

LARGEST REMAINDER

(Not quite Quota Notes)

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Editorial

A Fundamentalist argument for fully optional preferential voting!

When God threatened to destroy Sodom unless 50 Good Men could be found he was argued down to 10. After all what is the difference between 50 and 45, 45 and 40, etc.?

As it happens He could only find four - Lot, Lot's wife and their two daughters. (you'll notice that three of the Good Men were actually women)

Lot's wife promptly found herself wanting and was turned into a pillar of salt.

The two daughters blotted their copybook by making their father drunk and having sex with him, thereby leaving only one Good Man. (Genesis 18, 23-33; 19, 32-37)

The moral of the story?

If God can only find one Good Man why should voters be expected to find more?

Exhausted Votes

Exhausted, but still working; only informal votes are wasted votes.

By Stephen Lesslie

The experiment with above-the-line voting and group voting tickets has proven to be a failure. No further manipulation of the system with arbitrary thresholds or more rigid rules for party registration can correct its inherent faults.

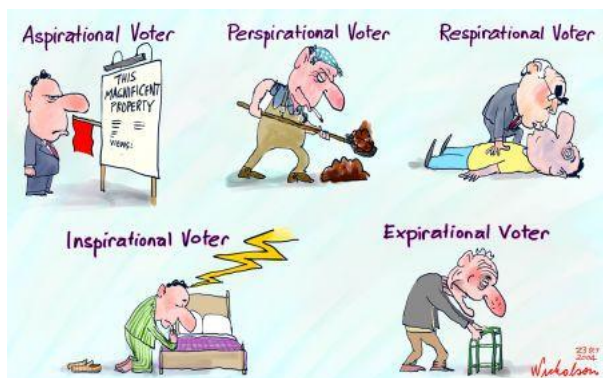
All forms of above-the-line voting must be abolished and voters allowed to freely choose their own favoured candidates and preferences.

Only by simplifying the system and trusting the voters to make their own informed decisions on preference allocation can we return to a system where the result is both democratic and proportional.

It is essential that voting be fully optional preferential. Any form of mandatory preferencing will result in an increase in informal votes but will have little impact on the number of votes exhausting. Paradoxically it appears that the most effective way to reduce both the informal rate and the exhaustion rate is to implement fully optional preferential voting.¹

Why is there a fear that votes will exhaust?

The fear seems to be that exhausted votes do not help to elect candidates and will be



Cartoon from www.nicholsoncartoons.com.au

¹ Largest remainder No 17 February 2013 Electoral Reform Australia
Largest remainder No 20 September 2013 Electoral Reform Australia
Largest remainder No 21 February 2014 Electoral Reform Australia

wasted.

It should be remembered that, even with compulsory numbering of all candidates, it is impossible to ensure that all votes help to elect a candidate. There will always be the left over votes that are allocated to the first runner-up; exhausted votes are just part of that number.

Why is there not the same concern for the votes (up to 49%) that, even after preferences are counted, do not help to elect a candidate in single-member elections?

Why exhausted votes are not wasted votes.

1. Every first preference, whether it is transferred on or exhausts without a further preference, gives candidates an indication of how well or how badly they have polled. An informal vote gives no such information.
2. If a party or group gains over a quota its votes have participated in the election of one or more candidates before they exhaust. In this instance the vote only exhausts at its transfer value. These “excess” votes are analogous to the votes over 50% that are cast for a winning candidate in a single-member electorate.
3. Exhausted votes may allow a candidate to reach the 4% threshold for electoral funding.
4. Exhausted votes contribute, under current STV rules, to determining the quota for election.
5. Exhausted votes may keep their candidate in the count long enough to ensure that another candidate or candidates are excluded first and thus affect the result of the ballot.

Exhausted votes are not wasted votes. They are only votes that in a particular election were unable to find a winning candidate. Had the electorate as a whole voted differently, they may have counted. Are the votes for losing candidates in a single-member electorate considered wasted votes? (If they were we might have a sensible system of multi-member electorates, eh?)

Excessive fear of exhausted votes and mandatory attempts to reduce them will only lead to an increase in the number of informal votes.

The only wasted votes in an election are informal votes.

It is impossible to prevent exhausted votes

Unless voters are required to number *every* candidate it will be impossible to prevent votes from exhausting. Votes will exhaust in any optional preferential voting system. It does not matter whether the requirement is to “vote for as many as there are to be elected” or “vote for twice the number to be elected plus one” or any other arbitrary number - “say a round number like 15.”

Despite the excessively onerous formality requirements at the 2013 Senate election in NSW 1% of below-the-line votes still exhausted.

“Rusted on” voters will vote for all the candidates in their preferred party; they also know who they consider to be the enemy and will vote for as many other candidates as necessary to vote formally but still avoid voting for the enemy. Should the micro parties be already excluded these votes will exhaust. This applies whether the voter is a major party voter or someone who believes in supporting *anyone but* a major party. In modern Senate elections there will always be enough makeweight candidates to ensure that these votes can exhaust.

Many voters will fail in the quest of finding sufficient “safe” preferences and will consequently vote informally. The more onerous the formality provisions, the higher the informality rate.

What are the consequences of forcing voters to number many candidates?

1. The number of informal votes will rise, whether the provisions require just two (2) preferences or many. The more onerous the provisions the greater the informal percentage. After 30 years of “just vote 1” the informal vote will be excessive.
2. To comply with the formality provisions

many voters will merely complete sufficient numbers sequentially starting from the beginning (the top left hand corner) of the ballot paper. The 2013 Senate election in NSW demonstrated the advantages of a favourable draw on the ballot paper. Parties which get a good draw on the ballot paper should not be given a double advantage.

3. STV gives voters the opportunity to choose the candidate that they consider to be the best. Requiring voters to further continue preferencing forces them to choose between candidates that they would normally ignore. If they are thinking strategically they will of course preference the weakest and least effective opposition candidates, in the manner of voters in the open primaries in the USA.

Conclusion

Informal votes cast inadvertently by voters are wasted votes and a denial of suffrage; every attempt should be made to reduce their occurrence.

Exhausted votes, however, are a natural part of any election. They are the section of the votes that do not elect a candidate. These votes are still part of the process; had the electorate as a whole voted differently, they may have contributed. In a democratic society voters should not be expected to know the outcome of an election before they vote.

Annual General Meeting

The next meeting will be our Annual General Meeting. It will be held at 74 Thompson Street, Drummoyne on Wednesday 28 May 2014. Meeting commences at 7:30 pm.

Anyone is welcome to attend. For details, please contact Susan Gregory at president@electoralreformaustralia.org or on (02) 6351 2598 for the relevant information.

Comments and/or contributions are welcome:

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