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The Tenant Electorate:

What the Universal Suffrage Selects For — and What a Stake-Based Alternative Would Show

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The universal franchise was not handed down by nature. It is a selection mechanism, designed at a particular time for particular reasons, and it produces predictable behaviour from the voters it selects. Where the median voter is a net beneficiary of state spending, holds no propertied stake in the future, and has staked no biological investment in the next generation, electoral incentives select for transfer expansion, deferral of consequence, and the steady erosion of long-horizon decision-making. This is *"The Cage We Built"* mechanism — outcomes without action — applied to the ballot box.

This brief argues three things.

First, that the Madisonian standard for institutional design — durable structures that align self-interest with good outcomes — has been quietly abandoned in the design of the contemporary political environment, with consequences that are now visible in the policy output of every Anglosphere government.

Second, that the Rhodesian qualified franchise — distasteful in execution to most, but structurally serious in design — is the cleanest historical instantiation of an alternative, and the Western intervention against it substituted moral satisfaction for institutional engineering.

Third, that a stake-based franchise applied to contemporary Australia, including a fertility criterion as the Prothean Institute extension, would shrink the electorate to approximately one quarter to one eighth of currently enrolled voters.

The brief does not propose the implementation of a stake-based franchise. The political path from current law to such a system does not exist in any liberal democracy, and Prothean's standing epistemic test — does this work in the world as it is — rules out the proposal as a near-term reform. The analytical payload is the diagnostic: the current franchise is also a selection mechanism, and naming what it selects for is the first step in any honest conversation about why it produces what it produces.

1. The Diagnostic: What the Universal Franchise Selects For

James Madison's argument in Federalist No. 51 is not principally about virtue. It is about engineering. Durable institutions produce good outcomes from self-interested people; they do not rely on the supply of good people. The test of any institutional structure is therefore not whether it would work if everyone were public-spirited, but whether it produces tolerable outcomes when populated by ordinary self-interested actors behaving rationally.

Apply that test to the contemporary Australian franchise. Total general government expenditure in 2023–24 was $959.7 billion against a population of approximately 27.2 million, or roughly $35,250 per resident.[1] Median individual net tax paid in the same period was $14,095.[2] The median Australian adult, in other words, is a net beneficiary of government spending — receiving services and transfers worth more than double the direct tax they remit. The voter who is a net beneficiary of state spending is not acting against their self-interest when they vote for further state spending. They are acting precisely in accordance with it. Long-horizon trade-offs, intergenerational equity, fiscal discipline, infrastructure amortisation — these are not policy levers the median voter is rationally indifferent to. They are levers the median voter is rationally opposed to, to the extent that they constrain present consumption.

Prothean has identified the same mechanism in adjacent domains. The Threshold brief described the voter "with a two-week time horizon and no capacity for delayed reward" as not acting against their self-interest when they vote for immediate gratification — the dysfunction of contemporary politics is not that voters are bad people but that the franchise selects across a population that includes them, weighting their preferences equally with those of any voter holding a longer horizon.[3] The Cage brief described the broader structural condition: outcomes accrue to people who took no action to produce them, and the franchise is the most visible instance of that condition operating at scale.[4]

> ***It is hard to imagine a more stupid or more dangerous way of making decisions than by putting those decisions in the hands of people who pay no price for being wrong. — Thomas Sowell[5]***

Sowell's formulation is the same observation in plain language. The franchise distributes decision-making power without conditioning it on stake in the outcome. Voters who pay no price for decisions made in their name will, on average and across enough decisions, make

[1] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Insights into Government Finance Statistics, Annual, 2023-24, ABS, April 2025. https://www.abs.gov.au/articles/insights-government-finance-statistics-annual-2023-24
[2] Australian Taxation Office, Taxation Statistics 2022-23 — Snapshot, ATO, June 2025. Median net tax of $14,095 for all individuals 2022-23. https://www.ato.gov.au/about-ato/research-and-statistics/in-detail/taxation-statistics/taxation-statistics-2022-23/statistics/snapshot
[3] Prothean Institute, The Threshold, Analysis Brief, May 2026.
[4] Prothean Institute, The Cage We Built, Analysis Brief, May 2026.
[5] Thomas Sowell, Knowledge and Decisions, Basic Books, 1980; see also Sowell, A Conflict of Visions, William Morrow, 1987, on the contrast between constrained and unconstrained visions of political decision-making. The quoted formulation is widely attributed to Sowell across multiple lectures and essays.

worse decisions than voters who do — not because they are worse people but because the cost-feedback loop that disciplines decision-making elsewhere has been deliberately severed.

This is not a recent observation. The historical franchise designers of the nineteenth century — Burke, Mill, the framers of the unreformed British and American systems — argued for property, education, and tax-paying tests precisely because they understood the alignment problem. A voter who pays no tax, owns no property, and has no stake in long-horizon outcomes is not a defective voter. They are a voter whose self-interest will, on average, be opposed to fiscal discipline, opposed to durable institutional design, and opposed to any reform that imposes present cost for future benefit. The classical liberal tradition resolved this by restricting the franchise to those whose self-interest tracked the polity's solvency.

The twentieth-century universal-franchise consensus did not refute this argument. It overruled it on moral and political grounds — that universal participation was a precondition for political legitimacy, regardless of consequence. The argument was won; the alignment problem was not solved. It was deferred. Sixty years later, the deferral has come due.

2. The Rhodesian Case: What Was Proposed, Why, and What the West Did Instead

The Rhodesian qualified franchise is the most thoroughly documented twentieth-century instantiation of a stake-based electoral system, and it is the case study any honest treatment of the franchise question must engage with. It also remains one of the most narratively loaded historical episodes in the Anglosphere — handled cleanly here, it strengthens the analytical argument; handled clumsily, it destroys it. The brief takes the case seriously on both registers.

The 1961 Constitution

The 1961 Southern Rhodesian Constitution, approved by referendum on 26 July 1961, created a 65-seat Legislative Assembly with a dual-roll franchise that was, on its face, race-blind.[6] The A roll (50 constituencies) required age 21+, two years' residence, and either £792 annual income or £1,650 in real property — with the income/property threshold reduced to £528/£1,100 for those who had completed primary education, and £330/£550 for those with four years of secondary schooling. The B roll (15 districts) required age 18+ and either £264 income or £495 property, with thresholds falling further for those with two years of secondary schooling. A cross-voting device with a 25 per cent cap allowed B-roll votes to influence A-roll outcomes and vice versa.

The system was, in the British government's contemporary framing, designed to bring African voters into the franchise more rapidly than would otherwise occur. Ian Smith and the Rhodesian Front articulated three substantive arguments for the structure: a classical "civilised standard" position descending from Cecil Rhodes's formulation; a gradualist-extension argument under which continued economic growth and education would progressively widen the African franchise; and a property-stake argument drawing on the same classical-liberal franchise theory that underpinned the unreformed British constitution before 1832.[7] The cautionary examples in their public argument were the post-independence trajectories of Ghana, Nigeria, the Congo, and Uganda — the wave of one-party states and

[6] Constitution of Southern Rhodesia 1961, Cmnd. 1399. See also Claire Palley, The Constitutional History and Law of Southern Rhodesia 1888-1965, Oxford University Press, 1966, pp. 414-416; Robert Blake, A History of Rhodesia, Knopf, 1977, p. 335; Hansard, Southern Rhodesia (Constitution) Bill, House of Lords, 16 November 1961.
[7] Larry W. Bowman, Politics in Rhodesia: White Power in an African State, Harvard University Press, 1973. See also Ian Smith, Bitter Harvest, John Blake, 2001.

military coups that had followed rapid universal-franchise transitions across Africa in the 1960s. These were not hypothetical concerns; they were empirical observations from the comparative record available at the time.

Critics, principally Claire Palley in her Constitutional History and Law of Southern Rhodesia (Oxford, 1966), argued a structural objection that should not be reduced to the racial subtext.[8] In a colonial economy with median African cash incomes well below £132 a year, the income and property thresholds excluded the great majority of Africans not formally but effectively. The B-roll registration grew slowly between 1961 and 1969 while white immigration grew faster, so the demographic trajectory ran against, not toward, an extending franchise. The structural objection was not that the 1961 design was racist in stated terms — it was not — but that, applied in the actual economic conditions of 1960s Rhodesia, the qualification thresholds operated as racial proxies whether they were intended to or not.

The 1969 Retreat

The 1969 Constitution is where the gradualist defence of the system, as it actually operated, breaks. Approved by referendum in June 1969, the new structure abolished the non-racial structure entirely.[9] Cross-voting was eliminated. The common roll was replaced with explicitly separate communal rolls. The critical innovation was the income-tax parity formula: African seats would only increase as Africans' share of national income tax rose, approaching 50:50 only when African direct tax paid equalled European direct tax. Africans paid approximately 0.5 per cent of direct taxation at the time of adoption. Reaching parity on that benchmark was, even on optimistic projections, not a generational matter but a multi-generational one. The earlier promise that Africans could "work their passage" to majority rule was explicitly abandoned in favour of "racial parity" as a permanent ceiling.

The Western Response

The West proposed five successive alternatives between 1971 and 1979.[10] The Pearce Commission (1971–72) tested African acceptance of a variant of the 1969 framework plus accelerated parity. The Anglo-American Proposals (September 1977) demanded immediate adult universal suffrage on a common roll, surrender of power, and reversion to British dependent-territory status. The Internal Settlement (March 1978) produced the brief Muzorewa government on a model with 28 of 100 seats reserved for whites — a ratio that, given the demographic proportions, was an explicit overweighting. The Lancaster House Agreement (December 1979) was essentially a surrender to international pressure: universal adult suffrage at 18 on a common roll, no qualifications; 20 seats reserved for whites for seven years on a separate roll, lapsing in 1987; constitutional bill of rights; ten-year prohibition on compulsory land acquisition without willing-seller compensation in foreign currency.

The post-1980 trajectory is documented in unusual detail by the Maddison Project Database's reconstruction, which provides a continuous real-GDP-per-capita series spanning the qualified-franchise and universal-franchise periods (Chart 1).[11] The headline reading is

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[8] Palley, Constitutional History, op. cit.; Claire Palley, 'Law and the Unequal Society', Race 12(1), 1970.
[9] Constitution of Rhodesia 1969. See P. M. R. Harris, 'The Rhodesian Referendum: June 1969', Parliamentary Affairs 23(1), 1969, pp. 72-80.
[10] Pearce Commission, Cmnd. 4964, May 1972; Anglo-American Proposals, September 1977 (see Hansard, House of Lords, 25 July 1977); Internal Settlement Agreement, 3 March 1978; Lancaster House Agreement, Cmnd. 7802, 21 December 1979.
[11] Maddison Project Database 2023, Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) real GDP per capita series, 1914-2022, constant 2011 international dollars. University of Groningen, Groningen Growth and Development Centre.

stark. Real income per head peaked in Rhodesia in 1972 at approximately $2,283 in constant 2011 international dollars, declined under intensifying war and sanctions to roughly $1,950 by 1979, recovered to $2,070 by 1980, and then flatlined for eighteen years before reaching its all-time peak of $2,369 in 1998. The compound real growth rate over the 1980–1998 period was well under one per cent per year. Over the same window, South Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa as an aggregate, and the world all grew exponentially. The post-independence GDP-growth figures so often cited in defence of the 1980–2000 period reflect aggregate demand stimulated by international aid inflows and commodity prices offsetting catastrophically weak and often negative productivity growth at the household level.

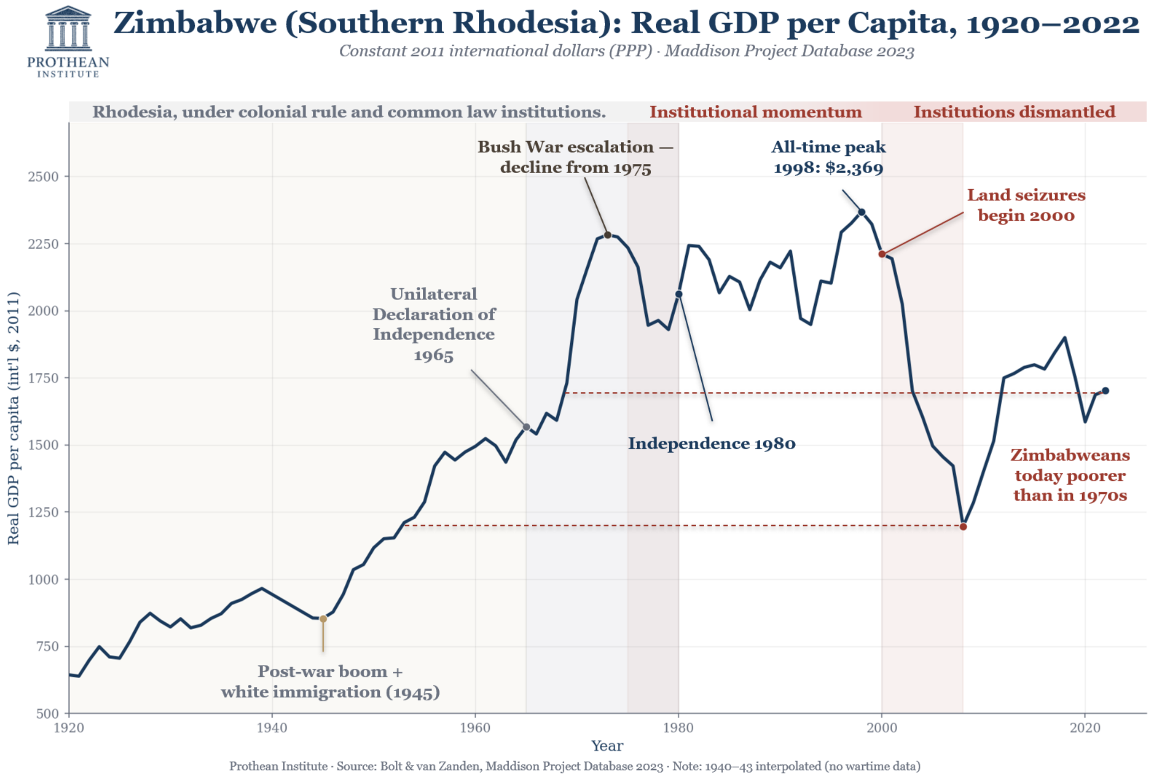

Chart 1. Zimbabwe (Southern Rhodesia) real GDP per capita, 1920–2022, constant 2011 international dollars. Maddison Project Database 2023.

What the flat real-income line obscured was the steady erosion of institutional capital inherited from the qualified-franchise period. The mechanisms are dateable. Shortly after Mugabe took power in 1980, the Gukurahundi campaign of 1983–87 killed an estimated 20,000 predominantly Ndebele civilians and signalled the regime's character to the country's commercial and professional classes; sustained capital flight followed.[12]

The Land Acquisition Act 1985 introduced legal expropriation risk into agricultural property rights without immediately exercising it. The 1990s structural-adjustment period exposed

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https://www.rug.nl/ggdc/historicaldevelopment/maddison/releases/maddison-project-database-2023. Methodology: Bolt, J. and van Zanden, J.L. (2024), 'Maddison-style estimates of the evolution of the world economy: A new 2023 update', Journal of Economic Surveys 38(4), pp. 1635-1664. DOI: 10.1111/joes.12618.

[12] On Gukurahundi: Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace in Zimbabwe and Legal Resources Foundation, Breaking the Silence, Building True Peace: A Report into the Disturbances in Matabeleland and the Midlands, 1980 to 1988, CCJP/LRF, 1997. Estimated 20,000 civilian deaths in the campaign against the Ndebele population by the Fifth Brigade. On aid-masked GDP: World Bank Zimbabwe historical data; IMF Article IV consultations 1985-2000. On 2008 hyperinflation: Steve H. Hanke and Alex K. F. Kwok, 'On the Measurement of Zimbabwe's Hyperinflation', Cato Journal 29(2), 2009.

the underlying productivity decline once aid inflows declined. By the 2000 onset of Fast-Track Land Reform, inherited institutional capital was depleted but not yet destroyed. The 2000–2008 collapse from $2,215 to $1,198 — a 46 per cent decline in real income per head — was the destruction phase. The Fast-Track Land Reform programme seized approximately 4,000 commercial farms and displaced an estimated 350,000 farmworkers; total food production fell by approximately 60 per cent over the decade; the 2008 hyperinflation peak reached monthly inflation of 79.6 billion per cent before the abandonment of the Zimbabwe dollar in 2009; life expectancy fell to approximately 44 years by the mid-2000s.

The diagnostic figure is the 2022 reading: $1,704 — below every annual observation of the 1970s. Zimbabweans today are poorer in real terms than they were half a century ago. The decade since 2008 has produced no recovery toward the 1970s baseline, let alone the 1998 peak. This is not a regime that destroyed value and is now rebuilding; it is a regime that destroyed value and has stabilised at a permanently lower level.

Botswana is the load-bearing comparison and the falsification test of the institutional reading against the racial one (in the same way that Singapore is often used as an example that on closer reading proves a rule). Same continent; same broad colonial heritage; post-independence African majority rule from 1966; similar exposure to global commodity cycles. The trajectory diverged sharply. By 2022, Botswana's real GDP per capita stood at approximately $16,352 in constant 2011 international dollars, roughly ten times the GDP of Zimbabwe, against a 1966 baseline of approximately $663 — an increase of roughly twenty-five times over the period in which Zimbabwe's real income per head regressed below its 1970s level.[13] The variable that differs between these two cases is not race, not franchise structure, not majority rule. It is institutional protection of property rights, rule of law, and the capacity to manage resource rents through credible fiscal discipline. Botswana retained these; Zimbabwe destroyed them. If the variable were race or majority rule, Botswana would track Zimbabwe. It does not.

South Africa is the second comparator and shows the same diagnostic on a longer timeline. The 1994 transition preserved substantially more institutional capital than Zimbabwe inherited at independence — an independent judiciary, a functioning central bank, deep capital markets, commercial agriculture, a competent (if compromised) public service. Real GDP per capita continued to grow under the Mandela and Mbeki administrations, reaching a peak of approximately $12,048 in 2013.[14] Since the peak it has declined modestly in pure per-capita terms — roughly five per cent by 2022 — but the institutional and infrastructural collapse running in parallel is much sharper than the headline GDP figure suggests. Eskom, the national electricity utility, entered sustained generation failure in 2014–15 and produced near-continuous load-shedding through 2022–23. Transnet, the national rail and port operator, swung from a R5 billion profit in 2019 to a R5.7 billion loss in 2023, with rail freight volumes collapsing by more than a third over five years. The Port of Durban ranked 403rd of 403 in the World Bank's 2024 Container Port Performance Index. Municipal water utilities are measurably declining: under the 2025 Green Drop reporting, 47 per cent of wastewater systems are classified as critical, against 39 per cent in 2021–22.[15]

[13] Maddison Project Database 2023, Botswana real GDP per capita: $663 in 1966, $16,352 in 2022 (constant 2011 international dollars). South Africa real GDP per capita: peak of $12,048 in 2013, declining to $11,416 in 2022. Source as fn25. Comparative readings via Our World in Data: https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/gdp-per-capita-maddison-project-database.

[15] On Eskom load-shedding and sustained generation failure from 2014-15: South African History Online, 'A Short History of Eskom Part 2 (2001-2022)', https://sahistory.org.za/article/short-history-eskom-part-2-2001-2022. On Transnet rail collapse (R5 billion 2019 profit to R5.7 billion 2023 loss;

Leadership modulates rate; structure determines direction. The Mandela and Mbeki administrations (1994–2008) slowed institutional erosion; the Zuma administration (May 2009 – February 2018) accelerated it through state capture of the prosecutorial and revenue-collection apparatus; the Ramaphosa administration has slowed but not reversed the trajectory. The structural diagnostic predicts continued decline regardless of leadership colour, because the franchise selects for distributional politics over institutional maintenance once the inherited capital is depleted. The same pattern that produced Zimbabwe's flat 1980–1998 line is producing South Africa's post-2014 decline at slower velocity. The institutional starting capital was higher; the march through the institutions takes longer; the destination appears the same.

The Rhodesian case is not a one-off Mugabe pathology. It is the first instance of a pattern that universal-franchise transitions in post-colonial economies with similar institutional and demographic profiles appear to produce on different time horizons. Leadership modulates the rate; the structural variable is institutional capacity, not race or majority rule as such.

What the Case Study Does and Does Not Support

The Rhodesian case supports the proposition that the analytical framework of qualified franchise — voters with stake — has a coherent classical-liberal pedigree and was articulated with substantive policy arguments distinct from racial subtext. The 1961 design was structurally serious; the 1969 retreat was a flaw in execution that converted the framework into permanent racial stratification and is not defensible.

The harder truth is that the Rhodesian Front's underlying structural concern — that universal-franchise transitions in low-institutional-capacity post-colonial economies produce single-party states, expropriation, demographic violence, and economic collapse — was vindicated by the historical record. The 1960s African examples that featured in RF rhetoric (Ghana, Nigeria, the Congo, Uganda) trended in that direction. Zimbabwe post-1980 confirmed it on a thirty-year horizon. South Africa post-1994 is showing the same dynamics on a longer timeline. The dominant institutional narrative treats Rhodesian Front concerns as racial; the structural concerns were also empirically grounded in the comparative record.

The brief takes the view that the analytical framework remains defensible and that the trajectory of universal-franchise post-colonial economies since 1960 supports rather than refutes the structural concerns the Rhodesian Front articulated. This is an uncomfortable conclusion. It is also, on the evidence, the one the comparative record points toward.

3. A Stake-Based Franchise Applied to Contemporary Anglosphere

A serious stake-based franchise for contemporary Anglosphere countries with Australia used as an example would specify both qualifying criteria — what a voter must demonstrate to qualify — and exclusionary criteria — what voids qualification regardless of other tests passed.

Every historical qualified-franchise system, from Athens to Reform Act Britain to 1961 Rhodesia, was structured this way. The Rhodesian A roll itself permitted qualification by

freight volumes down by more than a third): Daily Investor, 'Transnet rail network collapse', 2024. On Port of Durban ranked 403rd of 403 in 2024 Container Port Performance Index: World Bank Container Port Performance Index 2024. On water utilities decline (47 per cent of wastewater systems in critical state): Green Drop Report 2025, Department of Water and Sanitation, Republic of South Africa.

income or property or education in combination, not by all tests simultaneously — a flexibility the design proposed here preserves.

Qualifying Criteria

The brief proposes a two-part qualifying structure: a mandatory net-contribution test, plus satisfaction of at least two of three stake-category criteria.

Mandatory: net positive contribution to public finance. Income tax paid above (say) $30,000 annually, indexed each year to median per-capita general-government expenditure. The mechanism here is the analytical heart of the proposal. By tying the threshold to government spending per resident — which in 2023–24 stood at approximately $35,250 — the qualifying bar moves automatically with the size of the state. If government spending rises, the threshold rises, and the franchise narrows. Voters who qualify under this mechanism therefore hold a direct self-interest in fiscal discipline. The criterion is satisfied alternatively by demonstrated substantial net asset position above an indexed wealth threshold, which captures asset-rich retirees and self-employed voters whose contribution is structural rather than annual income. This is the Madisonian alignment device: the structure produces fiscal-conservative behaviour from self-interested voters without requiring any of them to be public-spirited.

Plus any two of the following three stake-category criteria:

Real-property stake. Owner-occupier of the dwelling they occupy, whether outright or with substantial owner-equity in a mortgage. The mortgaged owner-occupier holds skin in the game on every dimension the qualified franchise cares about — they need prosperity, low inflation, fiscal discipline, and durable institutions to continue paying down their loan, and they accrue growing equity over time. The renter is a tenant of the market; the public-housing resident is a tenant of the state; neither holds equity that cannot be revoked by external decision. This criterion identifies the propertied voter in the sense the classical franchise designers used the term, including those building rather than completing the equity stake.

Educational standard. Year 12 completion or equivalent. The Rhodesian system used an educational threshold descending to four years of secondary schooling at the lower bound. The contemporary Australian equivalent is Year 12 completion — attained by approximately 89 per cent of 20-to-24-year-olds and around 70 per cent of the full adult population.[16] This is the lightest-bite filter of the three; its principal function is to maintain analytical continuity with the historical franchise systems, which, if combined with improved quality of school curriculum in the areas of history, economics and logical argument could deliver significantly more sophisticated voter community.

Multi-generational stake. Two or more children ever born or adopted. This is the Prothean extension to the historical qualified-franchise structure. The Rhodesian system had no fertility criterion. The logic is set out in Section 5.

Exclusionary Criterion

Custodial sentence served in the past ten years. Conviction without imprisonment does not disqualify; suspended sentences do not disqualify. The test is whether the legal system has determined incarceration was warranted, not whether any offence occurred. The criterion is operationally clean: corrections data is reliable and the threshold is unambiguous.

[16] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Education and Work, Australia, May 2025, ABS, November 2025. https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/education/education-and-work-australia/latest-release

Two design features address legitimate concerns without compromising the criterion's logic. First, the exclusion is time-bounded rather than permanent: a continuous ten-year clean record (no further arrests or convictions) reinstates eligibility. The principle is redemption — the social contract permits return to full citizenship after sustained demonstration of compliance. Second, the criterion is race-blind by construction. It tests behaviour, not identity. Outcomes will differ by demographic group because incarceration rates differ, but the test itself does not select on race, ethnicity, religion, or any protected attribute.

The qualified franchise should be uniformly race-blind across all criteria; the redress for any underlying disparity is in addressing the causes of differential incarceration rates, not in tailoring the franchise around them.

4. The Numbers

Australia in mid-2025 had approximately 21.4 million residents aged 18 or over.[17] The Australian Electoral Commission certified 18,098,797 enrolled voters for the 2 May 2025 federal election, an enrolment rate of 98.2 per cent of eligible adults.[18]

The marginal share of adults satisfying each criterion is set out below. These are point-in-time prevalence rates drawn from the most recent ABS, ATO, and AIHW data:

Net income tax paid above $30,000 in 2022–23: approximately 12 to 14 per cent of adults aged 18+.[19] Outright owner-occupier or mortgaged owner-occupier with substantial equity: approximately 50 to 55 per cent of adults aged 18+ (outright ~25-30 per cent plus mortgaged with material equity ~25 per cent).[20] Year 12 completion or equivalent: approximately 70 per cent of adults aged 18+.[21] Two or more children ever born or adopted: approximately 45 to 50 per cent of adults aged 18+, rising to approximately 70 per cent of women aged 45 to 49, the post-fertility cohort.[22] Custodial sentence served in the past ten years: approximately 2 to 3 per cent of adults aged 18+ (estimate; the criterion's actual exclusion rate is materially smaller than lifetime incarceration prevalence because the amnesty restores most ever-imprisoned adults).[23]

Under the two-part qualifying structure — mandatory net-contribution test plus any two of three stake-category criteria — the binding constraint is the tax threshold. The mandatory test alone excludes roughly six in seven adults. Of the 12–14 per cent who clear the threshold,

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[17] ATO Taxation Statistics 2022-23, Individuals Detailed Tables. The $30,000 net-tax threshold corresponds approximately to a taxable income of $115,000-120,000 after offsets. Approximately 14.8 per cent of taxable individuals (those in the $120,001-$180,000 and $180,001+ brackets) pay net tax above this threshold, plus a small slice of the upper $45,001-$120,000 bracket; against the 21.4 million 18+ adult population, this is approximately 12-14 per cent. https://www.ato.gov.au/about-ato/research-and-statistics/in-detail/taxation-statistics/taxation-statistics-2022-23/statistics/individuals-statistics

[18] Australian Electoral Commission, 2025 Federal Election Enrolment Statistics. https://www.aec.gov.au/enrolling_to_vote/enrolment_stats/national/2025-fe.htm

[19] ATO Taxation Statistics 2022-23, Individuals Detailed Tables. https://www.ato.gov.au/about-ato/research-and-statistics/in-detail/taxation-statistics/taxation-statistics-2022-23/statistics/individuals-statistics

[20] Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Home ownership and housing tenure, drawing on ABS Census 2021. https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/home-ownership-and-housing-tenure

[21] ABS Education and Work, Australia, May 2025, op. cit.

[22] Australian Institute of Family Studies, Births in Australia, Qu, Baxter and Carroll, 2022; ABS Births Australia 2024. https://aifs.gov.au/research/facts-and-figures/births-in-australia

[23] Andrew Leigh, The Second Convict Age: Explaining the Return of Mass Imprisonment in Australia, ANU Centre for Economic History Working Paper 2020-01, 2020. https://cbe.anu.edu.au/researchpapers/CEH/WP202001.pdf

approximately four in five also satisfy at least two of the three stake-category criteria (the criteria correlate positively at the upper end of the income distribution — high earners are disproportionately educated, propertied, and family-formed). Best-estimate bands, pending a HILDA-derived cross-tabulation: approximately 10 to 12 per cent of adults aged 18+ satisfy the qualifying structure and do not trigger the exclusion.

Applied to the 21.4 million adult population, that produces a stake-based electorate of approximately 2.1 to 2.6 million voters. Against the 18.1 million currently enrolled, this is approximately twelve to fourteen per cent of the current electorate.

Roughly one in eight Australians would hold the vote under a stake-based franchise. The other seven — the tenant electorate — are who the current franchise was redesigned to include. Whether that horrifies or clarifies depends on what one believes the franchise is for.

The demographic composition of the stake-based electorate would skew strongly to upper-middle and upper income earners — the population paying net tax above $30,000 is concentrated in professional, managerial, and established small-business cohorts, plus high-skill trades. The flexible 'any two of three' design captures stake-holders with varied combinations of attributes once the tax threshold is met: those with two or more children but not yet outright owners; those with Y12 and owner-equity but childless; those with sustained tax-positive status and an educational qualification. The structurally young who are tax-positive and either propertied, educated, or parents will qualify well before age 50 — provided their incomes rise into the upper bracket.

The composition excluded from this electorate is broad and includes both ends of the income distribution. The excluded population includes: voters who are net beneficiaries of state spending (the majority of adults at median or below); voters whose income places them in the $45,000–$115,000 taxable range — the broad middle, taxable but below the $30,000 net-tax threshold; voters who clear the tax threshold but satisfy fewer than two of the three stake categories (typically childless professional renters at the top end of the income distribution); and voters who have served a custodial sentence within the past ten years. The exclusion is not principally a wealth filter at the bottom; it is a contribution-and-stake filter that excludes large portions of the working and middle classes alongside the welfare-dependent.

5. The Fertility Criterion: Why the Prothean Extension

The criteria design borrows three of its qualifications from the historical qualified-franchise tradition. The fertility criterion — two or more children ever born or adopted — is the Prothean extension, and it is the most analytically consequential of the three optional criteria. It is also the one most likely to be misread, so its defence deserves explicit articulation.

The argument is not that childless adults are lesser citizens. The argument is that the universal franchise treats those who have staked their lives on the continuation of the polity and those who have not as equivalent voters on questions whose principal stake is continuation. This is a categorical error.

Prothean has argued elsewhere that population continuation is constitutive of flourishing.[24] A polity that does not reproduce itself does not have a future to govern, regardless of how it governs the present. The voter with two or more children has staked roughly two decades of opportunity cost, financial commitment, and biological investment on the proposition that the polity has a future worth their children inhabiting. The voter without children has not necessarily made the opposite stake — there are many reasons not to have children, some of them admirable — but they have not made the staking move either. On long-horizon questions whose principal beneficiary is the next generation, treating these two voter types as equivalent overweights present consumption relative to future continuation.

The criterion captures this asymmetry. It does not punish childlessness; it grants additional electoral weight to those whose biological commitment is unambiguous. The mechanism is, again, Madisonian: voters with multi-generational stake in long-horizon outcomes will, on average, vote for policies that favour multi-generational outcomes. Their self-interest tracks the polity's continuation, where the median voter's does not.

The criterion has a second analytical function. The contemporary fertility decline across the developed world — Australia included, with a total fertility rate of approximately 1.5 — is the most powerful single indicator that the existing political settlement has failed to produce conditions in which family formation is rational behaviour for self-interested adults.[25] Prothean has identified the structural drivers of this failure elsewhere. A franchise that overweights those who have nevertheless made the staking decision is, simultaneously, a corrective mechanism: it gives political weight to voters who would, on average, favour the policy reforms necessary to restore family formation as rational behaviour.

The flexible 'any two of three' structure is also important for what the fertility criterion does not require. The childless adult who is an outright owner-occupier, Year-12-educated, and tax-positive above the threshold satisfies the franchise criteria entirely. The same is true of any other two-of-three combination. The fertility criterion is therefore a stake category, not a hard exclusion — it grants electoral weight to those who have made the multi-generational biological investment, but it does not prevent qualification by those who have not. The productive childless professional, the lifelong contributor who could not or chose not to have children, the second-generation immigrant building wealth before starting a family — each can satisfy the franchise via the other stake categories. The criterion identifies one path to qualification, not the only path.

The same flexibility mitigates the temporal-asymmetry concern that the strict-AND version generated. Younger adults can qualify on Year 12 plus owner-equity plus tax-positive status before having children, and the franchise is gained progressively as criteria are met across the life course rather than dependent on all-at-once attainment.

6. The Overton Distance — And What the Diagnostic Reveals Regardless

The proposal set out in this brief will not be implemented.

The political path from current Australian electoral law or any other Anglosphere country to a four-criterion qualified franchise does not exist. No party will campaign on it. No referendum would pass it. The standing Prothean epistemic test — does this work in the

[24] Prothean Institute, Thus Spake Ilos, Analysis Brief, April 2026; The Generational Stake, TDS Policy Brief 3, May 2026.
[25] Australian Bureau of Statistics, Births, Australia 2024. The 2024 total fertility rate was approximately 1.50 births per woman.

world as it is — rules out the implementation question for any time horizon a serious institute would commit to.

There is a recursive feature of the reform path that bears emphasis. Any constitutional amendment to introduce a qualified franchise must, under section 128 of the Australian Constitution, be ratified by referendum on the existing universal roll. The proposal therefore asks roughly seven Australians in eight to vote against their own enfranchisement. The Madisonian standard applied to the proposal itself produces an immediate verdict: ordinary self-interested voters will not vote to remove their own vote, and the proposal therefore fails its own epistemic test. The qualified franchise cannot be enacted by the franchise it proposes to replace. This is not a contingent political fact about the present moment; it is a structural feature of the reform path under any liberal-democratic procedure. Implementation would require either a constitutional crisis, a foundational rewrite under non-referendum conditions, or a generational shift in the median voter's understanding of their own long-horizon self-interest. None of these is in prospect.

The structural impossibility can be sharpened by a thought experiment. Suppose the bargain offered the disenfranchised electorate substantial consideration: a constitutionally entrenched, inflation-indexed Universal Basic Income of, say, $30,000 per adult per year, removable only by qualified-majority referendum. At a three per cent real discount rate, the present value of this entitlement exceeds $700,000 for a forty-year-old voter. A referendum trading the vote for this entitlement would, on the evidence of contemporary fiscal preferences, still fail.

The failure reveals what the universal franchise actually aggregates. It is not primarily a vote about democratic principle; it is a vote about expected lifetime extraction.

Resistance would come from high-extraction voters — those anticipating aged-care, healthcare, and pension consumption well above $30,000 per year in indexed terms at the expense of the productive voter — rejecting the cap on their effective claim. The implicit demand the current franchise aggregates is therefore for transfers materially above any practicable constitutional offer, indexed and growing. That is the demand against which fiscal discipline runs, and the demand that no bargain mechanism in the current Overton window can satisfy.

A second observation concerns the political consequence if implementation were somehow achieved. The instinct of commentators on both sides — that a stake-based franchise would entrench conservative rule — is wrong on the second-order effect. The Liberal Party's current advantage among outright homeowners, large families, and median-plus taxpayers is demographic rather than principled: Coalition policy under universal franchise has been short-horizon (tax cuts now, asset-price defence now) for the same Madisonian reasons that Labor policy has been short-horizon (transfers now, sectoral subsidies now). Both parties optimise for the universal franchise's median voter.[26] Under a stake-based franchise the median voter shifts to a suburban married homeowner with two children and median-plus tax paid — a voter who demands long-horizon outcomes regardless of party colour. Within two electoral cycles the parties would converge on a long-horizon, family-formation-favouring, fiscally disciplined policy stance, because the structural incentive would force them to. What the qualified franchise entrenches is not Coalition rule. It is long-horizon policy.

[26] Australian Election Study 2022 and successive waves (1987-2022), Cameron, McAllister, Sheppard et al., Australian National University. https://australianelectionstudy.org

This is not the analytical payload of the brief. The analytical payload is the diagnostic.

The current Australian franchise is also a selection mechanism. It was also designed — at a particular time, in response to particular political pressures, with particular structural assumptions. Universal adult suffrage at 18, compulsory enrolment, compulsory attendance at polling, no qualifying tests beyond citizenship and residency: this is a specific configuration with specific selection effects. Naming the alternative — even one that cannot be implemented — makes those effects visible. It permits the conversation that would otherwise be foreclosed: not "should we change the franchise" but "what is the franchise we have, in fact, doing?"

The diagnostic tells the following: the current Australian franchise selects across a population in which the median voter is a net beneficiary of state spending, holds no equity stake in housing, has not made a multi-generational biological investment, and has no automatic interest in fiscal discipline. The franchise weights these voters equally with the smaller fraction of the population whose self-interest is aligned with long-horizon outcomes. The aggregate output of that selection mechanism is predictable: governments that defer infrastructure, expand transfers faster than productive capacity, treat family formation as a private lifestyle preference rather than a civilisational input, and avoid any reform that imposes present cost for future benefit.

These are not failures of personnel. They are not the consequence of corrupt politicians or weak leaders. They are the predictable output of the selection mechanism, operating on the population it was designed to operate on, producing exactly what it was structured to produce.

We do not propose the qualified franchise. We notice that the franchise we have was also designed — and ask what it was designed to produce.

Implications for Australia

The Australian case is the natural application point for this analysis, and several specific observations follow.

First, the policy pathologies described elsewhere in the Prothean corpus — the inability to commit to long-horizon infrastructure, the steady upward ratchet of welfare transfers regardless of fiscal cycle, the structural unwillingness of either major party to address generational housing costs or fertility decline — are not failures of political will. They are predictable outputs of the selection mechanism. A franchise that overweights present-consumption preferences will produce governments that protect present consumption. This is what is occurring, and it will continue to occur until the selection mechanism changes or the underlying population composition changes.

Second, the demographic trajectory described in the data above will, on current trends, narrow the qualifying population of any future stake-based franchise faster than it narrows the universal franchise. Owner-occupier rates with material equity are declining sharply for adults under 50. Two-or-more-children completed-fertility rates are projected to continue declining for cohorts born after 1975. Tax-positive working-age adults will, under projected fiscal trajectories, become a steadily smaller share of the total adult population. The diagnostic that the brief sets out applies, with increasing force, to a future Australia where the stake-holding share of the adult population is materially smaller than it is now.

Third, the most useful function of the analytical framework set out here is not as a policy proposal but as an evaluative test. When considering any contemporary policy reform — housing, fertility, fiscal, generational — the relevant question is: which voter does this benefit, and is that voter staked in the long-horizon outcome it produces? The framework does not require implementation to be useful. It requires only that policy designers ask the question.

The Prothean Institute exists to think clearly about hard structural questions. The franchise is one of them. The conversation cannot begin until the diagnostic is named.

About Prothean Institute

The Prothean Institute is an independent strategic research organisation dedicated to understanding, preserving, and renewing the foundations of thriving societies.

Our mission is to develop political, cultural, and social frameworks that are deeply aligned with the structures, instincts, and emotional architectures that sustain human flourishing across generations.

Our work focuses on:

Developing strategic whitepapers, policy briefs, and advisory documents to support effective governance and leadership.

Conducting philosophical, historical, and behavioural analysis of political and cultural trends.

Equipping leaders with frameworks that connect emotional resonance to rational clarity and practical governance.

At the Prothean Institute, all policy recommendations and strategic analyses are grounded in strict epistemic rigour and the reality of real-world conditions and human nature. Idealism, where entertained, is explicitly flagged as distinct from core analysis.