

About Parliament 32

Preferential Voting System in the Legislative Assembly

Preferential voting, sometimes known as the 'alternative vote', is the system of voting used for the election of members to the Legislative Assembly. This system of voting differs to the Proportional Representation system that is used to elect the Legislative Council.

Historical Background

When Western Australia conducted its first elections for the Legislative Assembly under responsible government in 1890 the voting system for the 30 seat chamber was known as 'plurality', sometimes called 'first past the post'.

Under this method of voting the candidate who receives more primary votes than any other candidate for a district is elected.

The ballot paper instructions usually required voters to mark the candidate of their choice with an X. The candidate with the highest number of X's was declared the winner.

The plurality method, mostly in single member districts, had been inherited as the system to elect members to the British House of Commons.

It was also used in the period of representative government for the Legislative Council from 1870, in other Australian colonies, and other Commonwealth countries such as Canada and New Zealand as well as the United States of America.

About the time of the granting of responsible government and the establishment of the Australian federation in 1901 there were many public and parliamentary debates about the most appropriate voting systems to be used to elect members of Parliament.

Although single member plurality ('first past the post') was simple to understand and administer it was widely contended that voting reforms could improve the representative nature of parliaments which had begun to be elected by universal franchise with the emergence of political parties.

One of the voting reforms most widely canvassed was preference voting (the alternative vote). Under this system a candidate could not be elected with a minority vote as the successful candidate had to obtain an absolute majority, which required 50 per cent of the valid vote, plus one.

When the new Commonwealth Parliament debated its electoral laws in 1902 the Prime Minister, Edmund Barton, sought to have the House of Representatives elected by the preference vote.

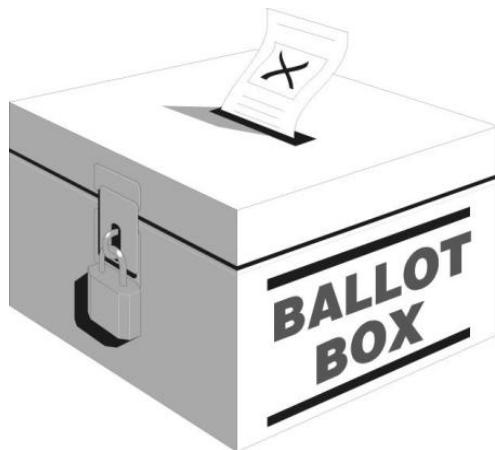
Barton thought the system had the democratic appeal of ensuring that the eventual winner gained an absolute majority with 'minority' candidates usually being able to influence the result. Eventually, though, the common plurality system was adopted.

In 1907 Western Australia was first State in Australia to introduce preference voting. This took place after a Select Committee review of the State's voting systems. However, the 1907 legislation was characterized by providing electors with the option of giving preferences to candidates beyond their primary or first preference vote.

At the 1908 Legislative Assembly election two-thirds of voters just 'plumped' for one candidate.

Only one-third of voters listed further preferences when casting a vote. In only eight of the 50 electorates was it necessary to count preferences and no results were changed as a consequence of the additional counts.

In 1911 a clause was adopted which made it compulsory for electors to indicate a full distribution of candidate preferences as the requirement of a valid vote. This provision has been retained for nearly a century.



The simple example below shows how the outcome for an election can be different under plurality as compared with the preference vote formula.

Candidate	Party	Votes
Geoffrey Andrews	A Party	1,000
Andrea Smith	B Party	800
Ross Williams	C Party	500
Total		2,300

Under plurality Andrews would be elected. However, as Andrews did not receive an absolute majority (2,300 divided by 2 plus 1 = 1,151) he would not be elected under the preference voting formula.

As Ross Williams would be eliminated, his second preference votes would be distributed to the remaining candidates.

If according to his second preferences 100 were directed to Geoffrey Andrews and 400 to Andrea Smith the final totals would read as:

Candidate	Votes	Votes after Distribution
Geoffrey Andrews	1,000 + 100	1,100
Andrea Smith	800 + 400	1,200
Total		2,300

As Andrea Smith (B Party) has more votes than an absolute majority she would be declared elected.

In the 1980 Legislative Assembly election, no candidate was defeated after leading on the primary vote.

However, in the last twenty-five years there have been a handful of candidates who have been defeated for a seat after having gained the most votes on the first count.

For the 57 Legislative Assembly seats in this period (and 59 in 2008) the number of candidates who have obtained a plurality (winning according to first past the post) but defeated in the quest for an absolute majority have been:

- 1983 - 4 candidates;
- 1986 - 3 candidates;
- 1989 - 4 candidates;
- 1993 - 3 candidates;
- 1996 - 2 candidates;
- 2001 - 6 candidates;
- 2005 - 4 candidates; and
- 2008 - 4 candidates.

The preference voting system, whilst often debated, has remained the law for Legislative Assembly elections.

Despite its very rare use in other countries, preferential voting systems have remained the norm for all mainland state lower houses, as well as the House of Representatives.

It should be noted, however, that in both New South Wales and Queensland electors have the option of distributing preferences. This was only permitted for the first use of the preference vote for the 1908 Western Australian election.