

The recent reforms to the Senate voting system, while a substantial improvement on the flawed Group Ticket Voting system they replaced, are not without their weaknesses.

The Senate reforms aimed to ensure that preferences between political parties flowed according to the wishes of the voter, not according to opaque preference instructions, which were difficult for voters to opt out of and lent itself to being manipulated by 'preference whisperers'. This modest goal has been well and truly achieved.

There is still a problem with the Senate voting system in that only 34 out of 76 senators in the new parliament polled over 0.2% of the total vote in their state or territory as below-the-line primary votes, the most extreme example being Queensland One Nation senator, Malcolm Roberts who only got 77 primary votes. The rest of his quota came from Pauline Hanson's surplus votes plus preferences from voters for other parties. This is far less than the 0.5% of the primary vote that former senator Ricky Muir was elected on in 2013.

Most senators, from major and minor parties, receive very few personal votes, and rely almost entirely on voters preferencing according to their party's ticket to win a seat. While with reforms making it less onerous, below-the-line voting has become more popular, it still makes up a relatively small proportion of the total vote, and most of those who avail themselves of this option still follow their party's ticket, voting for the candidate ranked first.

I would suggest that the best solution to this problem is Robson rotation which is used in Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory. The overall electoral system is the same as the Senate, but there is no above-the-line voting. In addition, Robson rotation randomises the ballot order within each party's ticket, so candidates appear in different orders on different ballots. The initial order can be alphabetical or established by random draw. (The latter is the preferred option) Many voters would still choose to simply number their party's candidates in ballot order, but since this order is randomised these votes are scattered amongst all of the party's candidates, not concentrated on one candidate.

Introducing Robson rotation in the Senate, would mean all Senate candidates would need to have their own profile to win a seat, and we would see the end of anonymous candidates winning seats with no scrutiny.

I am not suggesting Australia is ready to use Robson rotation for the Senate. Australian voters have been conditioned for thirty years to just vote for their party with a '1' in a box above the line. The new system has meant that all Australians get to choose and mark their own preferences in the Senate, many of them doing so for the first time.

The next step would be to abolish above-the-line voting, so that voters can get used to marking preferences between individual candidates. Now that the incentive to create splinter parties has been eliminated, we will probably see a consolidation of minor parties between now and the next election, which will result in a smaller ballot paper making it easier for voters to vote below the line, and also make it easier for the media to scrutinise all of the minor party candidates with a chance of election.

This won't be able to be done overnight, but if we are serious about a Senate made up of senators elected by voters who understand who they are voting for, we need a voting system that will allow candidates to get elected to the Senate on their own merits, not simply by virtue of securing a high enough ranking on their party's ticket.