

Australian electoral system design

In the pantheon of representative democracy, Australia has its name stamped on many of the major advances in electoral system design as well as on the steps towards democratising electoral laws. Many of its contributions are well known and have already been closely documented (most recently, see Sawyer 2001). It was a trailblazer in terms of the opening up of the electoral process; half a century ago Louise Overacker (1952: 15) commented that ‘no modern democracy has shown greater readiness to experiment with various electoral methods than Australia’. As early as 1859 the bulk of the Australian colonies had established systems of parliamentary government with adult male suffrage. In 1894, South Australia was second only to New Zealand in extending voting rights to women for its lower house elections. The secret ballot (known to this day as the ‘Australian ballot’) was also an Australian invention, first used in South Australia and Victoria in the mid-1850s. By the criterion of adult suffrage, Australia was the first truly democratic state, achieving that status in 1903, with most of the other contemporary liberal democracies following suit in the years after World War I (Aitkin and Castles 1989: 208).

Australia is also the home of a particular set of electoral systems that are generally known by the generic title of ‘preferential’ systems. The characteristic feature of these systems is that they permit a greater degree of flexibility in the voting act. Instead of voters expressing a categorical vote for one candidate or party list, under preferential systems, voters are to varying degrees able to vote ordinally, by rank-ordering candidates on the ballot paper, and

can therefore express their vote across several or more candidates. Above all else, ballot structure – the rules regarding how a voter votes – is what distinguishes these systems from other electoral systems.

Preferential systems occur in various forms, of which the most prominent include cumulative vote, limited vote, alternative vote (AV)¹, open list, panachage, and single transferable vote (STV)² (Bowler et al. 2003; Bowler and Grofman 2000; Grofman et al. 1999). These systems share a ballot structure in which voters are able to express more than a simple, categorical choice between the competing candidates or parties. The voters are given much greater freedom in completing the ballot paper, either in terms of making multiple marks on the ballot paper against several candidates, or in some cases being able to rank order the candidates. AV and STV, the two systems dealt with in this book, share the latter feature, and are used for electing respectively Australia's lower and upper houses. It is this emphasis on 'voter choice', specifically with regard to how voters may rank order candidates on the ballot paper, that sets these systems apart from other electoral systems.

Given Australia's prominent role in influencing the development of electoral institutions, it is ironic how few countries actually followed her lead in the adoption of these two preferential electoral systems. At present, only Ireland and Malta use STV, and the use of AV is even rarer, raising only sporadic interest in the Asia-Pacific region (for which Australia can claim some credit: see Reilly 1997a, 2001) and having limited use in certain other countries (such as for electing the Irish president or the London mayor). Despite the apparent lack of interest in preferential systems on the part of practicing politicians and electoral engineers, these electoral systems still excite much interest and debate among theorists, political scientists and electoral reformers (a point made, among others, by Bowler and Grofman 2000; Lijphart and Grofman 1984). But even given this scholarly interest in preferential systems, we still need some explanation as to why Australia has ended up as one of very few countries actually using them. This is one of the goals of this book.

Quite apart from its Australian focus, this book also has an international goal: we wish to locate preferential voting in the comparative study of electoral systems. This book therefore addresses two main audiences: those interested in the comparative study of electoral systems and those interested in the Australian political system. In the latter case, we show what the study of electoral systems can contribute to our understanding of the evolution and operation of a single political system; in the former case, we show what the

particularities of electoral system development in one polity can contribute to the comparative study of electoral systems.

In setting the scene for the book, this chapter is arranged in four sections. We start by establishing two key questions of Australian electoral system design that this study will be addressing – those relating to the origins and variation of these systems. The next section reviews a third set of questions underlying this study, relating to the operation of Australia’s electoral systems. This does not only cover narrow electoral outcomes; we argue that it can also be broadened to include such issues as the logical properties of these systems and the fate of individual candidates, the candidate-centred nature of party politics and representation, and the theme of voter empowerment and/or confusion. The third section provides a brief review of the wider institutional context in which these electoral systems operate in Australia. It reveals in-built tensions in the design of the country’s electoral institutions; these tensions exist between (on the one hand) electoral systems that emphasise such features as ‘voter choice’ and a candidate emphasis in electoral politics and (on the other) electoral institutions that introduce elements of compulsion in the voting act and privilege parties over candidates. The last section gives an outline of the structure of the book.

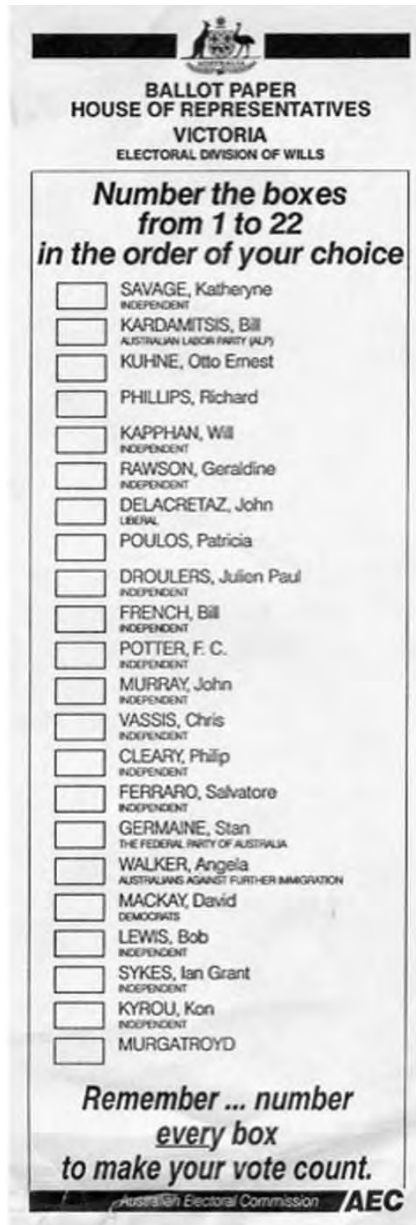
Australian electoral systems: origins and variation

The essentials of both AV and STV are very similar, although they are distinct in terms of certain key electoral outcomes (for general summaries, see Farrell 2001). AV and STV ballot papers are shown respectively in Figures 1.1 and 1.2. The idea underlying them is that voters are able to rank-order the candidates on the ballot paper, thereby potentially having a say in the election of all successful candidates. So, for instance, if a voter’s preferred candidate does not attract sufficient votes to be elected, the voter may still have an opportunity to determine the fate of the other candidates in the race. AV is a majoritarian electoral system operating with single-seat constituencies (or ‘electorates’) in which, to be elected, a candidate requires at least 50 percent of the vote. If, on the basis of counting the first preferences on the ballot papers, no candidate achieves an overall majority, the candidate with the least votes is excluded and those ballot papers are distributed among the remaining candidates based on the next preferences indicated on the ballot papers.

The process continues until one candidate emerges with an overall majority.

The process is similar for STV, but with one major difference: as a 'proportional' electoral system – which means that there is a much closer corre-

FIGURE 1.1 AN ALTERNATIVE VOTE (AV) BALLOT PAPER



spondence between the proportion of votes a party receives and the number of seats it ends up with in parliament – STV operates in multi-seat constituencies. A quota is established, based on the numbers of votes and seats, and equivalent to the majoritarian formula applied in AV. This quota determines how many votes each candidate must attract in order to be elected, and this produces a proportional election result. In addition, it adds a further layer of complication to the count process because now account must also be taken of those candidates who are elected with votes surplus to the quota.

This book is about the origins, development and operation of these electoral systems in Australia. We do not pretend to be the first to cover such themes. Book length treatments have included such monographs as Jack Wright's classic *Mirror of the Nation's Mind* (1980) or, more recently, the excellent collections by Marian Sawyer (2001) and Graeme Orr and colleagues (2003). In addition, important chapter-length studies have been produced by Murray Goot (1985) and John Uhr (1999), among others. Our aim is to contribute to this corpus of knowledge in two main respects, one specific to Australian political science, and the other relating to the compara-

POSTAL BALLOT PAPER
Tasmania

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
Election of 6 Senators

You may vote in one of two ways

either or

By placing the single figure 1 in one and only one of these squares is adequate to indicate the voting intent provided to allow to your vote

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
TASMANIAN INDEPENDENT SENATORS SHAN HARRAGANE	AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY	TASMANIAN SENATE TEAM	TASMANIAN GREENS	CALL TO AUSTRALIA (FREE WELD GROUP)	NATURAL LAW PARTY	AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS	LIBERAL

or

By placing the numbers 1 to 20 in the order of your preference

Use the ballot paper, place it in an envelope addressed to the Electoral Returning Officer and seal the envelope

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	Ungrouped
TASMANIAN INDEPENDENT SENATORS SHAN HARRAGANE <input type="checkbox"/> HARRAGANE Name: _____ Address: _____ Postcode: _____	AUSTRALIAN LABOR PARTY <input type="checkbox"/> TATE Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> COSTES Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> MURPHY Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> AULICH Name: _____	TASMANIAN SENATE TEAM <input type="checkbox"/> SPROULE Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> MUSHINE Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> _____ Name: _____	TASMANIAN GREENS <input type="checkbox"/> HENDERSON Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> JONES Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> PEY Name: _____	CALL TO AUSTRALIA (FREE WELD GROUP) <input type="checkbox"/> HOPSON Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> HOPSON Name: _____	NATURAL LAW PARTY <input type="checkbox"/> BOSZCZYK Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> DAVIES Name: _____	AUSTRALIAN DEMOCRATS <input type="checkbox"/> HARRISON Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> STEPHEN Name: _____	LIBERAL <input type="checkbox"/> ARCHER Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> GIBSON Name: _____ <input type="checkbox"/> ASBETZ Name: _____	Ungrouped <input type="checkbox"/> JAMESON Name: _____

FIGURE 1.2 A SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE (STV) BALLOT PAPER

tive study of electoral politics. In the first instance, our objective is to integrate the findings of existing studies together with further scrutiny of historical documents and the analysis of aggregate and survey data so as to provide the most thorough survey of these electoral systems to date, in terms of their origins, operation, variation and consequences. Secondly, we will be conscious throughout of the need to locate the Australian case in terms of the extensive comparative and theoretical electoral systems literature. We see these aims as entirely complementary: Australian experience of electoral system design has much to inform the political science community, but equally there are issues and methodologies applied in comparative research that can provide important insights into the nature of these systems.

Three main questions are analysed in this book, two of which are reviewed in this section and the third in the following section. In the first instance, we are interested in exploring how Australia ended up with these electoral systems. We already know from existing Australian studies that a combination of factors was behind this, notably lessons learned from experiments in certain pre-federation Australian colonies (especially Queensland and Tasmania), and the role of key actors such as Catherine Helen Spence, Inglis Clark and Edward Nanson. There is also excellent coverage in existing studies (e.g. Graham 1968; Goot 1985; Uhr 1999) about the point at which these systems were introduced; these studies make it clear that selfish party interests played at least some role. But such facts, while necessary parts of the story, fall short of explaining why exactly Australia ended up as the ‘home’ of preferential electoral systems.