.

Polling day: Second Sunday in September.²

Extraordinary election:
- If the Riksdag rejects the Speaker’s proposal for Prime Minister four times, the appointment procedure is abandoned and, if no ordinary election is due within 3 months, an extraordinary election is held within the same period.
- The government, other than a caretaker government, may order an extraordinary election to be held between ordinary elections, provided that at least three months have passed since the first meeting of the Riksdag.
- If the Riksdag, in a motion called for by at least 10% of the members and voted for by more than half the members, declares it no longer has confidence in the Prime Minister or another minister, the Speaker shall discharge that minister unless the government is in a position to order an extraordinary election to be held, and does so within one week of the declaration of no confidence.

Extraordinary election polling day:
- An extraordinary election held as a result of the abandonment of the procedure to appoint a Prime Minister is held on a Sunday determined by the Speaker, after consultation with the Election Authority.
- An extraordinary election ordered by the government is held on a Sunday determined by the government within 3 months of the issuing of the order.

First meeting of new Parliament: A newly elected Riksdag convenes on the 15th day following election day, but no sooner than the 4th day after the election result has been declared.

¹ The Riksdag term was changed from 3 years to 4 in 1994, with effect from 1995.
² Polling day was changed from the third Sunday in September in 2010, with effect from 2011.

United Kingdom (House of Commons)

Term: 5 years¹

End of old Parliament: Parliament dissolves at the beginning of the 17th working day before the polling day for the next general election. Parliament cannot otherwise be dissolved.

Polling day: First Thursday in May.

Polling day variation: The Prime Minister may, by order made by statutory instrument, postpone the polling day by up to two months. A draft of the statutory instrument must have been approved by a resolution of each House of Parliament. The draft must be accompanied by a statement setting out the Prime Minister’s reasons for proposing the change in polling day.

¹ The Riksdag term was changed from 3 years to 4 in 1994, with effect from 1995.
² Polling day was changed from the third Sunday in September in 2010, with effect from 2011.

The Instrument of Government, ch. 3, art. 3, 10, 11, ch. 6, art. 5, 7, ch. 13, art. 4; Vallag, ch. 1, s.2, 3

United Kingdom (House of Commons)
**Early general election**: An early general election takes place if:
- the House of Commons, by a majority of two thirds or more of the number of seats in the House, passes a motion that there shall be an early parliamentary general election; or
- the House of Commons passes a motion that it has no confidence in Her Majesty’s Government, and within 14 days has not passed a motion that the House has confidence in Her Majesty’s Government.

**Early general election polling day**: The day appointed by Her Majesty by proclamation on the recommendation of the Prime Minister.

**First meeting of new Parliament**: Parliament is summoned on a day appointed by Her Majesty by proclamation on the advice of the Privy Council.

1 The term was changed from a maximum length of 5 years to a fixed length in 2011.

*Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, s.1, 2, 3*

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**Victoria** (Legislative Assembly)

**Term**: 4 years¹

**End of old Parliament**:  
- The Assembly shall expire on the Tuesday which is 25 days before the last Saturday in November which is nearest to the 4ᵗʰ anniversary of the election day on which it was elected.
- If the previous Assembly was dissolved, the subsequent Assembly shall expire on the Tuesday which is 25 days before the last Saturday in November which is nearest to the last anniversary of the election day on which it was elected that occurs not more than 4 years after it was elected.

**Polling day**: Last Saturday in November nearest to the 4ᵗʰ anniversary of the previous election day.

**Polling day variation**: In exceptional circumstances the Governor may, on the recommendation of the Premier with the agreement of the Leader of the Opposition, postpone the election day to another Saturday as near as possible to the 4ᵗʰ anniversary of the previous election day.

**Early general election**: The Governor may dissolve the Assembly if:
- the Assembly passes a motion of no confidence, of which at least 3 clear days’ notice has been given, in the Premier and the other ministers, and after 8 days has not passed a motion of confidence in the then Premier and the other ministers; or
- the Premier advises the Governor in writing to dissolve the Assembly as a result of a deadlock between the Houses over a bill. A copy of the deadlocked bill, endorsed with the certificate of the Speaker that it is such a bill, must be attached to the advice.

**Early general election polling day**: Saturday, between 15 and 30 days after final nomination day.

**First meeting of new Parliament**: The Governor may, subject to the Constitution Act 1975, by proclamation or otherwise fix such times for holding every session of the Assembly and may vary and alter the same in such manner as he thinks fit.

¹ The term was changed from a maximum length of 4 years to a fixed length in 2003.

*Constitution Act 1975, s.8, 8A, 38, 38A, 65E*
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New South Wales

Parliamentary terms: fixed and flexible
February 2013
Constitution (Fixed Term Parliaments) Amendment Act 1993 (Assented to 2 May 1995)  

Federal, State and Territory election dates from 1946 to the present

New Zealand


Norway

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South Africa

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Sweden

United Kingdom


Victoria

Constitution Act 1975

Constitution (Parliamentary Reform) Act 2003

Federal, State and Territory election dates from 1946 to the present

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