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## **POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN AUSTRALIA: AN ANALYSIS**

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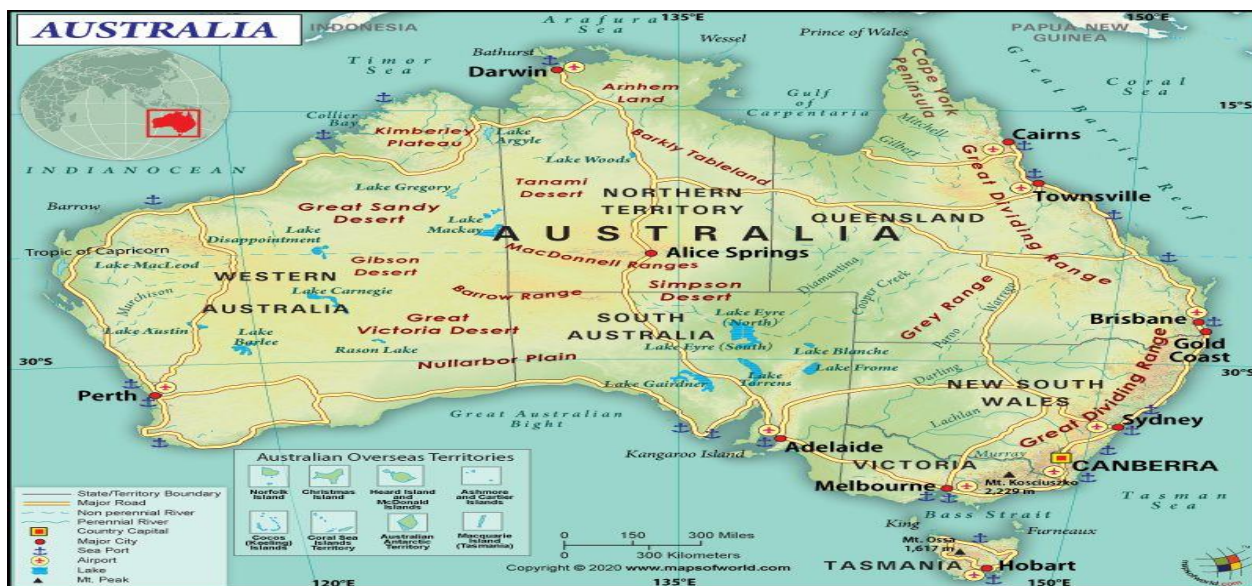
### **Abstract:**

Australia stands first among the states of the world to give most of the women to voting right. Australia is also the leading state which promotes policy regarding gender parity. But it does not mean that women representation is ideally achieved in Australia. Irrespective of all the efforts by the governmental and private levels, Australian women are still behind men political fields as most of the key positions in the political offices are being held by men. There might be lack of coordination in efforts in this field as individual and group efforts can be seen for women emancipation in political, social and economic sphere are not producing the desired results. This article attempts to elucidate the facts about women participation in Australian politics. The role

of women in legislature and in political parties depicts a promising scenario but requires a lot of improvement to gain the objective of gender equality in Australian Politics.

## Introduction

Australia is an island continent situated in Southern Hemisphere between Indian and Pacific Ocean. Its population is approximately 24.21 million with the area of 7, 692,030 sq.km. The official name of Australia is Commonwealth of Australia, federation of 6 states i.e. Queensland (Qld), Victoria(Vic), South Australia(SA), Western Australia(WA),New South Wales(NSW) and Tasmania(Tas). It has two territories i.e., Australian Capital Territory and Northern territory. All these were the British colonies and gained independence in 1901 and formed commonwealth of Australia.



Source:<https://i.pining.com/originals/50/d8/55/50d855705228498bc68dfcfc798c677.jpg>  
(accessed 20 December 2020)

Australian federal institution has deep resemblance with British institution due to its status of former colony of British mingle with the North American federalism. Political system is parliamentary in nature. The party with majority seats in house of representative forms the government. House of representative has 150 members and the upper house Senate has consisted 76 members (12 from 6 states and 2 each from territories). All bills must be approved from the upper house in order to become a law. Elections conduct after every three years to fill the full seats of house of representative and almost half seats of senate. Senate has tenure of six years while the tenure of territorial senators is 3 years. Voting is compulsory and it's considered obligatory for every adult citizen to cast their votes. (McAllister, 2006).

Both houses have diverse voting system in order to elect their representatives. Preferential voting system is used for House of Representatives. Voters cast their vote according to their preferences. If no candidate got majority of votes than the candidate having least preference vote has been removed and his vote are reallocated to the rest of the candidates and the process has repeated until the single candidate get the majority. Senators of upper house are selected through proportional representation also known as single transferable vote system. Under this system, the

percentage of Senators elected from a single party is approximately proportional to the percentage of votes that a party gets. Senator of each party needs to get a fix percentage of votes in order to secure his seat (Curtin, 2003).

Queen Elizabeth is the formal head of the state of commonwealth of Australia and she is represented by a Governor General appointed for the term of 5 years upon the advice of Prime Minister of Australia. (Van, 1998). There is multi-party system in Australia but in federal, ALP with the collaboration of nationals and LIB occupy the majority in house of representatives but in Senate many independent parties also get seats. Political parties of Australia are not extremist at all like some European (Jupp, 2004).

The ALP political party was established in 1890s by some trade unions who wanted to make them aware of their demands to the government. It is considered the oldest party of Australia and formed its government first time in Queensland in the year of 1899. The party was established to safeguard the interests of the workers. Initially blue collar workers have provided support for the party. But at the end of 1970, middle class workers along with various occupation and profession also gave their support to the party. The liberal party was the coalition of various groups of protectionist and free trade parties along with the quasi parties in the urban and rural areas of 1890s in 1909 to establish the first ever liberal party (Jaensch, 1996).

Every federal unit of Australia is known as state and every state has its own government and parliament. The head of each state is known as premier and the head of territory is known as chief minister. Every state has diverse political system according to their requirements. Some have uni cameral legislature others have bi cameral legislature. The strength of members of legislature are also different in different states. (McAllister, 2006).

All states have their own local government system except Australian Capital Territory. There is no article in the constitution of Australia regarding local government and the powers and functions of local government. Therefor the institutions of local government receive grants and funds from state government as well as from the federal government. In Australia, there are 564 local bodies' governments. Local government have seven different types in Australia but they are performing the same functions by and large in the states. Local governments have right to collect funds in form of fines, fees to raise their income (Irwin, 2009).

The tenure of local government is usually four years in every state except Tasmania and Western Australia where half local councils are elected every 2 years. Victoria, New South Wales, Tasmania and South Australia have adopted proportional representation system for voting whereas Western Australia and Queensland have first -past -the-post system and northern territory have adopted preferential voting system. Council's leaders are called mayors in big and urban areas and shire president in small areas. They are elected through direct voting by adult franchise. Councilors of councils elected every year while mayors are elected for the whole term of the council. (Daly, 2000).

### **International and National Strategies to Promote Gender Equality**

Australia has tried hard to enhance gender equality and signed many conventions and presented various acts to safeguard the equality of women in Australia. Australian government has

endorsed the convention about political right of women on December 10, 1974 to ensure the equal opportunities for women in order to hold public offices without any discrimination. The convention on political rights took twenty years to ratify in 1974 when labor party formed the government. The conservative attitude of liberal party towards women and power was the major hindrance to ratify the convention. Now international women's day is celebrated on 8<sup>th</sup> march every year in Australia. UN General Assembly adopted EDAW (an international bill) related to women rights in 1979, and it came into force in 1981 and has been endorsed by 189 states. Australia ratified it in 1983 with some reservations concerning women participation in defence forces and maternity leaves (Brentnall, 2012). The Australian government passed multiple laws i.e., affirmative action act 1986 which ensure equal employment opportunities for women, workplace gender equality act. Sex discrimination act was also passed by the Australian government to end gender disparity in politics. In 2011, Gillard government passed the law to allow women's participation in military and in Australian defense forces (Evans, 2013). Moreover, Australia also signed and ratified the Beijing declaration (1995) which ensures the empowerment of women. Australia is also signatory of platform for action which ensures women fundamental rights. It belongs to twelve crucial areas includes health, education, poverty, media, decision making and power, armed conflict, violence, economics, girl child, environment and institutional mechanism. Being signatory of platform for action and UN Beijing declaration, Australia is bound to take necessary actions for ensuring women participation in policy making and decision making institutions (Maddison & Partridge, 2007).

### **Gender Equality and Australia**

The second wave of Feminism has lasting imprints in Australian society as in 1970's the movements for gender parity has reached it acme. The striking impact of the movement was that women policies were being drafted and modified according to the desires of women even though women were not seen much in the Australian parliament. Women electoral lobby was established at that time to promote the betterment of the female political workers. It made it possible for women to make issues resolved by the parliament at the government level. In 1972, many reforms were initiated for the empowerment of women that include equal employment opportunities, childcare etc. The institutional working collaborations for the women cause at national level changed the working capacity and impact of the efforts in this direction (Lausberg, 2018).

The United Nations conference on Women was held in 1975 in which it was accepted that governmental reforms are necessary to eradicate gender disparity in different states. Since then, governmental machinery has been working extensively to promote the cause as directed by the UN. Although in Australia, there has been women emancipation and many women parliamentarian are working earnestly but a joint women caucus has not been established. Individual level efforts are being done for women rights. A parliamentary form of Australian parliamentary group on population and development was established where women from all the federating units are working jointly for women health issues. Joint efforts across the parties by the women are required to raise voices for gender parity (Whip, 1991).

The directives for gender empower from the government highlight the impact of all policies over male and female strata. Minister of women affairs was appointed in 1976 by the Fraser government in Australia. The department was included in family and community services later

on. Its merger made the impression that the department was welfare concern rather than the matter of governmental institutional level. The Abbott government has reinstated it back in 2013. In 2012, Julia Gillard in 2012 established a program of promoting women empowerment in politics and leadership by Pacific women aid program for ten years. The upcoming governments continued the program for promoting women empowerment and gender parity in the region.

### **Contemporary Status of Females in Australian Society**

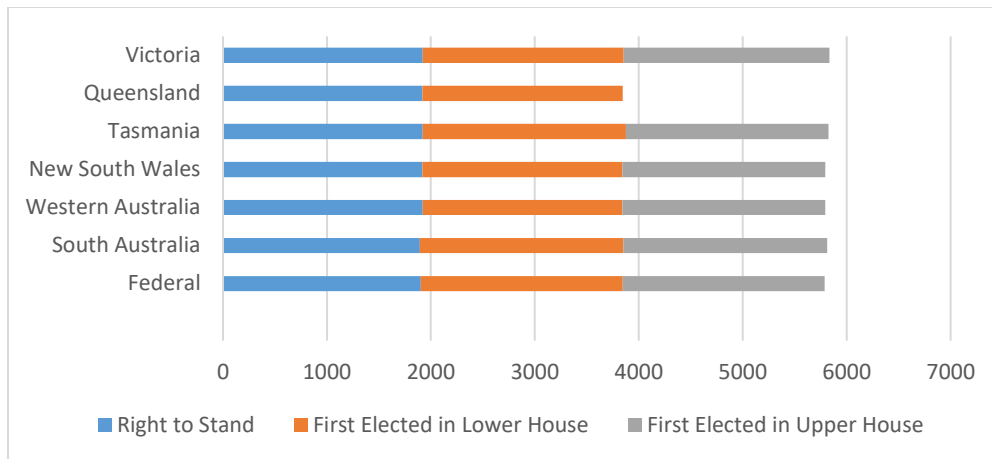
The workplace gender equality agency has presented its report regarding the gap in gender and established that women are lagging behind men. There may be various explanations to the less number of women actively involved at the key positions in institutions e.g., occupational preferences of women where chances of promotions are limited and childcare issues along with discrimination against women. Those who attain a high position in the hierarchy still have to face the dilemma that women are less competent than men, harassment issues etc. women disparity is not ended in the post-industrial Australia that has culminated a few women to hold key positions in political and economic spheres.

The gap is evident at the higher positions' level. The women in federal boards are gradually increased to 41% and comprise of 30% of the new appointments but ironically only 15% board heads were female in Australian stock exchange which shows decreased women empowerment that leads to play a limited role in political and economic sphere (McCann & Wilson, 2014). The male dominancy is evident in almost every institution. Although the number of women participating the different walks of life has increased and equivalent to men but the progress towards political power is not at fast pace (ALGWA, 2009).

### **Women in Australian Legislature**

Australian women attained the political rights quite before than most of the states of the globe but its way to suffrage was very tough (Sawer & Simms, 1984). It was also debated that women might be uncomfortable and unable to play their household roles after achieving positions in political offices. There was a long struggle of the women in Australia to have their entry in politics by accepting their complete skills and abilities to do so. At the time in 1901, women in certain states had right to vote and commonwealth franchise act of 1902 entitled women their right to vote and contest as a candidate (Wright, 2014). In Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria women had right to vote in federal elections but they were deprived of to participate in state elections in 1902. The struggle for it lasted for almost 22 years and in 1923 all of these three states allowed women to stand as a contestant in elections. The situation remained difficult for the aboriginals' women as till 1962 they were not allowed to vote federally (Langton, 2002). The case of Queensland resolved at the last and in 1965 Aboriginals were entitles to have voting rights. The graph explains the situation of the voting rights in Australia:

Graph: Australian Women Participation in Parliament

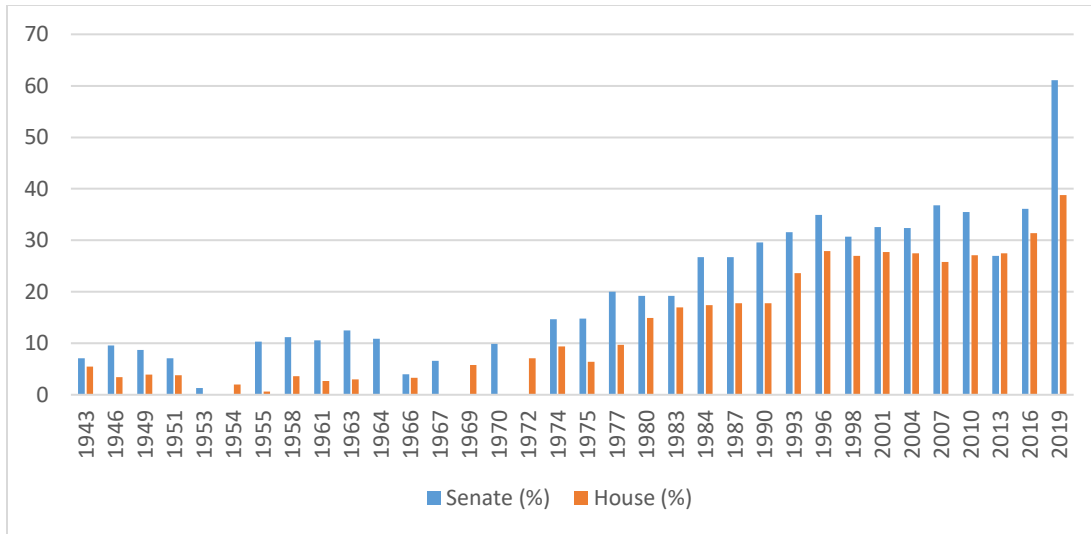


Source: Sawer & Simms (1993)

### Women's Participation Federal Parliament

The path towards women entry in parliament was an uphill task even after gaining the voting rights in Australia. There were a few women parliamentarian in the Australian legislature for a quite long time. The women were initially nominated by the smaller parties or they contested as independent candidates where they had a meagre chance to get elected. The larger political parties were not supporting women to get elected on their seats. The nominated women were given a constituency where there were minimal chances of winning. There was a fearing attitude towards female nomination by the parties that public voters would go against them and they might lose that seat. Female political workers contested in that harsh environment at that time. Catherine Spence was the first women ti contest federal convention in 1879. Although she was defeated but her efforts paved the way for women to come forward in that arena (Sawer, 2016). Women participated in the 1903 elections as candidate and in 1904 Vida Goldstein contested the senate election as well (Van, 1998). The failure of the women candidates continued till 1940's election. In 1943 election the first woman gained her entry in the Australian parliament. Out of the 24 women contesting the election in 1943, only four were nominated by the major political parties. Only 5.5 % candidates were female in that election.

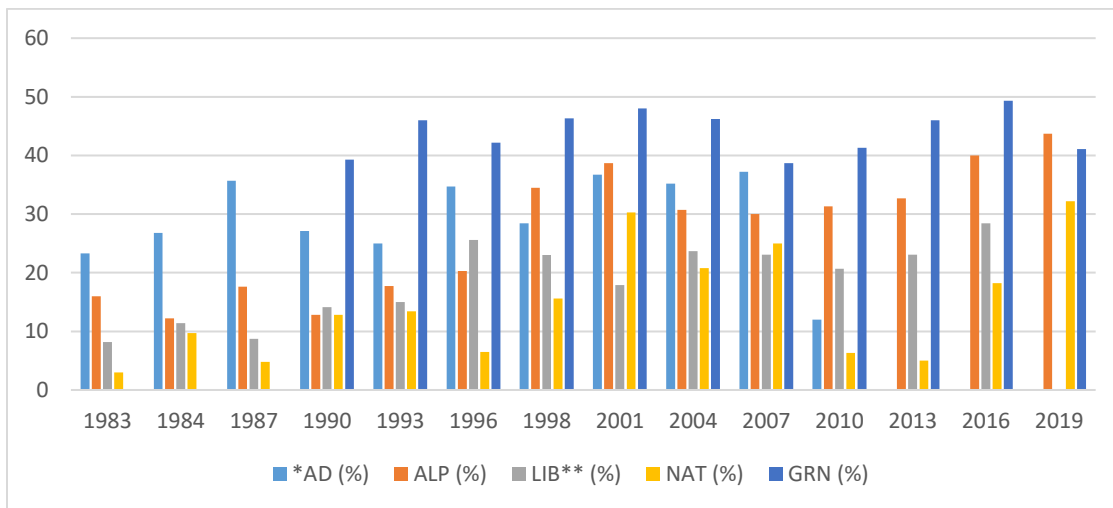
Graph: Percentage of Female Candidates Standing for the Senate and Representatives at Federal Elections 1943-2019 in Australia



Source: McCann & Wilson (2014), Australian Electoral Commission (2019)

The statistics shows that ALP and Coalition who did not focus much on female candidates till 1996. The situation gradually improved in 1998 when ALP started to increase the female contestants in the party. In 2016 elections, only 42 candidates were nominated by the coalition out of 161 nominations for House while ALP was in a better position regarding gender parity as 60 candidates were females and 90 were male in that election. The Green party was at the first position regarding female contestants with 74 female candidates out of 150 total contestants in 2016’s elections (Gilmore, 2016). The situation improved in 2019.

Graph: Percentage of Female Candidates for the House of Representatives by Party, 1983-2019

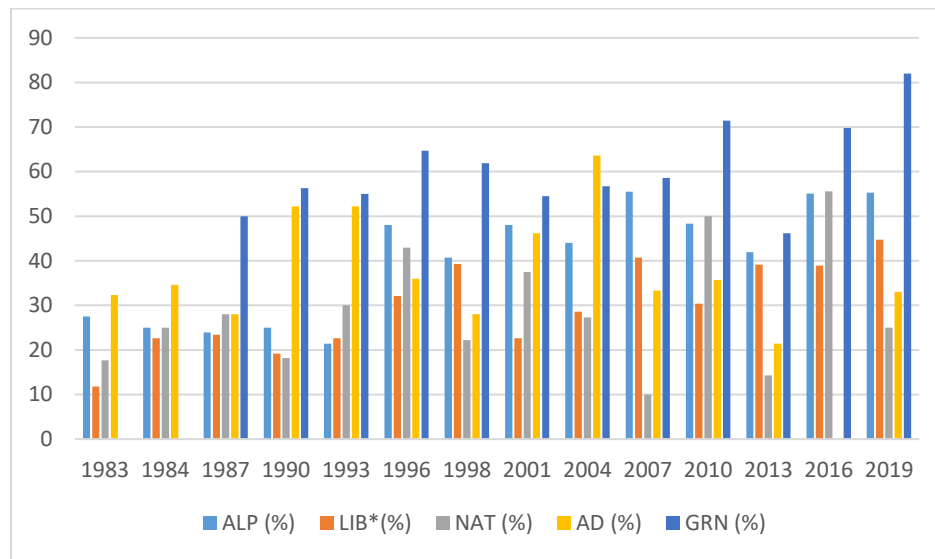


Source: (Gilmore, 2016 & AEC 2019) (AD: Australian Democrats, ALP: Australian Labor Party, Lib: Australian Liberal Party, NAT: National Party of Australia, GRN: Green Party)



The Senate candidates were also nominated with the same gender gap by ALP, Liberal and Green parties in the federal election of 2013, the liberal party nominate 39% female candidates while Australian Labor party had 41.9% women contestants. The situation was different in 2016 election in senate where coalition women candidates were 37.7% and Australian Labour Party was having 55.1% female electable to contest. The Green Party was at the top again with 69.8% female contestants that shows its commitment for the women empowerment (AEC, 2016; McCann & Wilson, 2014). The 2019 election witnessed more inclusion from the Labour party and the Green party (AEC, 2019).

Graph: Percentage of Female Candidates for the Senate by Party, 1983-2019



Source: (Gilmore, 2016), AEC (2019)

### Women as Representatives at Australian Legislature

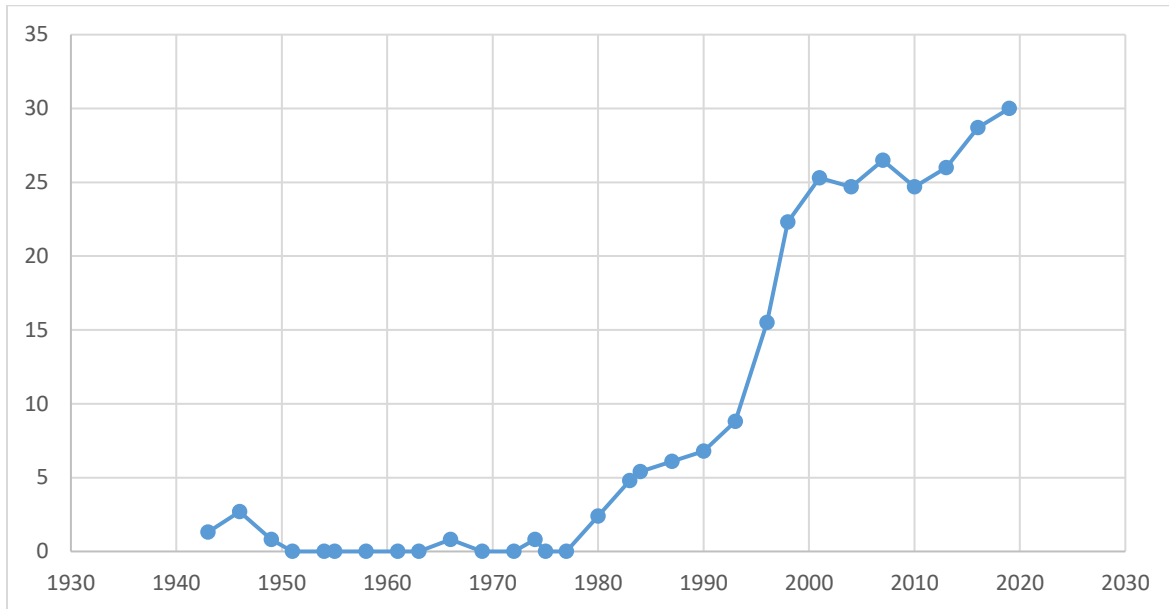
Australian women gained the right as a voter and a contestant almost earlier than any other state of the globe (McAllister, 2006). Women struggled a long battle to get elected and in 1921 first woman was elected as in the state parliament while in 1943 first woman gained the entry at federal level. It remained a process of majority of the parties to nominate women only in those constituencies which were considered as hard to win. Women as independent candidates were having to fight against all the parties to win the seat which was extremely difficult. Women were mostly unsuccessful in the elections that became a reason for the parties not to trust on female candidates for winning any seat. Joan Child won the seat in 1974 from the Labor party to enter in House of Representatives. The success ratio of women raised gradually afterwards (Sawer, 2001).

In the elections of 2013, there were 43 women who were elected out of 150 seats in the house of representatives. There were 28 females from ALP while 12 were from liberal party. One female was from NAT. There was one woman who belonged to Nick and one was independent. The number of women in the Senate was also promising as 30 female members were elected out of total 76 seats (Hough, 2016). It was also observed that the coalition has increased the nominations of the female contestants in the elections but the winning ratio was on the declining side. In senate, the victory of women nominees is easy to forecast as list of candidates explains



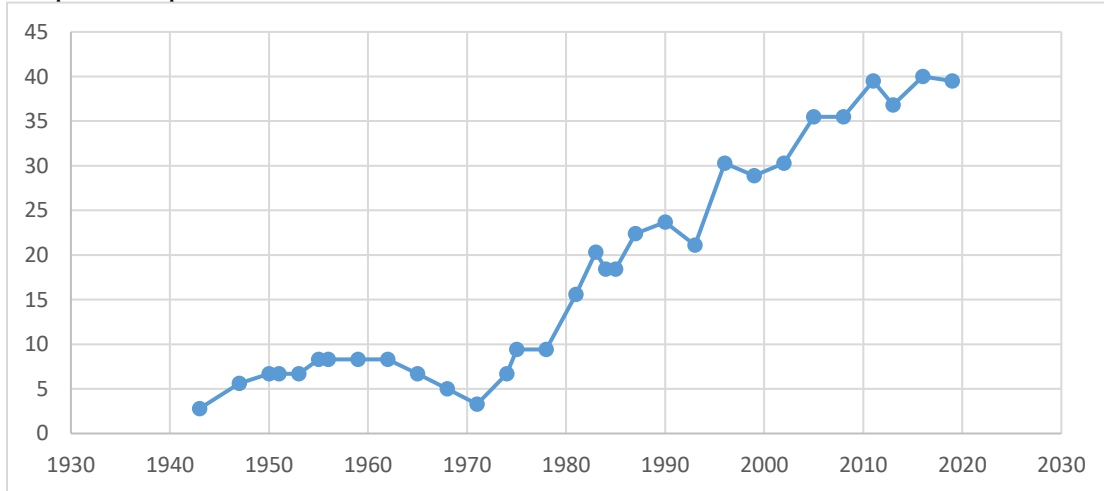
the selection of firstly written candidates to get selected. The next elections of 2013 and 2016 also witnessed a bit change. The selection may be hampered by the thinking that men are more suited for the seats as compared to females (Gilmore, 2016). The 2019 election showed improvement as compared to the earlier status (AEC, 2019).

Graph: Proportion of Female in Australian House of Representative Elections 1943-2019



Source: (Gilmore, 2016); AEC,2019)

Graph: Proportion of Female in Australian Senate in Federal Elections 1943-2019



Source: (Gilmore, 2016); AEC,2019)

The number of women in the senate is considerably higher than the lower houses. There had been different electoral systems used for the federal elections that influenced the women participation as given below. The role of political parties is also important to enhance women number in the houses.

The candidate with the most number of votes won the election in first past the post system. In 1918, another system was introduced that is known as preferential voting system. The proportional voting system was introduced in 1949. It is also observed that women have less chances of selection in preferential system than men specially when both have to contest for powerful portfolio. Most of the members of the cabinet are from lower house so pre-selection over there is extremely important for political parties in the lower house and mostly the seats are given to male candidates (Lovenduski, 2005).

Proportional representation favors female candidates in the senate (McCann & Wilson, 2014). Bennet (2011) points out that in this system parties can nominate more female candidates. Furthermore, men are more interested in the lower house for government formation which makes women an easier course towards senate. Thus, it has a lasting impact on having more women participation for the senate elections.

### **Rise of Australian Women as Political Leaders**

The women number gradually increased in federal and state parliaments but they could not gain top leadership position in the party or in the government (Drabsch, 2003). Federal executive council is formulated with minister of states from the federal ministry. Prime Minister is the head of the cabinet Dame Lyons was the first cabinet member without having any ministry in 1949. Liberal Senator Rankin acted as Whip for opposition and government. She was also having the housing ministry in 1966 (Sawer, 2010). She was also the head of foreign missions. In 1975, under the Fraser government, Margret Guilfoyle became the education and social security minister. She was also the first women with having the economic portfolio in 1980 (AEC, 2015). Florence Cordell became the state cabinet member of WA. The last state that were having a female minister for the first time was Queensland where the first women entered the parliament in 1988. It was due to continuous efforts of Australian society for women political workers to be at the party head position that in 1986 Senator Janine became the leader of Australian Democrats (Sawer, 2001). Mrs. Child assumed the position of Speaker of the House of Representatives in 1986 while in 1996 Margret Raid became the first ever female president of Senate. In 2002, Macklin became the deputy leader of Australian Labor Party. The Australian Green party had the female head at 2012 (AEC, 2015). The decade of 1980's witnessed more females to be the part of the cabinet. Susan Ryan worked in the Labor cabinet as education and special minister of state in 1983 and 1987 respectively. Julia Gillard worked as deputy Prime Minister in 1987 and in 2010 she became as the first female Prime Minister of Australia (Goldsworthy, 2013). Julie Bishop became the Foreign Minister in Turnbull's cabinet while Senator Payne was the first female defense minister. In the Abbott government of 2013, there were four female ministers and in the Turnbull government the number rose to 6 in 2016 as far as the Liberal governments are concerned. The Labor government has more female minister as seen in Gillard government, there were eleven female ministers. On the whole labor party provides more opportunities to women to play their role as minister level and leadership position (Curtin, 2015).

### **Conclusion**

Women political rights in Australia are not translated into substantive representation. At one side Australia is considered as a pioneer to promote women political rights while on the other hand the progress was uneven or even slow later on in this direction. The political parties and their strategies need to be overhauled for the policy making of the gender equality. ALP has introduced quota system for women that will certainly increase the descriptive representation of

them in the parliament but need of the hour is to enhance the quality of efforts to promote gender parity and empowerment. The conservative women are still in lower number in the party that is still an issue for the emancipation of women. Although there is a perception to abandon gender policy making as the number is increased in the parliament on the whole. Both the major parties are working to increase women representation and set the goal for 50:50 percent gender representation. The coalition government worked earnestly to eradicate gender disparity and promoted women that comprised of 40% seats of the government board. It was also observed that same number of positions were held by male cadre. The target was to increase the number of women in key positions up to 50% till July 2016. The Australian institute of Company directors is giving generous funds to women in order to promote them in the science and technology fields so that they might assume leadership position and affect the policy decisions for gender empowerment. There may be improvement in the legislative area to include gender parity in constitution framework so that it may be binding to everyone and not remain in the good will of the elected representatives to follow the course gender parity.

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