

Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
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Inquiry into the 2007 Federal Election Submission from Geoffrey Powell, Hawthorn East Vic.

Terms of reference: On 12 March 2008, the Senate agreed to the following resolution:

*1. That the following matters be referred to the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters for inquiry and report:
All aspects of the 2007 Federal election and matters related thereto,...*

In the media release published on the Committee's website it states:
New technologies, demographic changes and shifting public attitudes to the political system provide ongoing opportunities and challenges to ensuring that all citizens can fully participate in the electoral system.

"While all Australian citizens are required to both enrol to vote and vote at elections, it is important that these acts are made as accessible as possible to the entire community," Mr Melham (Chair of the Committee) said.

I fully endorse these sentiments and ask that the Committee consider the following points as a means of providing greater citizen participation in the election of Senators and would be happy to make a further submission at any hearing.

Recommendations:

1. That candidate names be printed within each party group in different sequences in batches of ballot papers so that all candidates appear in favoured positions equally.
2. That, if above-the-line voting is retained, a vote for a party group is deemed to indicate preferences for the candidates in that group and in subsequent groups as per group voting tickets in the order that they appear on that particular ballot paper.
3. That a below-the-line vote be deemed formal if it contains the number one being a clear expression of a first preference for one candidate with subsequent preferences being optional.
4. That casual Senate vacancies be filled by countback so that the quota of voters who have lost their representative choose the replacement Senator.

Geoffrey Powell

16 May 2008

Discussion:

1. That candidate names be printed within each party group in different sequences in batches of ballot papers so that all candidates appear in favoured positions equally.
2. That, if above-the-line voting is retained, a vote for a party group is deemed to indicate preferences for the candidates in that group and in subsequent groups as per group voting tickets in the order that they appear on that particular ballot paper.

These two points taken together will remove the bias in favour of minor and micro party candidates that occurs due to the somewhat arbitrary (but reasonable) practice of excluding the candidate with the lowest progress total during the scrutiny. If after the count of first preferences, the major party candidates shared their party support more equally, then either of the major parties would enjoy a greater chance of filling the last vacancy.

For example, in the 2004 Senate Election, Jacinta Collins, not Family First, would have been elected had Labor's 2.5282 quotas been spread equally between the top three Labor candidates. Three Labour candidates on 0.8427 quotas would be well ahead of Family First late in the count.

If there were no candidates elected on first preferences, it is likely the scrutiny would involve fewer counts.

3. That a below-the-line vote be deemed formal if it contains the number one being a clear expression of a first preference for one candidate with subsequent preferences being optional.

There is no justification for making the task of below-the-line voters more onerous than that of above-the-line voters. One should not have to indicate a preference for a candidate about whom little is known or whose policies you disapprove.

4. That casual Senate vacancies be filled by countback so that the quota of voters who have lost their representative choose the replacement Senator.

This method has been used in Tasmania for many years. It has usually resulted in a candidate from the same party being elected to fill the vacancy. The one interesting exception was when Norm Sanders was replaced by Bob Brown. It was their association with the Wilderness Society that the voters deemed more important than their party affiliation.