

Inquiry into Senate Voting Reform.

Please accept my submission on Senate Voting Reform.

I am a 57 year old pensioner. I tend to vote Labor in the Lower House and Greens in the Upper House, so I have no agenda to protect the current electoral system except that I believe the current system is fair.

I admit that the current system has been manipulated by a small proportion of people, who have created parties in order to distribute preferences to other parties in order to get them (possibly) elected to the Senate. This is a problem. Changing the way that votes are counted is not the solution to this problem. The Inquiry has already identified and proposed changes that will ensure a person cannot be an office bearer of more than one party. This will significantly reduce any unfair manipulation of the voting system. The inquiry is also proposing to ensure party names are sufficiently differentiated that there will be no confusion in the party whom you choose to vote for. Both of these changes will help to ameliorate the threat of manipulation of the voting process by people driven by self interest to so manipulate the system that their own self interest is promoted.

Denying preferences, on the other hand, does not do this. It is true, that it will avoid the situation where 20 parties "collude" to distribute preferences amongst themselves. But this is what parties have always done. This is what happens in the House of Representatives. Changing the voting system as proposed would have the same effect if implemented in the House of representatives of making the party with the highest primary vote get elected. It would mean the end of two party preferred voting. Now there are many places in the world that do not have two party preferred voting. Is that what we want for Australia?

I submit that it is not. Two party preferred voting, exhaustive preferential voting, is a foundation stone of our great democracy. We should be very wary of changing this system. There is nothing undemocratic about parties sending their preferences where they choose. The argument is that this allows (potentially) a person or party with, for example, 0.5% of the total vote getting elected. Now this is true, but it has to be remembered (and I don't have the best statistics available to fully explain myself, but I will do my best) that this person with 0.5% of the vote cannot, CANNOT be elected with 0.5% of the vote, they can only be elected by the preferences of a QUOTA. Like anyone else they are elected by a QUOTA. This is no different to the Greens preferencing Nick Xenophon, or Labor, or the LNP. Your preference gets exhausted, and the person with the majorative vote, after preferences have been exhausted, is elected.

Now it is proposed that there will be optional preferential voting. I know that the senators reading this submission would NOT support optional preferential voting for the House of Representatives. The reason you would not support it is that it is a less democratic form of voting. We expect someone to get elected to the House with at least 50.1% of the exhausted preferential vote. This is how it works. This is Australian democracy. This is what our diggers fight and die for. For the best democracy in the world. If changes are needed, then let us look at how we can make changes without tampering with the basic unit of our democracy, which is exhaustive preferences. This is entirely the nature of our democracy. We change it at our peril. And as I have said, we would not change it for the House of reps, so why should we change it for the Senate?

The reality here is that people are choosing in this case to vote for self interest. Just as the micro parties have voted for their self interest, now the Greens and Xenophon along with the Government are voting for their self interest. The greens will hold, perhaps with Nick Xenophon, the balance of power on the Senate if these changes take affect. It is hard to imagine a more blatant form of self interest than this, making changes that concentrate power in the Senate to protect your own power base. If Labor and the LNP were making changes in their own self interest against the interests of the Greens and Xenophon, there would be an almighty hue and cry.

These changes will undoubtedly confuse voters, who for 30 years have had to only vote ONE above the line. It is all I have ever done, and I have been happy to do so, confident that my choice of vote has the wherewithal to distribute preference sin both their and my interest. I believe it is not true that people who vote for micro parties get someone they don't want. I think the point of voting for micro parties is that you probably don't want your vote going to one of the major players. That is just an assumption on my part. What will happen with these changes is that possibly 3.3m voters (according to Senator penny Wong on ABC News 24 today) will have their votes exhausted, their vote will, for all intents and purposes, not be counted.

I note that informal voting has fallen significantly in the Senate over the past 30 years. 97% of voters choose to vote above the line, and they vote ONE. Forcing voters to choose multiple candidates above the line, and abolishing group voting tickets, will result in a higher informal vote, and will not result in a fairer, more democratic system, but rather a less fair and undemocratic system.

Thank you for your consideration in this matter.

Noel Conway

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