YWCA Australia
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters
24 February 2014

Inquiry into and report on all aspects of the conduct of the 2013 Federal Election and matters related thereto

Introduction

YWCA Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the *2013 Federal Election Inquiry.*

About us

YWCA Australia is the national association of YWCAs in Australia and is part of the World YWCA movement. We are a women-led organisation that achieves positive change by providing advocacy, programs and services for women, families and communities. YWCAs undertake advocacy and deliver services and programs that develop the leadership and collective power of women and girls, support individuals, their families and communities at critical times, and promote gender equality and community strengthening.

Background

Every Federal Election YWCA Australia runs a campaign aimed at young women to encourage enrolment, formal voting and informed voting. This work is part of our commitment to developing women's leadership and women's civic engagement.

In 2013, 409 142 voters failed to have their ballot counted with an informal rate of 2.96% in the Senate[i]. The complexity and structure of the Senate ballot paper indubitably contributes to the unintentional informal voting rate[ii].

In 2013, YWCA Australia held two election forums. We partnered with the YWCA of Canberra for a forum in Canberra, where over 60 people attended and we partnered with the YWCA of Perth for a Perth forum where over 20 people attended. The forums were designed as both candidates' forums and election workshops –where an open and informative discussion on voting and the electoral system took place.

During the voting workshops, we heard from women who voted above and below the line. Overwhelmingly, the reasons given for voting above the line were that it took too long, it was too hard and there was a concern that it could informalise their vote. These were reasons to not vote below the line rather than reasons to vote above the line. The reasons given for voting below the line were, overwhelmingly because people wanted to control the direction of their preferences.

This submission is chiefly concerned with the Senate ballot paper and seeks to make recommendations for an electoral system which reflects voter intention and is genuinely proportionally representative. In putting together this submission, we surveyed 43 people (42 women and 1 man) on the 2013 federal election. We acknowledge that this is a small group and we are not purporting that this survey is statistically reliable. The qualitative insight into every day voters is interesting and worthy of consideration in any electoral reform.

Please note that all examples taken from our surveys are in the survey participants' own words.

Issues

Senate Voting Requirements– An Obstacle to Voter Intention

Several of our survey respondents expressed the view that below the line voting requirements were an impediment to determining their own preferences:

> *"I wanted to vote below the line but the numbers of individuals was so vast I was concerned I would make a mistake and make my vote informal."*

> *"I thought I was organised and I knew what I was doing when I got there with the form I wasn't. I was also voting in an embassy outside of Australia so didn't get any how to vote cards that might of helped."*

> *"I felt compelled to vote below the line because I wanted control and ownership of my preferences but this wasn't made easy by a big, confusing ballot paper. The likelihood of making a mistake also increased!"*

> *"Decided to go above the line to avoid making a mistake."*

The national average for below the line, or non-ticket, votes at the 2013 federal election was 3.51%. Despite the low take up rate and reasons for not voting below the line, our survey showed that there is a democratic value placed on below the line voting as, as one respondent simply put it "Love voting under the line!" This enthusiasm for voting could explain why 95% of our survey respondents felt confident that they had cast a formal vote, 52% felt as though they knew what they were doing and for whom they were voting and yet only 14% of respondents agreed that the Senate ballot paper is set out in a way that makes it easy to vote for whom you want. Our survey shows that the ability to vote formally in the Senate is not necessarily matched with a recognition that is easy or ideal.

Do you think the Senate ballot paper is set out in a way that makes it easy to vote for who you want?

14%
35%
51%

■ Yes
■ No
■ Sort of
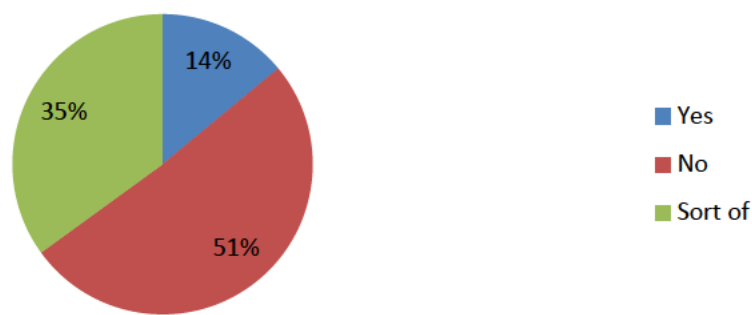
The two Senate ballot issues that came up repeatedly for respondents were:

- o the number of candidates; and
- o concern around how and where preferences flowed.

In our view, restrictions on party and candidate registration are not appropriate, and would not on their own be enough to address the complexities of the Senate ballot paper. Any electoral reform in this area must, as a priority, simplify the voting process and ensure that the will of voters is reflected in election results.

Number of candidates

Survey respondents said:

"I voted below the line and tried to inform myself about all the candidates/parties. This was easier because I postal voted and so could look them up online while I voted. But the number of candidates made this a lengthy process..."

"It's important to vote below the line, but difficult to really know who you're voting for when there is a very large number of minority parties."

"Thankful that I live in the ACT, and I only had twenty-something choices."

"There were a lot of candidates, but not enough to be overwhelmed (in Darwin)."

"I did think that there were too many choices, however, I'm not sure how to fix that problem. I don't believe that making people pay more for nominating (as they've just done in South Aust; a 400% rise) is the right way to go bcos this is discriminatory."

"The form is out of control and I think leads to unintended consequences."

"Far too many candidates. Felt like a farce."

"I went online beforehand, filled out my preferences and received a printout –took it along- easy as"

It has been shown that there is a strong correlation between number of candidates and vote informality in the House of Representatives[iii]. In 2013 NSW recorded the highest number of candidates for the Senate (110), the lowest below the line non-ticket usage[iv] and the second highest informal vote count[v].

In spite of this, only 21% of our survey respondents agreed that fewer parties and candidates was the answer to an improved Senate ballot paper. This was much lower than the support for other areas of reform in this area (see below).

Preferences deals and flow

Survey respondents expressed unease about the current preferential voting system. Respondents were chiefly concerned with the (lack of) transparency around preference deals and information, and the way in which the preference system works to distribute preferences:

"I feel like my vote isn't going to where I want it to go!"

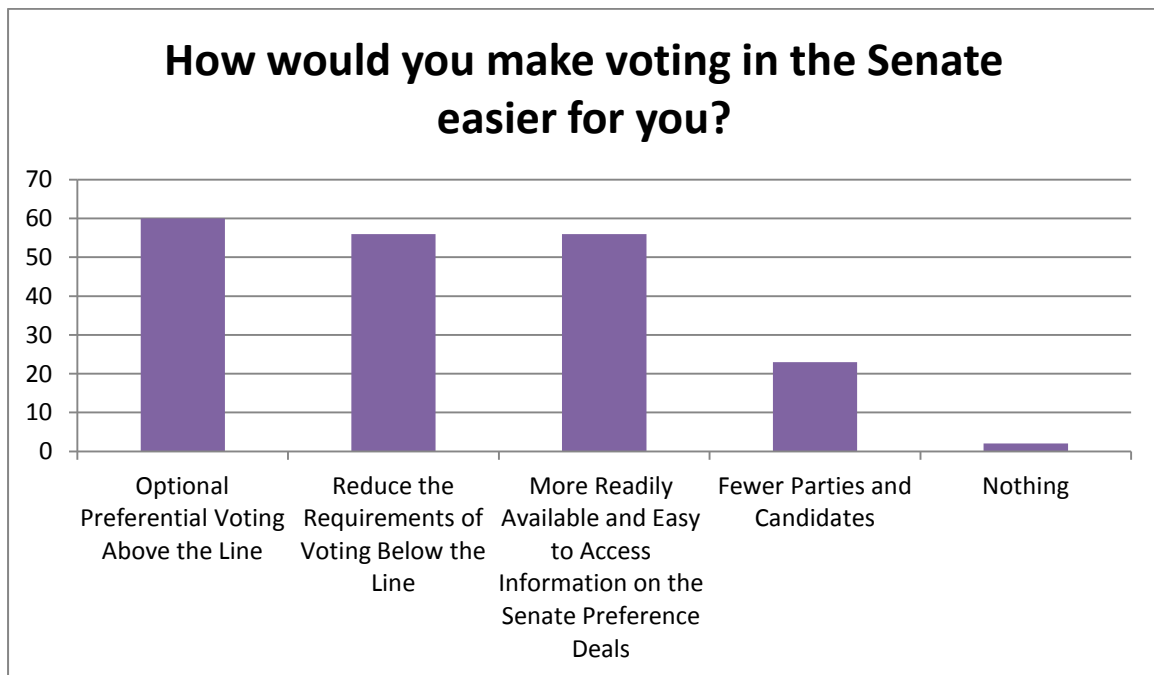*"Still a little unsure of how the seats are distributed."*

"Would have been nice to know where preferences went."

"The system could be changed and still allow us to ensure our vote would go where we wanted it (to)."

"I would have liked to know more about the preference system but otherwise I felt well-informed."

Discussion

The following options were put to respondents in the survey. We put forth this suite of options as a basis for your investigation and consideration in electoral reform.

How would you make voting in the Senate easier for you?

Option	Value
Optional Preferential Voting Above the Line	60
Reduce the Requirements of Voting Below the Line	56
More Readily Available and Easy to Access Information on the Senate Preference Deals	56
Fewer Parties and Candidates	23
Nothing	2

Optional Preferential Voting Above the Line

Optional preferential voting above the line coupled with an abolition of predetermined preference deals would shift the focus on preferences from backroom deals to the polling booth and simplify the voting process for voters. By abolishing predetermined preferences and putting the voter in control of their preferences, the incentive to register micro parties for the purposes of so-called "preference harvesting" is diminished.

60% of our survey respondents were in favour of this type of electoral reform.

There is an argument that optional preferential voting for the Senate and compulsory preferential voting in the House of Representatives could lead to confusion and a possible spike in the informal vote count[vi]. This is a good example of why any electoral reform should be accompanied by a strong public education campaign.

Reduce the Requirements of Below the Line Voting (Optional Preferential)

Survey respondents said:

"At first I knew. Yes. Yes. Them first. Then them. And them. But by the end it was really hard (to) figure out who to put next –they all held contrary views to my own."

56% of our survey respondents supported reducing the below the line voting requirements. By reducing or loosening the requirement to number every candidate (still with an allowance of three sequential errors) below the line voting would both become simpler and more attractive. We believe there is a good case to retain the current structure of the ballot paper in order to avoid confusion for the voter and retain the choice between voting for parties or candidates. This reform could go hand in hand with optional preferential voting above the line.

More Readily Available and Easy to Access Information on the Senate Preference Deals

> *"I voted above the line for the first time ever. I knew where the preferences were going (by the party I voted for) and was happy. Impossible to research every single candidate so I relied on the judgement of the party I was putting number 1 to sort out the multitude of candidate I knew nothing about. Plus I was worried about making a mistake and therefore casting an informal vote."*

> *"I went in relatively informed, but I regretted some of my preferencing later after I found out more information. It was a confusing ballot paper."*

YWCA Australia is in favour of the abolition of group voting tickets or predetermined preference deals, however, in the event that predetermined preference deals are not abolished, information about the group voting tickets needs to be more readily available and accessible. We recognise that information is currently available at the polling booth and on the AEC website; however, there is a real and enduring gap in broader public understanding when it comes to both preferences and their system of distribution. Antony Green has stated "You could consult the preference tickets, but let me assure you, unless you really know how the Senate's voting system works, this could be more misleading than helpful. It is also incredibly time consuming"[vii]. Public education campaigns and effective avenues through which to communicate this information about group voting tickets and the system of preference distribution should be further investigated.

Another option – this was not included in the scope of the survey:

Implement the Robson Rotation System

While respondents were not surveyed on this option, the adoption of the Robson Rotation system, where the order in which candidates appear within groups varies from ballot paper to ballot paper, would help overcome some of the challenges of a large and unwieldy Senate ballot paper.

While the "donkey vote" or "linear vote" effect is debateable, an increase of around 1% in a candidate's vote share is an accepted rule of thumb[viii]. The 2013 Senate election results once again reignited debate about the arbitrary electoral advantages and disadvantages of ballot paper positioning with the Liberal Democrats' success in NSW largely attributed to their number 1 position on the ballot[ix]. The Tasmanian review into the system stated "Robson Rotation significantly reduces the unfair advantage a candidate receives by being in a favoured position on a fixed ballot paper."[x]

More information

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this submission. We would be happy to discuss any of the information provided in more detail.

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[i] Australian Electoral Commission, *Informal Votes by State,* AEC Virtual Tally Room*,* 2013, retrieved 17.02.2014

[ii] A. Green, 'Hand the power of preferences back to the people', *The Drum –ABC,* 12 September 2013, retrieved 19.02.14

[iii] Australian Electoral Commission, *Analysis of Informal Voting- House of Representatives 2007 Election,* 2009, retrieved 17.02.2014

[iv] Australian Electoral Commission, *Senate Group Voting Ticket Usage,* AEC Virtual Tally Room, 2013, retrieved 17.02.2014

[v] Australian Electoral Commission, *Informal Votes by State,* AEC Virtual Tally Room, 2013, retrieved 17.02.2014

[vi] S. Young, 'Informal voting is on the rise', *University of Melbourne – Election Watch 2013,* 19 September 2013, retrieved 17/02/2014

[vii] A. Green, 'Voting Below the Line in the Senate', *Antony Green's Election Blog –ABC Elections,* 27 August 2013, retrieved 17.02.2014

[viii] A. King, A. Leigh, 'Are Ballot Order Effects Heterogeneous?' *Social Science Quarterly,* Vol. 90, No. 1, 2009, pp. 71-87

[ix] D. Murphy, 'Detours ahead as minor parties claim Senate balance', *The Sydney Morning Herald,* 9 September 2013, retrieved 17.02.2014

[x] Tasmanian Electoral Commission, *A discussion paper on Robson rotation in Tasmania*, 2008, retrieved 17.02.14