

# AUSTRALIA'S ALTERNATIVE VOTE SYSTEM

The following excerpt from a research paper published by the Australian Electoral Commission compares the advantages and disadvantages of the "first past the post" voting system now under criticism in Canada with Australia's "Alternative Vote" system.

The Alternative Vote system operates by asking voters to number the candidates in order of their choice. If no candidate receives a majority, more than 50% of first preference votes, then the candidate with the lowest first preference vote is eliminated and his votes are redistributed to the remaining candidates on the basis of the second choices. Further candidates are eliminated until one candidate reaches a majority.

The entire paper can be downloaded at:

[http://www.aec.gov.au/pubs/electoral\\_systems.htm](http://www.aec.gov.au/pubs/electoral_systems.htm)

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## Plurality Systems

Plurality systems are the simplest of all electoral systems. The plurality system awards the seat to the candidate who receives the most votes regardless of whether the candidate receives a majority of votes. The plurality system is almost always used in conjunction with single member constituencies, but can be adapted for multi-member constituencies.

The plurality system or **First-Past-The-Post** system awards the seat to the candidate with the most votes. In the following illustration candidate B wins the seat although not obtaining a majority.

Candidate	Votes	%
A	5 000	31.2
B	7 500	46.9
C	3 500	21.9
Total	16 000	100

Plurality systems are widely used but are largely restricted to the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America. Plurality systems are commonly used for the election of Heads of State where only one candidate is to be elected.

The variation of the first-past-the-post system used in Japan is referred to as the **Single Non-Transferable Vote**. This system is used to elect constituency members to both the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors. In both chambers members are elected from multi-member constituencies. Electors have one vote and candidates with the highest number of votes are elected. In the following example three members are to be elected. Candidates B, C and E are elected.

Candidate	Votes	%
A	500	2.4
B	6 000	28.6
C	5 500	26.2
D	1 000	4.8
E	4 000	19.0
F	2 500	11.9
G	1 500	7.1
Total	21 000	100.00

Other variations of the first-past-the-post system involving multi-member constituencies are the Block Vote and the Limited Vote systems. In the **Block Vote** system the elector has as many votes as there are candidates to be elected. Once again the candidates with the highest votes are elected regardless of whether they receive a majority of votes. The block vote system is mainly used in some local authority elections in Britain. The block vote system works best when the candidates are independents. When the candidates are members of parties, and party voting is strong, the block vote system tends to exaggerate the characteristics of plurality systems for giving a bonus to the largest party. If three candidates are to be elected it is possible for all three candidates from the same party to be elected with only a small plurality. In the **Limited Vote** system the elector has fewer votes than there are candidates to be elected. The intention of this is to limit the number of seats that can be won by one party. However, the system does not overcome the problems of the block vote and can be manipulated by parties estimating the number of votes their candidates expect to gain and by nominating an optional number of candidates.

An American initiative designed to overcome some of the problems of plurality systems for single member constituencies is **Approval Voting**. As the name suggests this system allows voters to vote for as many candidates as they approve of. Thus if five candidates are standing and a voter approves of three but not the other two candidates then he can vote for the three candidates he approves of. Only one vote can be cast for each approved candidate. The candidate approved by the most voters, ie with the most votes, wins. A majority of votes is not required for election. The perceived advantages of approval voting over other plurality systems are: increased flexibility given to voters as voters can vote for all candidates they find acceptable, not just one candidate; increased voter turnout as voters are better able to exercise a choice; would help elect the candidate with the greatest overall support not just the candidate with the largest number of votes; would give greater due to minority candidates as voters would be more likely to vote for minor party candidates knowing that their vote would no longer be wasted; not affected by the number of candidates standing.<sup>1</sup>

The first-past-the-post system is widely seen to be unfair and many attempts have been made to improve or replace it in countries where it is in use. However, the system does have a number of advantages. First, when operated with single member constituencies it provides for a direct relationship between the member of the legislature and the local constituency. Second, because elections are contested at the constituency level there can be a degree of local control over the party's choice of candidate and parties must take some account of the constituency's wishes when selecting a candidate. Third, the system elects the candidate who receives the largest number of votes. Candidates cannot be elected as a result of the transfer of a third or fourth preference, thus defeating the candidate with the largest number of first preference votes. Fourth, the system is straightforward and easy to understand. Electors are not required to choose from vast lists of candidates or to exercise preferences they may not have. The system is uncomplicated and produces a speedy outcome. Fifth, the system allows electors to directly choose the government and not be subject to backroom wheeling and dealing that can occur when a large number of parties are elected to the legislature. Sixth, there is less opportunity for minority parties to be given power disproportionate to their electoral support. Seventh, there is less likelihood of a proliferation of minor parties which may make the formation of stable governments difficult. Finally, because elections are contested at the constituency level there is a greater possibility of outstanding candidates being elected regardless of party support.<sup>2</sup>

The main criticisms of the first-past-the-post systems are that it cannot be relied upon to provide a legislature reflecting the various shades of opinion expressed at the election and it does not necessarily place in power a government supported by the majority of the electorate.

The first-past-the-post system is a winner take all system that can deny representation in the legislature to quite substantial levels of minority opinion and can provide large differences in the number of representatives elected with only a small difference in the number of votes obtained through the operation of the winning bonus. The Liberal Party in the United Kingdom has fought a singularly unsuccessful campaign against the first-past-the-post system in that country. The reason for the campaign is easily understood when the following results are possible. In the 1987 general election the Liberal Social Democratic Alliance polled 22.6% of the vote but received only 3.4% of the seats in the House of Commons. The 1987 general election results demonstrated both the under representation of minority parties and the effect of the winning bonus.

### UK House of Commons Election 1987

Party	Votes	Seats	Seats
	%	No	%
Conservatives	42.2	375	57.7
Labour	30.8	229	35.2
Liberal Social Democratic Alliance	22.6	22	3.4
Others	4.4	24	3.7
Total	100.0	650	100.0

Source: *The Times Guide to the House of Commons*, June 1987, Times Books Ltd, London 1987.

In 1987 the Conservative Party was the recipient of the winning bonus characteristic of the first-past-the-post system and the Liberal Social Democratic Alliance was the victim of the under-representation of minor parties. The other parties shown in the above table are primarily located in Northern Ireland. This result demonstrates a quirk of the first-past-the-post system that allows minor parties to gain representation commensurate with their level of support if that support is concentrated in a specific area rather than spread over the whole country.

The first-past-the-post system can also result in the election of a government that does not receive support from a majority of the electorate, or even by the largest number of votes. In countries with a strictly two party system there is a reasonable chance that the first-past-the-post system will result in the party receiving the majority of votes being elected to government. However, where significant third parties are present this possibility becomes remote. The situation can also occur where the party receiving the largest number of votes does not win sufficient seats to form a government. In New Zealand the Labour Party has been the victim on at least two recent occasions, 1978 and 1981.

### NZ House of Representatives Elections, 1978 and 1981

Party	1978		1981	
	% Votes	% Seats	% Votes	% Seats
Labour Party	40.4	43.5	39.0	46.7
National Party	39.8	55.4	38.8	51.1
Others	19.8	1.1	22.3	2.2

Source: T. Mackie and R. Rose, *The International Almanac of Electoral History*, 2nd ed, Facts on File Inc. New York 1982.

A further consequence of the first-past-the-post system is the tendency of the system to limit the range of candidates available through fear of splitting the vote. Thus two separate political parties with similar, but

not the same policies, might decide to divide the constituencies between them rather than contesting all constituencies and splitting the vote. This tendency can provide a limitation to the choices facing an electorate.

## Majoritarian Systems

Majoritarian systems as the name suggests require the winning candidate to receive a majority (more than half) of the vote to ensure election. This can be achieved either through a second ballot or by means of preference voting (Alternative Vote). The second ballot systems are restricted to electing members from single member constituencies while the alternative vote system can be used for both single and multi-member electorates.

In the **Second Ballot** system a second election is held a short time after the first election if no candidate gains more than 50% of the votes in the first election. Where second ballot systems are used the number of candidates eligible to enter the second election is restricted either by number - the two candidates who receive the highest vote - or by some threshold - only candidates receiving over a set percentage of the vote. Second ballot systems are more likely to be used in presidential elections rather than for legislative elections. Of the six Western European countries with a directly elected Head of State, three, including Austria, France and Portugal, use the second ballot system.

The second ballot system prevents the election of any candidate without a majority of the vote, thus overcoming one of the main criticisms of plurality systems. However, the second ballot system introduces a complication into the voting system. The requirement for a second ballot results in greater expense for the candidates and parties involved, greater inconvenience to the electors and delays the result of the election causing uncertainty. The requirement for a second ballot may also influence the final result as electors may use the first ballot as a form of protest vote.

The **Alternative Vote** system is familiar to all Australians as it is the system used to elect members to the House of Representatives and the lower houses of all State Parliaments except Tasmania. The alternative vote system removes the cumbersomeness of the second ballot system by asking the voter to indicate how he would vote if his first choice candidate were defeated and he had to choose again from the remaining candidates.

The system operates by asking voters to number the candidates in order of their choice. If no candidate receives a majority, more than 50% of first preference votes, then the candidate with the lowest first preference vote is eliminated and his votes are redistributed to the remaining candidates on the basis of the second choices. Further candidates are eliminated until one candidate reaches a majority.

In the following example no candidate receives a majority of first preference votes. Candidate B received the lowest number of first preference votes and is eliminated first and his preferences are distributed to the two remaining candidates. Candidate C is elected as he receives a majority of votes, after the distribution of Candidate B's preferences, even though he did not receive the highest number of first preference votes.

Alternative Vote System			
	First Preference Votes	Distribution of Candidate B	Total
Candidate A	10 000	500	10 500
Candidate B	4 000	..	..
Candidate C	8 000	3 500	11 500
Total	22 000	4 000	22 000

In Australia the Alternative Vote system is not only used in single member constituencies. The system was used for multi-member constituencies to elect members of the Senate prior to 1949. The Alternative Vote system does not work well when applied to multi-member constituencies because of the propensity of the system to return members of the same party to all positions. In multi-member electorates the Alternative Vote system requires electors to indicate an order of preference for all candidates. If a candidate receives a majority of first preference votes he is elected. If no candidate receives a majority then the candidate with the lowest vote is eliminated and his votes are distributed. Candidates are eliminated until one candidate receives a majority.

The votes of the first elected candidate are then distributed (all votes being used again) and if no candidate receives a majority then the process of elimination starts over again. The process continues until all vacancies are filled. The system can result in the election of members of the one party to all positions as the votes used to elect the first member are used again to elect the second and subsequent members.

In the following example, simplified by assuming that one candidate receives a majority of first preference votes, all three vacancies are filled by members of the same party.

<b>Alternative Vote - Multi-Member Constituency</b>					
	First Vacancy	Second Vacancy		Third Vacancy	
		Distributed from Candidate A1	Total	Distributed from Candidate A2	Total
<b>Party A</b>					
Candidate A1	200 000	..	..		
Candidate A2	5 000	195 000	200 000	..	
Candidate A3	2 000	1 000	3 000	194 000	197 000
<b>Party B</b>					
Candidate B1	180 000	3 000	183 000	4 000	187 000
Candidate B2	4 000	500	4 500	1 000	5 500
Candidate B3	1 000	500	1 500	1 000	2 500
<b>Total</b>	<b>392 000</b>	<b>200 000</b>	<b>392 000</b>	<b>200 000</b>	<b>392 000</b>

Under the Alternative Vote system representation in the Senate was grossly unequal. On three occasions 1925, 1934, and 1943 all Senators elected were from the same party or coalition of parties. In every other election there were large discrepancies between support for individual parties and the number of Senators elected from each party. The system was changed in 1949 to the current Single Transferable Vote form of proportional representation.

The main advantage of the alternative vote system (for single member constituencies) over plurality systems is that it requires the winning candidate to secure a majority of the vote. It thus avoids the

situation where a candidate can be elected on a little over one third of the vote, where there are three relatively evenly supported candidates. The system also overcomes the problem of vote splitting.

With the alternative vote system voters can exercise a choice between two similar candidates without the fear that a third, unacceptable, candidate may be elected. Thirdly the alternative vote system provides some dampener on the plurality system's characteristics of concentrating party representation on a geographical basis and of providing exaggerated majorities. Although party representation under the alternative vote system is more clearly aligned to voter support than under plurality systems the alternative vote system still produces working majorities and thus provides for stable government. The alternative vote system is relatively easy to understand and can produce relatively speedy results.

The principle disadvantage of the alternative vote system, and of plurality systems, is that the system does not necessarily reflect the wishes of the electorate. The degree of proportionality (i.e. members elected in proportion to voter support) is greater under alternative vote than under plurality but does not achieve the degree of proportionality of proportional representation systems. The system is still subject to the winning bonus phenomenon and can also result in the party winning the highest number of votes not receiving the largest number of seats. Although this factor is largely dependent upon the geographic spread of party support and on the mix of parties contesting the election.

The alternative vote system can often be capricious in its practical application and can result in the election of the least unfavoured rather than the most popular candidate. In a political situation consisting of a left, right and centre party, the centre party could receive preferences of both the left and right parties on the basis of being the least unfavourable option available.

The capriciousness of the alternative vote system can often be witnessed in Australia in what are termed three cornered contests. Here the winning party is often more dependent upon which party polls the least first preference votes rather than which party polls the most.

In the following example Lusher, National Party, was eliminated first and his preferences elected Fife, Liberal Party. However, if approximately 550 voters had changed their first preference vote from Fife to Lusher, then Lusher would have been elected. Thus, in this example the main contest was between which party would be placed second and which third.

<b>House of Representatives Election 1984, Hume Electoral Division</b>					
		First Preference Votes		After Distribution of Lusher's Preferences	
		No	%	No	%
Milliken	ALP	24 342	39.3	26 221	42.3
Lusher	NP	18 245	29.5	..	..
Fife	LIB	19 331	31.2	35 695	57.7

Source: Australian Electoral Commission, *Election Statistics 1984: House of Representatives: Full Distribution of Preferences*, AGPS Canberra 1985.

The Alternative Vote system has also been criticised because it requires voters to express a preference for candidates where the voter may not wish to do so. This situation can be overcome by allowing voters the option of not expressing preferences if they so desire. The optional preferential system has been used for New South Wales Legislative Assembly elections since 1981.