



Contact:
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To the Committee Secretary,
Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters,

The Future Party is a small, growing, and recently established party - a so-called micro party. We are nonetheless serious and issues focused, with a comprehensive policy platform¹, and are seeking to build support over the long term to eventually become a viable alternative force in Australian politics. As such, we share the concerns of the public, experts and the major parties that there are systemic flaws in our electoral process that turn the contest for some Senate seats into preference deal lotteries.

Equally, though, we believe that attempts to “fix” recent problems simply by making it harder for small parties to register or contest elections will fundamentally damage Australian democracy. The right to vote in an election every few years for one of a handful of established parties is by itself not enough. Truly democratic government must let ordinary citizens stand for office, as independents or under the banner of a party as they see fit; to join and participate in parties that broadly represent their views; and where such parties do not exist, to form new ones of their own.

Voters should be given the chance to support new parties with policies, ideas and values that may not be present in currently established parties. Increasing administrative or financial hurdles will not filter out groups who have views that are not represented in the Australian population. Rather, it will reserve politics for experienced political operatives and for the wealthy - the last outcome the Australian people would want.

Barriers to entry

Our experience with registering a new party and contesting the 2013 federal election was that it was a relatively time consuming, expensive and complicated process. The current system already prevents groups from registering a party without reasonable degree of commitment from its founding members, and also significant support in the community through the

¹ <http://futureparty.org.au/policy/>

requirement to have 500 members. While the latter may not seem onerous, it should be considered in the context of each of the following:

- **Party members need to be correctly enrolled to vote to be counted for registration.** We had significant difficulty establishing enrolment addresses for many of our members. We believe this was in part a function of our membership's youth. However, other factors also contributed. The publicly accessible AEC enrolment verification system is very exacting². And the application to register a political party needs to happen months out from any election to be contested (which of course in turn is not a fixed date), meaning that party members' electoral details were not up to date.
- **People are much less willing to join political parties than vote for them and, to a degree, this is increasing over time.** Estimates put national Labor Party membership at below 40,000 in 2010³, while their primary vote was 4.7 million in the 2010 election⁴.
- **Initial party membership is likely to be established in a single state.** The Future Party's financial position made it difficult to travel to other states to establish membership bases. The majority of Future Party members are in NSW, due to the majority of our organisers being based in NSW.

Beyond all this, once registered, small parties are at a further disadvantage relative to larger ones through the reverse handicap of electoral funding. Candidates who receive less than 4% of the total primary vote forfeit their nomination fees; while candidates who pass this threshold both have their fees refunded, and further receive taxpayer funding to the tune of \$2.53 per primary vote⁵, which in the largest Senate contests of NSW and Victoria translates to a total pool of millions of dollars, split between the already well resourced major parties⁶.

The barrier to entry of registering a party and participating in elections is reasonably high in our opinion, and further increasing that barrier will make it prohibitive for all but the most wealthy organisations and individuals to establish new political parties. All groups that meet a minimum standard of community support, and can pass basic administrative and financial hurdles, such as currently exist, should be allowed to register and field candidates under their party name.

² People seeking to register a new party, unlike existing parties, have no special access to the electoral roll. The integrity of enrollment data must be manually checked through the same means provided to the public, such as the [AEC website](#), which fails over details as small as the absence of middle initials; or else, by having an entire application rejected if the AEC fails to verify more than a handful of provided membership records, with a large associated delay to the registration process.

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http://blogs.theaustralian.news.com.au/mumble/index.php/theaustralian/comments/party_member_number_estimates/

⁴ <http://results.aec.gov.au/15508/Website/HouseStateFirstPrefsByParty-15508-NAT.htm>

⁵ http://www.aec.gov.au/parties_and_representatives/public_funding/Current_Funding_Rate.htm

⁶ The only parties that field over 4% of the national primary vote with any regularity are Labor, the Liberals, the Greens, the Nationals, and, so far at least, Palmer United.

Group Ticket Voting

There will always be more parties running than are likely to get elected. However, from our experience of interacting with other minor parties, we believe that the current group voting preference system gives an incentive to register many more parties than would exist otherwise.

Group voting tickets - whereby a voter's single vote above the line is translated into an entire preference ranking of all candidates, determined by the party they vote for - are without doubt the single worst part of our current system. They incentivise binding preference swaps that:

- Are highly opaque to many voters
- Frequently are based in tactical considerations, rather than shared values or policy between preferencing groups
- Tax the limited resources of small parties, both to negotiate preference deals and to calculate their effects
- Encourage the proliferation of parties, seeking to win on the strength of well negotiated preferences rather than popular support. In particular, the coveted 'donkey vote' column is sought after by all parties, but is particularly useful to a group of parties using circular preferencing in order to avoid elimination
- Further encourage the proliferation of parties, by enabling the creations of groups entirely or primarily intended to harvest preferences for a different party.
- Are prone to so called "preference whisperers" - expert third party advisors who may be working, unknown to the parties they advise, in the interest of a particular candidate or candidates.⁷

Main recommendations

The Future Party unequivocally recommends that:

- Administrative and financial barriers to the registration of new political parties, and the nomination of candidates for elections, **not** be substantially increased.
- Group Ticket Voting be abolished, and some alternative system that retains preferential voting without mandating the ranking of dozens of individual candidates, be established in its place.
- Should the elimination of GTV (and replacement with an alternative) be considered inadequate to address current problems by itself, additional options including those outlined below be considered by the committee, with a view to one or more being adopted into electoral law.

⁷ See for instance the recent 7:30 report, <http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2014/s3975400.htm>

Possible reforms

We suggest investigation of (but do not necessarily endorse) the following potential changes to our current electoral system for the Senate, that can act as replacements for Group Ticket Voting, and/or further address issues arising under the current system by other means:

- **Above the line preferences:** NSW has for elections to the State upper house implemented a system where voters may opt to order not just individual candidates, but if they prefer, the parties listed above the line, as a substitute for following a group ticket determined order of preference.
- **Preliminary vote:** A preliminary round of voting could be conducted (possibly optional to voters) to determine which of the registered parties have sufficient support to appear on the final ballot paper. The practical details of such a system would need a great deal of research, including into the basic design, any tradeoffs between costs and fairness, compatibility with the Constitution, and so on. Such a system could, potentially, be used to reduce the size of final ballot to the point where compulsory preferences of some sort could be used, in place of group ticket voting
- **Improved preference counting:** The Instant Runoff Voting (IRV) version of the Single Transferable Vote (STV) currently employed in the Senate is known to have a number of flaws⁸. Several alternative vote distribution methods are known, and often have superior properties that reduce incentives for tactical voting, front party creation, strategic preference swaps, and so on. STV systems that notably improve on IRV include Meek's method, and an Australian developed cousin, the Wright system - both of which are purely changes to the system of counting, and do not in themselves require any adjustments by voters.
- **Randomised ballots:** Ballot papers that are printed with an individually randomised order of the groups - frequently called "Robson Rotation" after the Liberal MP who introduced them to Tasmania - are logistically more effort, and would require some creativity by candidates in terms of their How to Vote cards. However, they would remove the "Donkey Vote" effect that significantly advantages candidates in more prominent positions on the ballot, and thus reduce the incentive to create parties to exploit this effect.

Undesirable changes

Some suggestions have circulated that group ticket voting be retained, but that groups below a certain primary vote not distribute preferences. We believe this suggestion ignores the numerous flaws in GTV, would disenfranchise voters who choose a smaller party, and would ultimately make smaller parties unviable. We thus consider this to be a fundamentally undemocratic idea, and urge the committee not to adopt any proposal along these lines.

⁸ Strictly, all voting systems fail some desirable properties, according to the famous [Arrow's theorem](#) and related subsequent results in social choice theory. But IRV fails an especially large number of desirable properties compared to other preferential systems, including highly desirable ones.

Final remarks

We support the committee's ongoing efforts to improve our electoral system, and look forward to the publication of its recommendations.

The committee is most welcome to contact us to further discuss any of the contents of this submission if desired.

Regards,

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