How do people vote? – text version

In democracies around the world, voters use a system of secret ballot developed in Australia in the 1850s which allows them to vote without fear of threat or bribery. The following features make up this system:

- Pre-printed ballot papers listing the names of the candidates
- Voting booths to fill out the ballot paper in secrecy
- Sealed ballot boxes to place the vote in.

Even with modern developments such as electronic voting machines, these ideas remain the basic features of free and fair voting.

- Australian citizens 18 years and over can vote and stand for Parliament.
- Australia is also one of the few countries where voting is compulsory.
- Votes can be made and counted in many different ways.
- In most countries 'first past the post' voting is used.
- It's like a horse race – first one to the winning post wins!

First Past the Post voting

The voter simply puts a mark, cross or a tick, against the name of the candidate of their choice. If there are 10 000 votes casts the results are:

- Lee 2 900
- Brown 2 700
- Simos 1 400
- Amos 3 000
- Amos get the most votes so Amos WINS!

First Past the Post voting is easy to use and to understand. But in this case, notice that Amos did not get a majority of the votes – in fact more people voted against Amos (70%) than voted for Amos (30%).

That's one reason why, in Australia, we usually use a preferential system of voting where candidates must get more than 50% of the vote, a majority, to win.

Preferential voting

In Australia, preferential voting is mostly used. Preferential voting requires the voter to put numbers against the names of all candidates in order of the voter's preference - i.e. No 1 for the voter's first choice, No 2 for their second, and so on.

- This is a 'formal' (accepted) vote. If any numbers are left off, the vote may not be able to be counted. Incorrect votes that cannot be counted are called 'informal' votes.
- To win, someone must get more than half of the total vote

If no candidate gets more than half the votes, the voters' second and later choices will become important in deciding the winner.

Counting Preferential Votes

Using the same example as before

- Lee 2 900
- Brown 2 700
- Simos 1 400
- Amos 3 000

A candidate needs a majority of votes to win, 50% +1 or in this case 5 001. As nobody has this, second or third preferences must be considered

- The candidate with the lowest number of primary votes, No. 1s, is eliminated, in this case it is Simos.
- Each of Simos' 1 400 votes is now added to the votes of the other three candidates according to the voters' 'No 2' choices.
- Lee gets 600 more preferential votes giving her a total of 3 500
- Brown gets 500 more preferential votes giving him a total of 3 200
- Amos gets 300 more preferential votes giving him a total of 3 300
- As there is still no-one with a majority, 5001 (50% + 1) so the next lowest is eliminated, in this case it is Brown.
- Each of Brown's 3 200 votes is now added to the votes of the other two candidates according to the voters other preferences
- Lee receives 1 900 preferential votes bringing her total to 5 400
- Amos receives 1300 preferential votes bringing his total to 4 600
- Lee Now has more that 50% of the votes.

Counting Preferential Votes is more complicated than First Past the Post and generally the results are quite similar. However, Preferential Voting does ensure that the person elected has the support of most voters.

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