

Preferential Voting and Informality

Australians are very familiar with a voting pattern which we know as "preferential voting". This is not, however, what it is called overseas where there is more precision in the differentiation between preference voting in a single-vacancy constituency - Alternative Voting (AV) - and in a multi-member constituency - Single Transferable Vote (STV).

Preferential voting was introduced by the conservative Nationalist Government in 1918 because it feared that factional fighting within the Nationalist Party (which was a fragile coalition of the Liberal Party, Billy Hughes' breakaway group of the Labor Party, and farming interests) might lead to its defeat at the next General Election. Up till this time the system was first-past-the-post, and at the Swan by-election, for example, the Labor Party candidate won with 34.36% of the vote.

On the basis of the new preferential system, the Nationalist Government was returned and the Country Party was born. The dependence of the Country Party on the inequities of the electoral system has continued to the present day and will be detailed below.

Practically speaking there is little obvious difference between the AV and STV, both involving as they do the listing of the voter's preferences 1, 2, 3, etc. But the mechanics of counting are altered by the fact that in one case once the candidate has a majority of first plus alternative preferences, that is the end of it, while in the other more than one candidate needs to be elected and therefore voters are in reality voting more than once. These extra votes also must be counted and therefore the need to transfer the vote from one candidate to the next.

This brings up the problem of how many preferences need to be indicated. Australians have been plagued by the

requirement of numbering all candidates to show a complete set of preferences. Theoretically, purists argue, this is necessary since any candidate may need exhaustive distribution of preferences to gain election. In reality, however, the vote is not evenly shared between candidates and very few preferences beyond the second or third (or fourth or fifth in multi-member constituencies) are distributed.

In fact, voters only need to have the right to enter all preferences so that they may exercise their judgement regarding their preferences. The obligation to do so is counter-productive since the increase in informal votes produced by the necessity to number row upon row of candidates deprives large numbers of voters of the very right to express their political will. These figures show the extent of disenfranchisement:

INFORMAL VOTE: 1980 ELECTION

		<u>SENATE</u>		<u>HOUSE OF REPS.</u>	
	(No. of Senate Candidates)		% Formal Vote		% Formal Vote
<u>NSW</u>	(33)	281,338	9.4	70,742	2.4
<u>VIC</u>	(34)	256,060	11.2	61,920	2.7
<u>QLD</u>	(33)	117,884	9.2	22,435	1.8
<u>SA</u>	(27)	70,359	8.7	22,491	2.8
<u>WA</u>	(23)	69,453	9.7	18,821	2.7
<u>TAS</u>	(13)	19,651	7.5	6,967	2.6
<u>NT</u>	(10)	3,325	7.3	2,231	4.9
<u>ACT</u>	(9)	3,558	2.8	2,752	2.1
<u>AUSTRALIA</u>		<u>821,628</u>	<u>9.4</u>	<u>208,359</u>	<u>2.4</u>

There is a clear correlation between the high informal vote in the Senate and in States where there are large numbers of candidates. There is correspondingly a lower informal vote in the same State for the House elections where the number of candidates is generally only three or four. Not shown here, but nevertheless of critical importance, is the correlation between high Senate informal voting and strong Labor areas: out of the 30 highest Senate informal vote seats, 21 are Labor held, most of them with large majorities. The worst seat showed a 15.2% informal vote!

If we can assume that there will always be an informal vote of between one to two per cent, the unnecessary informal vote in the Senate is presently 7% to 8%. If then we accept that these informal votes would have favoured the ALP by a ratio of 2:1, the difference as a lost ALP advantage is about 2.5% at every Senate election. Even if we assume a ratio of only 3:2 in favour of the ALP, the lost advantage is still about 1.5%, a critical amount.

If any further example need be shown of the disastrous effect of the high informal Senate vote on Labor's fortunes take the situation in the Senate election of 1974. It has been calculated that if just 87,305 (26.3%) of the 332,818 informal votes had been formal, assuming that 2/3rds of them were ALP votes, then Labor would have secured 6 of the 10 seats rather than 5. The implications of that for the events of 1975 need not be spelt out!

A further complication of compulsory preferential voting is the phenomenon known as the "Donkey" vote. In the past the DLP were the main abusers of this selecting their candidates with a mind to the alphabetical priority of their surnames. Now, however, it can be shown that the Liberal/Country Party have taken up the tactic and in the 1980 election may have won 5 or more seats simply by careful selection of candidates. Barry Cohen estimates that taken nationally about 0.3% is added to the Coalition's preferred vote through this method. The old story about people voting for an ape needs to be amended to include his name being Aardvark!

There seems little to be said then for compulsory preferential voting. Various modifications have been proposed and are in use elsewhere, but the most simple appears to be the requirement to mark votes equal to the number of vacancies, leaving the choice of whether to go further up to the voter, with the additional proviso that the vote shall not be informal despite any mistakes the voter may make on the ballot paper beyond the minimum requirement. The responsibility would then be upon the parties and candidates to encourage their supporters to exercise further preferences if they thought it useful.

A variation of the Alternate Vote is the second-ballot system, where instead of marking preferences in one go, the voter has a second vote at a later stage after the weaker candidates have been eliminated. This is unwieldy, expensive, inconvenient, and the same result seems to be perfectly achievable through the Alternate Vote mechanism.

the House of Representatives; the establishment of mobile polling facilities at hospitals and similar institutions; and many other changes (Electoral Bill No. 2-7 1975).

A further provision for an increase in the deposit required for candidacy has come in for some criticism as being discriminatory, and a modification of this allowing the candidate a choice between paying a substantial deposit or presenting a nomination with the signatures of a set number (100 or 1000) of electors or of a certain number (say 1) from each electorate in the relevant State, would appear to have more support.

There appears also to be some agreement for extending the term of Parliament from 3 years to 4 years. With a fair electoral system operating there would be little in