

# Make the most of your Senate vote

## A voter's guide to making your Senate vote as effective as possible this federal election

Australia has new rules this federal election which make it much easier to cast a vote in the Senate that fully reflects your own views. It is now much simpler to vote for individual candidates *below the line*. Group voting tickets, through which it was sometimes possible for candidates with little voter support to be elected through complex, opaque interlocking numberings among themselves, have been abolished. By taking a moment to understanding some simple facts about the new Senate voting arrangements, you can maximise the impact of your vote this election. You will see that your vote is most effective if you:

- **vote *below the line* for individual Senate candidates**
- ***say it like it is*: number the candidates in the order of your own genuine preferences**
- ***don't hold back*: mark as many preferences as you genuinely have (and at least 6 to have the vote accepted as formal).**

## Preferential voting

Australia has a preferential system of voting for federal elections. This means that you number the candidates in the order of your preference for them. This determines the order in which what is still unused of your single vote will be available to candidates.

Your vote will *always* assist your first preference candidate while they remain in contention to be elected. If at any stage of the count, some or all of your vote cannot assist one of your most preferred candidates to be elected, the unused portion of your vote will be transferred to your next preferred candidate who is still in the running.

## ***Below the Line* voting vs *Above the Line* voting**

**Voting *below the line* guarantees that you will maximise the impact *your* opinions have in the Senate election.**

When voting for the Senate, you have the option of indicating your preference for political parties and groups *above the line*, instead of individual candidates *below the line*. By voting above the line, you delegate to each political party or group you number the decision about the order in which your vote will be counted for candidates *within* those parties or groups.

Since you must vote **either** *above the line* or *below the line*, you should only vote *above the line* where you agree **exactly** with the order in which **all** of your preferred parties have ordered their candidates. Your vote cannot assist anyone in parties or groups that you haven't numbered.

## **It is most effective to “say it like it is”**

**Give your vote the most impact by numbering the candidates in accordance with your own genuine preferences.**

Australia's voting system has been designed so that when you mark a lower preference it cannot hurt the chances of election of your higher-preference candidates. Your most preferred candidate will always benefit from your vote while they are still in contention to be elected.

This means you don't need to worry about 'tactical voting', or 'wasting' your vote where you think your preferred candidate or candidates won't be successful. You can never harm the chances of your higher-preference candidates by marking further preferences.

## **Don't hold back on marking preferences**

**Minimise the chances of your vote being wasted by marking as many preferences as you genuinely have.**

Preferential voting in Senate elections is designed to minimise the number of wasted votes, that is, votes that have no direct impact on who gets elected. As the counting progresses, your vote only ceases to affect the outcome in two situations:

- 1 where you have not marked any further preference for a candidate still in contention to be elected. Remember, it makes sense to express a preference for as many candidates as you can differentiate among, putting those you generally agree with ahead of those you are ambivalent about, followed by those you disagree with. Marking more preferences means your vote has more chance of ensuring that views closer to yours are represented in the Senate.
1. where your preferred continuing candidate is lowest in the poll and no transfer is necessary to determine who fills the remaining vacancies.

## **How to Vote cards are suggestions only**

**The Senate voting system is designed to allow you maximum flexibility in specifying what happens to your vote. Take advantage of this.**

Political parties and other political groups often prepare *How to Vote* cards indicating the order in which they think you should mark your preferences on a ballot paper. *How to Vote* cards are suggestions only, and you do not have to follow them to cast a valid vote. So-called 'preference deals' by political parties and groups are not binding on voters.

You should follow the advice on a *How to Vote* card only where you agree *exactly* with the suggested order of preferences on the card. However, you should also feel free to mix and match. You may prefer a candidate lower on a party's ticket above a candidate higher on the ticket - feel free to give such candidates a boost through a higher preference. You may also wish to vote across party lines for individual candidates that you like - you are free to do so!

## How many preferences do you *have* to mark?

**To cast a valid Senate vote that best reflects your personal opinions, mark at least 6 candidates *below the line*.**

The ballot paper will have instructions telling you to mark at least 12 candidates below the line or 6 boxes above the line. Under the law, any vote with preferences for a minimum of 6 candidates *below the line* or one party or group *above the line* is accepted as formal. Voting *below the line* will better reflect your own assessment of the candidates. Remember, the fewer preferences you mark, the greater the risk of part or all of your vote being wasted in situations where it could have helped elect other candidates with views closer to your own.

## How your vote will be counted

Put simply, Senate preferential voting works by transferring all or part of your single vote to your next preferred candidate who is still in contention to be elected, but only where it has not been (or can no longer be) counted towards your more preferred candidates. This happens in two ways:

1. where your most preferred candidate has more votes than they need for election, their surplus is distributed: **an unused fraction** of your vote will be transferred to your next preferred among candidates still in the running
2. where there are no surpluses to distribute and your most preferred candidate has the lowest number of votes of any candidates still in contention, that candidate will be excluded and your vote transferred to your next preferred candidate **at its full remaining value**.

## More information

- A short video about making the most of the new Senate voting freedoms  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BqgiUarZDo>

- The Australian Electoral Commission's official web page on [Voting in the Senate](#)
- The [Proportional Representation Society of Australia](#) promotes reforms to election systems in Australia to make them more representative and more robust by increasing voters' influence
- Antony Green's [Tips on the New Senate Voting System](#)

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