

30 March 2012

MMP Review
Electoral Commission
PO Box 3220
WELLINGTON 6140

Submission to MMP review

1. Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the MMP voting system. I do not wish to appear in person to speak to my submission, unless that would be of assistance.

The Problem

2. My submission relates to the issue of thresholds for the allocation of list seats. It is directed at the problem of tactical voting and the distorting effect thresholds create. The two main examples of this are:
 - 2.1 concern about “wasting” their vote preventing a person from voting for the party they consider best represents their interests, where it appears likely this party will fail to make it over the threshold; or
 - 2.2 concern that an ideologically aligned party will not make it over the threshold (thereby “wasting” the votes cast for it) encouraging people tactically vote for this party (where they would otherwise cast their vote differently) in order to get it over the threshold.
3. It is submitted that neither of these pressures are desirable features in a democratic voting system. This is because, to the greatest extent possible, who a person votes for should be determined by their view of the merits of the parties/candidates, and not the structure of the voting system.

The Proposed Solution: “Backup” Party Vote

4. It is submitted that voters should be provided with two party votes: a first choice and a second “backup” choice. In the event that a voter’s first choice party fails to return to Parliament, their party vote would be reallocated to their “backup” choice of party (if specified).
5. When votes are counted following a general election “backup” votes would be reallocated as follows:

- 5.1 Step 1: rank all parties which have failed to qualify for the allocation of list seats¹ by the proportion of the party vote they received;
 - 5.2 Step 2: eliminate the party on this list with the lowest proportion of the party vote and reallocate party votes cast for it to voters “backup” choice discarding any votes where no “backup” choice is specified;
 - 5.3 Step 3: check whether, as a result of reallocation, any additional parties now meet the criteria for allocation of list seats;
 - 5.4 Step 4: if there are still (non-eliminated) parties that do meet the criteria for allocation of list seats, repeat this process from step 1.
6. The purpose of allocating party votes in this way is to allow voters cast a “first choice” vote for the party that best reflects their interests, while mitigating the risk that this vote will be “wasted” by allowing their vote to be reallocated if that party does not make it into Parliament.
 7. This removes the incentive for a person to vote for their second choice of party because they are sure that party will “get in”. It also limits the incentive to tactically vote for an ideologically aligned party to try and get it over the threshold (because if it fails the votes cast will be reallocated rather than “lost”).

Advantages and disadvantages

8. Other potential advantages and disadvantages of adopting a “backup vote” are considered below.

Complexity

9. A common criticism of systems which require voters to rank choices by order of preference is that they are too complex. I do not consider that this is a significant problem with the proposed “backup” vote.
10. The reason for this is that the issues of “wasted” votes, thresholds, and the question of whether or not a party will make it into Parliament have been a prominent feature of past MMP elections, so there is already public awareness of the problem. Being able to say who you would like your vote to be given to if the party you are voting for does not make it into Parliament is intuitive and reasonably simple to explain.
11. The mechanism by which votes are reallocated (set out at paragraph 5 above) is a little more complex. However, it is debatable whether this needs to be fully understood for a “backup” vote to be properly cast.

Vote counting more difficult and time consuming

12. The process of reallocating and counting “backup” votes will be more difficult and take longer than simply counting initial party votes. There may also be issues with special votes and determining the order in which the votes that parties which have

¹ Currently this occurs when a party fails to obtain at least 5% of the party vote or win an electorate seat. This submission does not address whether either of these requirements should be changed.

made it into Parliament are eliminated. It is likely that a new system for vote counting would need to be put in place to ensure this can be done efficiently.

Backup vote allows for a higher threshold

13. This submission does not consider whether MMP's 5% threshold should be higher or lower. However, a potential 'knock on' effect of adopting a "backup" party vote is that this allows for a high 5% threshold to be retained. This is because, as set out above, a "backup" party vote would mitigate some of the negative effects of a high threshold.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Tom Hallett-Hook', written in a cursive style.

Tom Hallett-Hook