

Submission to the JSCEM inquiry into the 2010 election.

This submission is to suggest

- (1) a simple way of introducing into our electoral system the equivalent of American “primaries”, but incorporated into the main election itself, and
- (2) more "voluntariness" in our electoral system.

1. Primaries

I suggest that each political party could (if it chose) nominate two (or more) candidates to the same seat, and that the ballot papers should be printed in batches rotating the order among candidates of the same party. Suppose two parties nominate one candidate each and another party nominates two:

Candidate W (party A)

Candidates X and Y (party B)

Candidate Z (party C)

Then half the ballot papers would show the candidates in the order WXYZ, and the other half in the order WYXZ. Party identification is printed on the ballot paper. Voters who supported party B but did not have any preference between its candidates would give their first and second preferences to its candidates in their order on the ballot paper the voter had received. Voters who did have a preference between the party’s candidates would ignore the order of the ballot paper and give their first preference to their preferred candidate and their second preference to the party’s other candidate, and these votes would decide which of the party’s candidates got up (thereby providing the advantages of US primaries; on which, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primary_elections).

Nominating two candidates would not “split the vote” and enable another party to win, since a party’s voters would give their second preference to the party’s other candidate; even if one of the party's candidates was first excluded, the other candidate would get all or most of those votes and be as strong as if the party had nominated only one candidate.

If party A also nominated two candidates, V and W, the printing of the ballot papers would follow the pattern VWXYZ, WVYXZ. Since the order of the parties is not varied, it would not be necessary to print all the possible permutations.

Another method would be to introduce "above the line" voting in House of Representative seats where any party nominated more than one candidate. Above-the-line votes for a party should be distributed equally among the candidates nominated by the party, as if voters had followed the order of ballot papers printed in accordance with Robson Rotation (<http://www.prsa.org.au/viclc/submission/sub/node15.html>). Which of the party’s candidates got up would then be decided by “below-the-line” voters.

Something similar could be adopted for the Senate. “Above-the-line” votes should be distributed among the party’s candidates equally, as if above-the-line voters had followed the order of ballot papers printed in accordance with Robson Rotation.

The main argument for a primary is that it gives the voters who support a party (not just the miniscule fraction of them who are members of the party) a say in the selection of the candidate. A primary “built-in” to the election itself is better than a primary held separately before the election, for several reasons:

- (a) All of the party’s voters participate, without having to register as supporters of a party, or vote twice, or do anything except vote in the ordinary election as they do already.
- (b) In a separate primary, voters often vote not according to their own preference but according to their idea of which candidate swinging voters are more likely to vote for in the real election.
- (c) Separate primaries are held before the election campaign proper gets under way, when the issues are not yet clear, so the primary voters are trying to guess which candidate other voters would support at the end of the sort of campaign they guess will happen. In a primary built-into the actual election, the party's supporters would express their own assessment of the performance of the party's candidates in the campaign that actually takes place.
- (d) After a separate primary the defeated candidates and their supporters may sit on their hands, whereas if the primary is built into the election itself the party’s nominees will put their full weight behind the party’s campaign—given the likely flow of preferences to the party’s other candidate(s), the effort each candidate makes to get elected will in the end benefit whichever candidate turns out to have most support.
- (e) A separate primary increases the total cost of the election, thereby increasing the influence of wealthy donors.

2. Voluntariness

I would also like to see an increase in voluntariness in voting, i.e. a reduction in the compulsion or channelling that voters at present experience. I do support compulsory voting, in the minimal sense that voters must attend the polling place and have their names crossed off. However--

Ballot papers should include, at the top, a box for the option “I do not wish to vote for any candidate”, and a box for comments.

Also, there should be optional preference voting. In federal elections at present we have “compulsory preferential voting” (i.e. the ballot is informal unless (nearly) all the boxes are numbered). Voters resent the compulsion to order all the candidates, believing very reasonably that only the top preferences have any real meaning. In some cases they simply do not wish to give even their last preference to some candidate they regard as particularly obnoxious.

Finally, above-the-line voters should be invited to number more than one square (but not necessarily all the squares) if they wish to express an order of preference among parties, and a vote should exhaust once it has been distributed through the candidates of the preferred party or parties. Thus the vote would be transferred according to the voter’s preferences, and not channelled by “preference deals” among the parties. (See <http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/10/28/1098667909085.html>, http://democratic.audit.anu.edu.au/papers/200411_brent_above_line.pdf.)

My suggestions would not prevent parties from distributing how-to-vote cards advising supporters which of the party's candidates should get their top preferences, or from agreeing to advise supporters to give their lower preferences to candidates of another party.

To sum up:

(1a) House of Representatives ballot papers should be printed in batches to provide rotation if a party chooses to nominate two or more candidates; or, alternatively,

(1b) there should be above-the-line voting in House of Representatives seats in which any party nominates more than one candidate, with above-the-line votes distributed equally among the party's candidates according to a "Robson rotation" pattern.

(2) Above-the-line Senate votes should be treated in the same way.

(3) Ballot papers should provide a box for "I do not wish to vote for any candidate", and a space for comment.

(4) Expression of preferences should be optional.

(5) Above-the-line Senate votes should be transferred according to the preferences among parties expressed by voters and not according to patterns nominated by the parties.

Submitted by
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