Elections for organisations

Voting systems

There are many different types of voting systems in use around the world. This document gives a brief description and comparison between the main ones in use in Australia.

A good voting system:

- provides for frequent elections;

- is based on procedures that are user-friendly;

- allows for all adults to vote, without prejudice against individuals or groups;

- has clear and accepted laws about voting;

- is based upon a secret ballot;

- has a clear and accepted process for counting votes and deciding on a winning candidate;

- incorporates 'one vote, one value';

- has results based on majority rule;

- provides freedom from false, misleading or unfair influence on voters; and

- ensures elections are administered in an impartial way.

More information on different voting systems can be found on the following Internet sites:

- Australian Electoral Commission: www.aec.gov.au

- Electoral Council of Australia: www.eca.gov.au

- International Foundation for Election Systems: www.ifes.org

- The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA): www.idea.int

Voting systems – to elect one person

Voting system	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Counting the system
First past the post	The elector votes for one person on the ballot paper by placing a tick or a cross in one square beside one name.	First past the post is the simplest method of voting. It is easy to understand and to follow and the result of the election may be quickly determined.	The first past the post system can elect a candidate who may not be preferred by the majority of electors, that is, a candidate may be elected with less than 50% of the formal vote.	The returning officer counts the votes of each candidate. The candidate receiving the greatest number of votes is elected. In the event of equal votes the returning officer determines the issue by lot.

Voting system	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Counting the system
Optional preferential voting to elect one person	The elector writes the number 1 in the box of the candidate he/she most prefers and may then number the remaining boxes consecutively.	Preferential voting is a fair system because the person elected is the most preferred by electors. The elected person must receive 50% + 1 of votes showing preferences for the two most popular candidates. An elector need not cast a preference for those candidates he/she does not like.	Preferential voting is more complex for voters and takes more time to count than the first past the post system. A candidate with fewer first preference votes than another candidate can be elected. With optional preferential voting, as ballot papers can be exhausted, a candidate can be elected with less than 50% of total formal votes.	To elect one person the returning officer counts the first preferences of each candidate. The candidate who has received the largest number of first preferences votes, if that number constitutes an absolute majority (50% + 1) of votes, is elected. If no candidate has received an absolute majority of first preference votes, the candidate who has received the fewest first preference votes is excluded, and each of his/her ballot papers is counted to the candidate next in order of the voter's preference. (In an optional preferential election, if no further preference is expressed on a ballot paper then that ballot paper is set aside as finally dealt with [exhausted]). The process of excluding candidates continues until one candidate has received an absolute majority of votes. If at any stage of the count two or more candidates have an equal number of votes, the returning officer shall go back to the last count where the two candidates were not equal, or if there is no count where the candidates were not equal, determine by lot who shall be excluded.
Full preferential voting to elect one person	An elector must mark the ballot paper by placing the number 1 in the square opposite the name of the most preferred candidate and then the numbers 2, 3, 4 and so on in the squares opposite the names of remaining candidates so as to indicate a preference for all of them. The last box may be left blank.	Preferential voting is a fair system because the person elected is preferred by more than half the electors. The elected person must receive 50% + 1 of formal votes. All formal ballot papers remain in the count until the end (that is, no ballot papers are exhausted). Most familiar system to Australian voters.	Full preferential voting is more complex for voters. The system can result in more informal votes because any ballot paper that does not have a number in every square but one is not counted. With full preferential voting a preference must be given to all candidates – even those the elector does not like.	

Voting systems – to elect more than one person

Voting system	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Counting the system
First past the post to elect more than one candidate	A single tick or a cross is placed in the box alongside one candidate. The ballot papers are counted to each candidate and if, for example, three candidates are to be elected then the three candidates receiving the most ballot papers are elected.	First past the post is the simplest method of voting. It is easy to understand and to follow and the result of the election may be quickly determined.	The first past the post system can elect a candidate who may not be preferred by the majority of electors, that is, a candidate may be elected with a small proportion of the votes.	The returning officer counts the votes of each candidate. The candidates receiving the greatest number of votes are elected according to the number to be elected. In the event of equal votes the returning officer determines the issue by lot.
Modified first past the post to elect more than one candidate	Ticks or crosses are placed in the boxes alongside the number of candidates equal to or less than the number of vacancies. A scoresheet is needed to record how many votes each marked candidate received. If for example four are to be elected then the four candidates with the highest number of votes are elected.		This system typically does not lead to proportional results. For example, in an election where two or more factions contest the election, it is possible using this variant of first past the post that one faction will fill all the vacancies.	

Proportional Representation

When electing a group of representatives from one ballot paper the full preferential or optional preferential system (described above) can be used. If a quota or set proportion of the votes must be obtained for a candidate to be elected, the systems are called proportional representation electoral systems. The object of a proportional representation system is to ensure that the distribution of opinion in an elected body is representative of the distribution of opinion amongst the persons who elected it. The ballot paper can be a simple list of names or it can be divided into columns with headings to indicate those candidates with common opinions. An elector then has an opportunity to choose candidates with identifiable opinions.

Voting system	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages	Counting the system
Proportional representation in a preferential system for the election of more than one candidate	An elector must mark the ballot paper by placing the number 1 in the square opposite the name of the most preferred candidate and then write the numbers 2, 3, 4 and so on in the squares opposite the names of remaining candidates so as to indicate a preference for some or all of them.	A group of people can be elected from the same ballot paper. Proportional representation is a fair method of election because each person is elected with the same proportion of votes (or quota).	The counting of this type of election is more complicated and may take some time. If not enough candidates are given a preference (optional preferential) some may be elected without gaining a quota.	Ballot papers with ticks, crosses, more than one number 1 or no number 1 are informal and not counted. In order to be elected a candidate must obtain a quota or percentage of the vote after the initial count of first preference votes. The quota is calculated using the formula: $$\frac{\text{Number of formal votes}}{\text{Number of vacancies} + 1} + 1$$ When a candidate reaches a quota he/she is elected. If a candidate has more first preference votes than the quota, the value of the surplus votes gained by this candidate is passed on to other candidates according to the preferences indicated on the ballot papers by the voters. Ballot papers received by an elected candidate who gains a surplus are distributed at a reduced value called a "fractional transfer value". The transfer value of surplus votes is calculated by dividing the number of surplus votes by the total number of ballot papers with further preferences shown. After all surplus votes from each elected candidate have been distributed, the total number of votes which each candidate has now received is calculated. This is done in order to see if any further candidates now have votes equal to or greater than the quota. If so, surplus votes of any newly elected candidates are now distributed. If, however, no candidate receives a quota, or after the transfer of an elected member's surplus votes, no other candidate has achieved a quota, the candidate with the fewest votes is excluded from the count and his/her ballot papers are transferred to the next preferred remaining candidate according to the voters preferences at the same vote value as they were received. The process of distributing surplus votes and excluding the candidate with the fewest votes continues until all vacancies have been filled.