VOTING AND COUNTING SYSTEM

Current situation…at a glance

• The **voting system** for Local Government elections in South Australia requires voters to record as a minimum a preference for the number of vacancies to be filled for each election.

For example, if there are three ward councillor positions to be filled in the election for that ward, voters must indicate their first, second and third preferences. Further preferences may be cast at the discretion of voters. This system of voting can be referred to as partial preferential.

• The **method of counting** the votes is known as proportional representation ("PR"). PR requires the following.
  
  - A candidate needs to achieve the required **quota** of formal votes to be elected (that is, informal votes are excluded). The surplus votes (votes above the quota) of elected candidates are then distributed to the continuing candidates according to the next available preference expressed on the ballot paper.
  
  - If all the surplus votes of elected candidates have been distributed and vacancies still remain, the least preferred candidate by electors is excluded and his or her votes are transferred to continuing candidates.
  
  - Where two candidates remain in the count for the final vacancy and neither has a quota, the candidate with the largest number of votes is elected.

The **PR system quota** is worked out on the basis of dividing the number of formal ballot papers by the number of vacancies plus 1, and adding 1 to the result as follows:

\[
\text{Quota} = \frac{\text{number of formal ballot papers}}{\text{number of vacancies} + 1} + 1
\]

PR rules ensure candidates are elected in proportion to their broad support. Previous South Australian reviews of the vote counting system concluded that PR is the fairest and most equitable system for elections where two or more vacancies are to be filled.

Some issues to consider

• PR is more complex than other vote counting systems and there is a lack of understanding about the rationale for its use and how it works in practice amongst some candidates and voters.

• It has been suggested that **partial preferential voting impacts on voter turnout and informality rates** as ‘potential’ electors are unwilling to record a preference for candidates they don’t know or have very little knowledge of, or don’t want to support (voters must record a preference for at least the number of vacancies to be filled for each election).
There are a number of matters that could be considered in reviewing the voting and counting system.

- **Should the current voting system be modified to allow voters to express preferences only as far as they choose (rather than for the required number of candidates to fill the vacancies)?**

- **Should such a modification be supported even if it is not compatible with the objectives of the counting method under the PR system?** For example, optional preferential voting in which electors are not required to express more than a first preference would have the result that many votes are ‘exhausted’ early in the count as there would be no further preferences to allocate. Many more positions would be filled under quota undermining the rationale and benefits of the PR system with its current preferential rules.

- **Should a mix of vote counting systems be introduced with individual councils being able to decide on the vote counting system for local elections?**

A mix of systems in South Australia would reverse the policy adopted in 1999 of having a consistent approach to fundamental aspects of the electoral system in order to simplify procedures and maximise elector participation, as far as is possible.

It should also be noted that under the PR system single vacancy contests (Mayor and single member wards) give the same result as if conducted under optional preferential.

- **Figure 1 indicates the voting system used in other jurisdictions.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>System</th>
<th>SA</th>
<th>QLD</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>VIC</th>
<th>WA</th>
<th>TAS</th>
<th>NT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting system</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>First past the post*</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>First past the post*</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>First past the post*</td>
<td>PR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different voting method in some cases</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, Optional Preferential for election where 1 or 2 vacancies are to be filled</td>
<td>Yes, Optional Preferential for election where 1 or 2 vacancies are to be filled</td>
<td>Yes, Preferential voting where 1 vacancy is to be filled</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Since PR takes longer to count than other systems, the Electoral Commissioner has recommended that the **closing time for voting in periodic elections be changed** from the current 12:00 noon on the first business day after the relevant Saturday (usually a Monday) to 5pm on the business day immediately preceding the relevant Saturday (usually a Friday). The proposal would enable all ballot materials to be processed and organised for a next day count with preliminary results being able to be announced on the Saturday.

- **Would the disadvantage of votes not being counted because they arrive on the first business day the following week be outweighed by giving earlier results?**

**Linkages with other review topics in Information Sheet 2**

- Multi-member electorates, such as wards with two or more councillors or the election of councillors from areas undivided by wards, complement the use of PR.

**Further Information**


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1. It should be noted that first past the post voting system can mean that candidates with minority support can be elected
2. Note variation of PR is used for City of Melbourne

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