

What is a vote, and how does this system work?

Australia has compulsory voting but for many first time voters our voting system can be confusing.

That confusion is likely to be worse with the new voting system for the senate.

Discussion about the reform has been widespread across social media though, sadly, much of that discussion has been around the old system. So let's start with the basics.

What is a vote?

To put it simply a vote is a way for each of us, as citizens, to have a say in how, and by whom, the nation is governed.

In the federal election we must cast two votes: one for The House of Representatives, the Lower House, and one for The Senate, or the Upper House. In by-elections (which are held when one parliamentarian needs to be replaced), such as 2015 Canning by-election, only one ballot was required because only one person is being elected.

Whichever party, or coalition of parties and independents, wins a majority in the Lower House gets to form government. They choose one of their elected members to serve as Prime Minister. We, the citizens, don't get to choose our PM.

House of Representatives

Voting in the Lower House has not changed and is a simple process. To win a seat in the Lower House candidates must win a majority – half + 1 vote – of the total valid votes cast in an electorate. Because winning an outright majority can be difficult Australia uses preferential voting.

This means that on your Lower House ballot, the smaller, green piece of paper, you will see a number of candidates from various parties and with no political affiliation, called independents. The order in which the candidates are listed is chosen at random for each electorate to avoid bias.

To cast your vote, you must number all the boxes. Your number 1 being your first choice and so on until all the boxes have been numbered. Simple right?

The complexity, and I will say beauty, of the vote comes as it's being counted. Each ballot is sorted according to where the voter placed their number 1 preference. If any one of those sorted piles reaches a majority a winner is declared.

If a majority has not been achieved, then the smallest pile of ballots is redistributed to their number 2 preference. This process is repeated until a majority has been achieved and a winner for the seat declared.

The counting continues once a winner is declared purely to work out the two-party-preferred result for each electorate. To help voters decide where to allocate their preferences, the candidates, especially from the bigger parties, have people at polling stations handing out how-to-vote cards. You do not need to follow these if you don't want nor do you have to take one. Remember to be nice to the people though, they are giving their time to help everyone.

The Senate

Things get more complex on the bigger, white Senate ballot. Candidates standing for the Senate are voted for by the whole state or territory they aim to represent. At a normal election each State elects six Senators, at a double dissolution they elect 12. The Territories elect two at both normal and double dissolution elections. The most complex point is how a Senate seat is won.

To win a Senate seat a candidate must achieve a quota.

A quota is determined using the following formula: [$\text{Number of formal votes cast} / (\text{number of senators to be elected} + 1) + 1$]. You have two different ways to vote in the Senate but you only need to choose one. Above the line voting is the quick way to cast your vote. In the new system, you vote by numbering your preferred parties 1 to 6 and you're done. You can number beyond six if you want to. Below the line voting has gotten easier too.

You now can number as few as 12 boxes below the line rather than all 100+ that were on some state's ballots last election. Again, you may choose to number as many more

than 12 as you wish. When you vote below the line you are choosing individual candidates so if you don't like your preferred party's first candidate vote below the line and put the person you think is best at number 1.

If you voted above the line it is counted as though you numbered your chosen candidates from the top of the below the line column downwards for the parties you numbered. Then each vote is sorted by their number 1 preference. Candidates from bigger parties may achieve a quota at this point and be elected.

Once a quota has been achieved by a candidate all their votes are sent to their number two preference with a reduced weighting. The weighting is worked out using the formula: number of votes above quota/total number of votes for the candidate = weighting.

The number of votes directed to the number two preference is multiplied by the weighting to determine the amount of votes to be counted. This process continues until either all vacant seats are filled or no new quotas are achieved.

If all vacant seats are filled the winners are declared. If seats are still vacant the candidate with the lowest number of votes remaining is excluded and their vote is redistributed to the number two preferences at full weighting. When a candidate achieves a quota in this way they are elected and their votes are weighted and transferred as per method 1. This process continues until all vacant seats are filled or no quotas are achieved.

This happens if they are one of the last two remaining candidates and their vote is the highest or the number of candidates remaining in the count equals the number of remaining vacant seats and all candidates are elected.

What is the difference between a formal/valid and informal/invalid vote?

A formal vote is a vote that is accurately filled out and is thus able to be counted. An informal or invalid vote is one that, for a number of reasons, cannot be counted. A vote is informal if:

The ballot paper is incorrectly filled out (i.e. the required number of boxes is not filled out). Senate ballots WILL be considered invalid if less than six boxes are marked above the line.

The ballot has not been marked at all (i.e. it was put in to the box blank).

The ballot paper has writing which can be used to identify the voter (e.g. you wrote your name).

If using a postal vote, the ballot is not contained within a declaration envelope (this is to ensure your ballot is not altered from your preferences).

If the ballot paper does not have the official mark and has not been initialled by the polling official, and the ballot paper is not authentic in the opinion of the Divisional Returning Officer (this helps to prevent fraudulent votes being cast).

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What do all these words mean?

Ballot: The piece of paper used by a citizen to cast their vote.

By-election: An election to fill a specific seat e.g. an MP retires, passes away or is otherwise unable to continue in Parliament or to resolve an electoral dispute as happened in the 2014 WA senate by-election. Only the seat or seats involved are up for re-election.

Excluded: A candidate is excluded if their votes are reallocated because they have the fewest.

Normal election: When the House of Representatives and half the Senate are dissolved and the seats put up for an election.

Quota: The term describes the number of votes a Senate candidate must win to be elected.

Redistribution: The process of allocating the votes of excluded candidates.

Two-party-preferred: A data gathering mechanism. It looks at the two last candidates in an election (the winner and the second biggest vote winner) to establish voter trends.

Vote exhaustion: Senate voting reform allows people to stop their where they want to a point may come where a vote can no longer be redistributed. At this time the ballot is put aside and the vote considered exhausted.