

2004

The Alternative Vote : In Theory and Practice

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**THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE:
IN THEORY AND PRACTICE**

BY

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BA (ARTS)

A thesis submitted in the partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of
Bachelor of Arts (Politics and Government) with Honours
Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences
Edith Cowan University
Date of Submission: 11 March 2004

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

Abstract

The idea of choosing political representatives through elections has its origins in ancient times. More recently, democratic values have been united with the concept of elected representative government. This then places a great deal of importance on the system used to elect these representatives, since this system must satisfy an impressive range of democratic values, as well as being effective and simple enough for the voter to understand. The electoral system chosen will reflect those values and outcomes which those who introduce the system wish to bring about. Sometimes this may be proportional representation, which means seats allocated in direct proportion to votes obtained, which often comes at the risk of unstable coalition governments but that represents minority groups quite adequately. On the other hand, majority rule by one major party (or coalition) may be sought through a plurality voting system (or first-past-the-post).

The alternative vote (AV), often called preferential voting, is an electoral system which combines considerations of stable majority rule as well as the preferences of those who support minority party views in society. This is done through the listing of preferences on the ballot paper, which enables those whose first preferences are eliminated from the count to still affect the final result. The AV has been refined and implemented largely in Australia, both at a federal level to elect members to the House of Representatives, and in most state lower houses. Outside of Australia the AV has been used very little.

This study looks at the AV in Australia, both in theory and in practice. The origins of election and representative government are traced to provide a conceptual background to the study. Both the history and outcomes of the AV are covered at a federal level, as well as considering Western Australia as an example of its use at a state level. Also considered is the optional variant of the AV, as is used in the state lower houses of New South Wales and Queensland. This study uses focus groups as the methodological tool with which to determine: firstly, how well the AV is understood by West Australian voters; and secondly, what these voters think of this system as a method of electing their representatives to the Legislative Assembly in Western Australia.

The outcomes of the AV, in both Western Australia and the Commonwealth, have sometimes been different than those who introduced the system anticipated. Most predictable, and indeed one of the main reasons behind its introduction, has been the prevention of vote-splitting between non-Labor groupings. This, however, has proved more effective on a federal level than in Western Australia. Other outcomes include the formation of a stable two-party system of politics, and the election of candidates and governments which have the support of an absolute majority of voters. The AV has also sustained the presence of some minor parties, particularly the National (formerly Country) Party. Interesting, and less predictable in earlier years, is the way in which the AV has facilitated a 'politics of the centre' in the Australian context. In recent times, preferences have become more important in determining election

outcomes, as the number of minor parties and independents contesting lower house seats in Australia increases, and also as the number of votes for major parties decreases.

Finally, the focus group research uncovered a marked lack of understanding of the AV amongst voters in Western Australia. Thus a primary recommendation arising from this study is that better civic education is required to ensure that the AV is used to its full potential by voters, which will then achieve fully one of the original intentions behind its introduction - to negate the effect of the 'wasted vote'.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- (i) incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- (ii) contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- (iii) contain any defamatory material.

Signature.....



Date.....

15.7.2004

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Associate Professor Harry C.J. Phillips for his unflagging support at all times during the course of this study. His enthusiasm for, and knowledge of, electoral law made me believe this study was possible.

To my family also, whose faith in my ability to see this through was invaluable. I am especially indebted to my parents, Noel and Frances Beckingham, who taught me from a young age that a thirst for knowledge was something to be nurtured. And finally, to Lance - who shared each frustration and triumph along the way.

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CHAPTER ONE: AN OVERVIEW

Introduction

Voting is a concept which nearly every person in today's world understands, and an activity in which many participate. The majority of nations in the world use voting as a means to elect political representatives. Liberal democratic governments today are representative democracies, with election being the central institution through which representatives are chosen. Elections then are an integral part of representative government.

It is here however, that the similarity ends. The method by which elections are enacted have been many and varied. Electoral systems are largely a product of the state or polity in which they are implemented, reflecting the values and assumptions inherent within the wider political society. Since the birth of modern representative government in the 17th and 18th centuries, political theorists have debated which voting systems best represent voters. Election outcomes do not only depend on popular votes, but also on the rules used. It is a question of how the votes are compiled and seats allocated. Often it is not clear how electoral rules will work, with governments adopting rules in expectation of certain results and then experiencing outcomes different from those predicted. This is where a more systematic study of electoral laws and their consequences can become important and useful.

A vast array of literature exists which critically examines the roots, characteristics, and outcomes of almost any given voting system in use around the world. However, the alternative vote (AV) (known more commonly as preferential voting), a system largely refined and implemented almost exclusively in Australia, has tended to escape the analysis afforded more commonly used voting systems.

This study looks at the AV, both in theory and in practice. The history and effects of this voting system will be examined at a federal level in Australia, and also at a state level using Western Australia as the principal, though not exclusive, example. The term 'alternative vote' (AV) will be used throughout the study rather than the more commonly used term 'preferential voting', in order to avoid confusion with a host of other voting systems which incorporate the transfer of preferences.

Preferential voting systems

The wide range of voting systems used in the democratic world can be divided into two basic types. The British system is based on a plurality system commonly called 'first-past-the-post' (FPP). The European tradition has more examples of varieties of proportional representation (PR). Preferential voting systems

are a variant of the plurality or 'first-past-the-post' voting method. All the three of the major forms of preferential voting were developed or refined in Australia. The first of these is the AV, which is now the most common form of preference voting in Australia, hence the interchangeable use of the two terms. Appendix 1 shows a typology of preferential voting systems, breaking them down into several basic categories. The first listed below - the AV with compulsory preference marking - is the voting system expressly considered by this study.

1. The Alternative Vote (compulsory preferences/ full preferential)

Under the AV system, voters rank their choice of candidates in order of preference, exhausting all options. Used in single-member constituencies, a candidate who gains an absolute majority of first preference votes is elected. In the situation where no candidate has a majority, the candidate with the lowest amount of votes is eliminated, their ballot examined, and the second preferences are re-allocated to the remaining candidates in the order they appear on this ballot. This process is repeated until one candidate has an absolute majority and is declared elected. The AV is used for all lower house elections at the Federal, State and territory levels in Australia, excepting Tasmania and the Australian Capital Territory (Queensland and New South Wales now feature optional preference marking - see below).

2. The Alternative Vote (optional preferences/ optional preferential)

Optional preferential is a variant of full preferential voting, where voters are not required to exhaust all choices on the ballot. This type of ballot was the one recommended by the Western Australian Commission on Government (COG) (1995, pp. 310-313). It was introduced for a short time in WA in 1907, although soon abandoned for a system of compulsory (exhaustive) preferential voting in 1911. It was introduced in NSW in 1981, and in Queensland in 1992. There is some confusion over its use in Victoria between 1907 - 1911, with Goot citing this as incorrect (1985, p. 222) but Reilly (2001, p. 93) supporting others (Hughes and Graham, 1968; and Parliament, 1983). Also, in some sources, optional preferential voting is ambiguously coupled with the contingent vote (Goot, 1985, p. 221). What may cause this confusion is that all examples of the contingent vote to date have featured optional preference marking (Reilly, 2001, p. 94). The AV is divided (see Appendix 1) into optional or compulsory marking. Since the AV is essentially divided into these two types, this study would not be complete without looking at the optional form which is covered in Chapter Seven.

3. The Contingent Vote

The contingent vote was used in Queensland between 1892 - 1942, and in NSW between 1926 - 1928, but has now been abandoned in Australia (although increasingly used elsewhere). As with the AV system, any candidate who receives an absolute majority of first preference votes is elected. Failing this the process changes, with all candidates, other than the two leaders, being eliminated and their preferences re-distributed to the two leaders, thus ensuring a majority winner. While superficially similar to the AV, this method has quite different antecedents and delivers quite different results (Reilly, 2001, p. 82).

4. The Alternative Vote in Multi-member Districts

Occasionally the AV has been utilised in multi-member districts. The Australian Senate used this form of voting from 1919 until 1948 when the STV (see below) was introduced. South Australia also used this form of voting for its lower house elections between 1929 and 1935. In 1936 South Australian lower house electorates were divided into single-member districts which then used the AV proper. Outside of Australia, British Columbia used the AV in multi-member districts for a short time in the 1952 and 1954 elections, although the process was complicated due to the AV being used in single-member districts simultaneously. As it is, the process is quite complicated in multi-member districts. In two-member electorates the count to produce the second successful candidate involves returning to the first preference votes. The elected candidate's votes are transferred according to the second preferences shown. If no absolute majority emerges, then the preference allocation again starts with the exclusion of the candidate with the fewest votes, and continues until a second absolute majority is obtained. A similar process is used, if necessary, to produce the third and subsequent members. The AV is no longer used in multi-member electorates in Australia and this form is not considered in this study.

5. The Single Transferable Vote

Finally, there is the Single Transferable Vote (STV), and its Australian variant Hare Clark. This form of proportional representation is used for elections to the federal Senate, the lower House in Tasmania, the unicameral ACT Legislative Assembly, and to upper houses in New South Wales, South Australia, and Western Australia. The STV is quite unlike other forms of preferential voting, using multi-member electorates and a quota system which includes some distribution of preferences for election of candidates. This form of voting is not the focus of this study (and will therefore not be covered in any detail in its own right), the focus being the AV form of preferential voting which was developed as an adaption of the STV to enable its use in single, rather than multi-member, constituencies.

The Concept of Representation

In order to gain fuller insight into a particular voting system such as the AV, it is useful to understand better the history behind the more general concept of representation and its intersection with election as a form of choosing representatives. The following chapter examines the history of representation and election, and how these two institutions were united to serve democratic principles. Institutions and political theories about representation which had their embryonic beginnings in the middle ages, and even more practical roots in ancient civilisations, were adapted to modern democratic theory and practice by reformers beginning in the 17th century. In countries where the practice of electing representatives had existed since medieval times, democratic reformers saw an opportunity to convert parliaments and legislative bodies into more truly representative institutions that would serve democratic purposes. In

1820 James Stuart Mill described "the system of representation" as "the grand discovery of modern times" (Dahl, 1998, p. 104). The two main concepts that emerged out of this period in political history are the basis on which modern representative government is constructed. The first one is the idea of an elected representative as an independent policy maker, and the concept of a representative assembly as a public authority deriving its legitimacy from the fact that its members have gone through an election process, even though they have no obligation to take instructions from their electors. The other is the radical notion that sovereignty rests with the people - the theory that in the middle ages was 'driven underground', and later resurrected by theorists such as John Locke, Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, James Stuart Mill, James Madison, and Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès.

It was through the ideas of these men that the idea of representative government became linked with the idea of democracy, and the values of liberty, justice, as well as majority rule. Thus representation as we know it today - that is, the idea of some humans representing others in politics - is an essentially modern concept. Ancient Greeks, for example, had no theory about this, although in practice used representation in their everyday political activities (Pitkin, 1967, p. 241). This failure to recognise representational theory within their institutions is what Eulau (Eulau & Walke, 1978, p. 37) claims was partly responsible for their eventual failure. In the middle ages, members of parliament gradually came to be thought of as representatives, while still having nothing to do with elections or democratic rights. In England, parliamentary representation gradually began to be used as a device for furthering local interests, as a control over the power of the king. By the 17th century the idea of political rights and the right to elect members of Parliament began to gain momentum in England, and the culmination of this trend was the French and American revolutions which enshrined the right to elect representatives as one of the inalienable 'rights of Man'. As Pitkin (1967, p. 3) argued, "Thus representation came to mean popular representation, and to be linked with the idea of self-government, of every man's right to have a say in what happens to him. And that is how it came to be embodied in our institutions."

Representative government has only been accepted as a form of democratic government for a relatively short time. In the late 18th century, a government organised along representative lines was seen as differing radically from democracy, whereas today it passes for a form thereof (Manin, 1997, p. 4). Contemporary democratic governments which rely on representative institutions to function efficiently have evolved from a political system that was conceived by its founders to be something quite different from democracy. What we call today representative democracy has its origins in a system of institutions, established in the wake of the English, French, and American revolutions, that was in no way initially seen as a form of democracy or of government by the people (Manin, 1997, p. 1). Practical applications of representation go as far back as ancient Greek and Roman civilisations, as outlined in Chapter Two, although normative theories of political representation were not formulated until quite recently in comparison.

Representation and Elections in Theory

1. The Role of Election in Representational Theory

Liberal democracy, based upon the idea of government by consent, actually “implies a system of representative democracy, in which the right to exercise government power is acquired through success in elections” (Heywood, 1992, p. 281). Elections are an integral part of the representational process, since elections are the means by which representatives are chosen and legitimised. This means for revolutionary yet bloodless change is what Hampton (1995, p. 391) terms “controlled revolutionary activity.” In this way representatives are made accountable for their decisions, harking back to the arguments inherent in the social contract theories of Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Kant, and Rousseau. However, rather than surrendering all power to the representative ruler as envisioned by Hobbes, democratic societies retain the right expounded by Locke to depose any representative who does not govern as the public demands. Locke, arguing against Hobbes, claimed that people had a right to “resume their original Liberty” in cases of legislative abuse of power, implying the possibility of people monitoring the performance of their representatives (Maddox, 1996, p. 395).

It is understandable then, that in liberal democratic theory, great attention has been devoted to the rules governing the electoral process, and especially the methods used to convert votes into seats. John Stuart Mill advocated the “highly practical employment of scientific intellect, to improve the mechanics of government and the formulae for political representation” (Phillips, 1995, p. 114). This sentiment has been fulfilled in Australia, a country where democratic institutions have been in continuous existence for most of its federal history, and where extensive electoral law reform has played an important part in the search for new and better ways to represent the people. This was relatively easy in Australia, as compared to an older civilisation such as England, partly due to the absence of a powerful, entrenched, conservative class (Aitkin & Jinks, 1985, p. 123). Both federally and at a state level, electoral law reformers have introduced, modified and discarded an impressive array of voting systems. One of these experiments was the AV. Another interesting Australian anomaly is the variety of electoral systems between the Commonwealth and the States, there being no uniform system. The AV, either optional or exhaustive, is one of the more widely used electoral systems within Australia.

In Australia currently there is renewed debate over both principles and practice of representation, as changes which have come about in 20th century politics impact fully on political systems around the world on the cusp of the 21st century. In some ways representation of populations became more fully realised early in the 20th century with nearly universal suffrage. Other changes such as the extension of government activities and the increasing dominance of the executive branch of government have made representatives more distant, highlighted by the growing gap between political elites and mass opinion. The rise of one party states and totalitarian systems have demonstrated how representative principles and

institutions can be the very antithesis of democracy. One of the most important developments has been the growth of party politics, which has radically changed the way representation functions in modern democracies like Australia.

The complexity of representation in contemporary liberal democracies means that one should not be surprised that political analysts have not been able to generate a unified or cohesive political theory of representation in the Australian context (Uhr, 1998, p. 120). Within the literature of political theory there are a number of competing yet plausible accounts of the ends and purposes of representation.

What becomes obvious in any analysis of a political system is that the boundaries and issues regarding representation are neither straightforward nor permanent. The study of the AV in this thesis will illustrate how a particular voting system has its own inherent assumptions about the purposes and outcomes of representation.

Thus the study of an Australian electoral system such as the AV is useful to come to some conclusions about representation in Australia. A brief review of the literature on electoral systems will provide a starting point for this, thus placing the AV into context within the wider range of electoral systems and theory.

2. The History of the Literature on Modern Electoral Systems

In 1859, Thomas Hare presented a proposal for a new electoral system for Great Britain and Ireland. His proposal was prompted by John Stuart Mill's theories on representative government, set out in his *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861). In short, Mill argued against the representation of geographic constituencies which is inherent in plurality systems, especially those used in single-member districts (of which the AV is one). Mill's view of legislators was that they are elected to address national concerns and should be chosen on the basis of their conformity to voters' viewpoints on the issues of the day. Thus any electoral system that confines voters' choices to those candidates who are running in their electorate falls short of the ideal representational electoral system. The Hare system that Mill recommended was in its essentials what we know now as the single transferable vote (STV), commonly known as proportional representation (PR). While Mill's dissertation was not really an empirical study but rather a philosophical statement, it is important because the subsequent 'first generation' of empirical studies of electoral systems "unabashedly took sides in the dispute over whether proportional representation or the Anglo-Saxon system of plurality was the 'best' system" (Taagepera & Shugart, 1989, p. 48).

In a book published in 1926 titled *Proportional Representation*, Hoag and Hallet presented examples of numerous anomalies which can result from plurality systems. Much attention was paid to the 'wasting' of

votes under these systems. The AV was considered by them to be the 'best' of the plurality systems, but still inferior to the 'worst' form of PR - this being the list system (Taagepera & Shugart, 1989, p. 48). Other books in the same tradition are Lakeman and Lambert's *Voting in Democracies* (1955) and Lakeman's *How Democracies Vote* (1974).

On the other hand, Hermens, in *Democracy or Anarchy* (1941), was probably the most virulent critic of PR. He argued that the use of PR leads to anarchy through the proliferation of political parties, and eventually to dictatorship. He extolled the virtues of the British plurality electoral system in providing stable two-party government.

These books are examples of just of some of the more prominent arguments between the proponents of plurality and PR (although mainly the use of STV) voting systems. These arguments will be further illustrated in the following chapters when discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the AV.

Mentioned above was the prominent role that the development of political parties in the twentieth century has played in politics of representation and electoral systems. In 1951 (1954 in English) Maurice Duverger published probably the most seminal work to date regarding electoral systems, political parties and representation. His work, *Political Parties*, prompted questions regarding the interaction of parties and representation which are still being debated today by political scientists. Simply put, his theory is that the political world is dualistic by nature and that this dualism is reinforced by plurality elections which polarise electoral choice between two parties. PR on the other hand, undermines this dualism by multiplying political choices and sustaining the presence of many parties. Two important questions which he raised were; firstly, what are the effects upon the party system of a change in electoral system; and second, to what extent are voters influenced by the electoral system through the psychological effect? Many published works on electoral systems since the 1950's have attempted to explore one of these questions (for instance, J. G. Grunm, 1958; Rokkan, 1970; Sartori, 1968; Fisher, 1973; Nohlen, 1984). Duverger concentrates on the most common electoral methods and does not expressly consider the type of preferential voting, the AV, which we use here in Australia. He does however, deal with the use of the second or 'run-off' ballot in single-member constituencies, which is well known for its use in France. It was also briefly used in New South Wales from 1910 to 1918. While these differ from the AV in several ways, they do have important similarities, and the conclusions he draws are applicable to the Australian use of the AV.

In Australia certainly, 'Duverger's law' seems to hold true. Plurality electoral systems such as the AV in federal and state lower houses has tended to promote the two-party system, while on the other hand PR (used in the federal Senate and most state upper houses) has tended to promote the representation of minor parties. Furthermore, Duverger argues that with the second ballot (not unlike the AV) one would expect splits or 'proliferation' of the major parties unless such parties were already extremely well and

tightly organised. Rydon (1968a, pp. 190-191) finds this argument applicable to Australia. The party organisation would seem to be a determining factor in the working of the AV. For example, the rigid organisation of the ALP has tended to prevent the multiplicity of candidates one would expect under the AV. When splits do occur the party tends to be torn asunder, with great hostility resulting in lack of preference exchanges. The less rigid discipline of the non-Labor parties enables them to make better use of the AV, especially the National (formerly Country) Party (see Chapters Three and Four).

Duverger's second assumption regarding the psychological effect of plurality voting systems seems to be largely supported by the findings of the research conducted through the focus groups, documented in Chapter Six. Duverger proposed that as voters became aware over time that voting for a minor party in a two party system meant an implied 'wasting' of votes, they then would refrain from voting for these parties, thus further reinforcing the two-party system. It is interesting that this persists even although one of the intentions behind the introduction of the AV in Australia was to negate the effects of the 'wasted' vote.

A watershed in the comparative study of electoral systems was Douglas Rae's book, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws* (1967). He primarily considered how electoral laws affect competition between political parties. One of his conclusions which is relevant for this study is that both PR and plurality electoral systems produce manufactured legislative majorities which lend legitimacy, or what some would call a mandate, to the winning party. Building upon Rae's work, Lijphart (1984; 1999) found that fewer majorities were manufactured under PR systems, than under plurality systems. This manufacturing of majorities is generally considered a positive thing by most commentators since normative theories of democracy, widely accepted in our society, suggest that government should be supported by a majority of voters. However, critics counter that manufactured majorities violate the principle of majority rule since power goes to a party which more people voted against than for, and thus creates the illusion of a mandate when none exists.

In conclusion, another work with some relevance for the Australian system of preferential voting is Katz's findings, documented in *A Theory of Parties and Electoral Systems* (1980). In this work Katz asserted that intraparty preference voting provides for less of a team orientation within parties, especially given that most of the turnover in legislative seats in systems with preference voting occurs within parties and not between them. The failure of the AV in the Australian context to encourage any large scale multiple endorsements by parties within electorates (discussed in Chapter Four) reflects both the cohesiveness and discipline of Australian political parties, and a two-party system which discourages ideological extremism. Katz bases his findings on the assumption that parties in a two-party system will converge ideologically, while parties under a PR system will have to accentuate their differences in order to differentiate themselves from parties on either side of them on the ideological scale. It is certainly true that a two-party system in Australia, along with the use of the AV, has led the two major parties to

become closer over time on the ideological scale, and has facilitated a 'politics of the centre' in Australia, in which all political parties are drawn toward the centre of the political spectrum.

While the above review covers just some of the studies more relevant to this particular research on the AV, they do provide a fairly general literature review of some of the seminal works on electoral systems and representation. Their findings provide a conceptual framework for an analysis of the AV in Australia.

Representation and elections in practice: The AV in Australia

1. History

Preferential voting, of which the AV is one variant, has its beginnings in 'run-off' systems of voting commonly called the 'second ballot'. These types of elections allow for a run-off between the top two candidates when no candidate has an absolute majority on the first ballot. These kinds of elections are still used today in France to elect the president, and for presidential elections in various other countries. Used very briefly in NSW (1910-1918), it was abandoned in favour of preferential voting proper (the AV) (Goot, 1985, p. 222). The second ballot shares all the main advantages of the AV, these being: they encourage candidates to broaden their support base in search of a majority; they limit the impact of vote-splitting; and they manufacture majority support for one candidate (Reilly, 2001, p. 80). The AV however, can be considered a further refinement of the second ballot, in that it does away with some of the problems associated with run-off elections. For example, run-off elections require parties to follow one exhaustive election campaign with another. An AV system requires only one election, and ballots can be later re-examined for information if necessary. Electoral reformers in the 19th century developed the idea of a preferential voting system (later refined to the AV in Australia) to capitalise upon the advantages of run-off elections, while retaining the simplicity of one-off elections. The first serious proposal for applying a preferential ballot to national elections was put forward in 1856 by Thomas Hare in Britain (as mentioned above), and Carl Andrae in Denmark as part of a new form of proportional representation, the STV (Reilly, 2001, p. 80). However, it was Australian reformers who developed the AV as we know it today.

The AV was developed by electoral strategists as an adaption of the STV for use in single-member constituencies. The first documented method of this reworking of STV appears to have been by Professor Ware of Harvard in 1871. He demonstrated that the transfer of preferences in order to find the most preferred candidate could work just as well in single-member constituencies as it did in Hare's complex scheme of proportional representation, which was developed for multi-member constituencies.

The AV system, which was not yet in use anywhere else in the world, was suggested by reformers for the House of Representatives during the framing of the Australian constitution in the 1890's. The first

Electoral Bill presented to the new federal Parliament in 1902 provided for AV in the lower House, and STV in the Senate. In spite of the perceived benefits of these choices however, conservative opinion held sway, and the systems of AV and STV were deleted during the passage of the bill, to be replaced with first-past-the-post systems for both Houses. The issue was not laid to rest however. Bills for AV were introduced by the Deakin government in 1906 and a Liberal member in 1911, both of which failed. In 1915 the *Royal Commission into Commonwealth Electoral Law and Administration* also supported the adoption of preferential voting, i.e. the AV, in the House of Representatives. The AV was perceived by its proponents to give better representation of 'all shades of political opinion' in society, which was later noted by those on the *Joint Select Committee on Electoral Reform* in 1983 (Parliament, 1983, p. 8).

When the AV was finally introduced for elections to the House of Representatives in 1918, it was more a political choice than anything else, based upon considerations of partisan advantage (this is outlined more fully in Chapter Three). As for outside Australia, the AV has not been popular, in spite of its simplicity and fairness, probably because its introduction would enhance the power and position of minor parties more so than under a straight plurality system (Aitkin & Jinks, 1985, pp. 125-126).

Other than Australia, the AV has been tried briefly in a handful of other places, the most notable being the Canadian provinces of Alberta (1926-1955), British Columbia (1952-1954), and Manitoba (1927-1936) (see table in Appendix 1) with Alberta and Manitoba using it in rural electorates only. While these experiences are at times mentioned in this study, the main focus will be on the Australian experience with the AV, since this is where it has been used most extensively.

This study will also look closely at the use of the AV in Western Australia, as an insight into the functioning of the AV at a state level. In spite of attempts to install a system of AV in the federal Parliament sooner, the AV was first introduced in the Western Australian State Parliament by the Electoral Act of 1907. Discussed in Chapter Four, the history and consequences of the AV in Western Australia so far have been only sparsely documented, and usually dealing only with representation at a federal level. As John Uhr (2000, p. 4) points out, while Australian developments in electoral practice attract international attention, there remain many gaps in the scholarly investigation of Australian law, policy, and history on elections. He concludes that:

International attention is directed to the Australian approach to electoral fairness through a combination of preferential and proportional voting, both subject to the distinctive Australian requirements of compulsory voting. But more needs to be known about the policy and purpose behind these distinctive Australian practices. (p. 4)

This provides a sound rationale for studies such as this one, which look at distinctively Australian electoral practices through analysis of their history and outcomes.

2. Outcomes

This study will also look at the effects of the AV within the Australian context, and whether the same in Western Australia (at a state level) as at a federal level. Use of the AV has mostly ensured the election of governments which enjoy the majority of electoral support, avoiding the possibility that a party supported by a minority of electors will gain a majority in parliament and form government. However, it enables the votes of these minorities to still be utilised, thus sustaining the presence of some minor parties. It has also enabled coalitions to form between parties with similar ideological views, without their votes working against each other. These have all come together to produce what Reilly (2001, p 78-79) considers the most important effect of this method of voting; its moderating, consensual influence upon Australian politics. By encouraging parties to look outside their immediate support bases for potential secondary support, the AV has tempered some of the more 'zero-sum' aspects of Australia's majoritarian electoral politics, making elections above all a search for the political middle ground, thus encouraging a degree of 'consensual' practice which moderates what is otherwise considered a highly adversarial political culture. As a direct result of this, parties in Australia tend to be broad based, converging ideologically in the centre of the political spectrum, with extreme candidates and issues relegated to the margins of Australian politics.

It is true also that, as votes for the major parties have declined in recent years, preference votes under the AV system have become increasingly important in determining election outcomes. It is now common for minor parties and independents to determine election outcomes via their preferences. This phenomena has encouraged major parties to court the interests of minor parties, particularly the Greens, the Australian Democrats, and One Nation. However, these minor parties generally do not win seats in their own right in the lower house, since their support is spread over many electorates and concentrated support in one electorate is necessary to gain a seat in single-member constituencies. This factor is seen by some as a failing of the AV, in that it does not allow for accurate representation in parliament of a minority, or minor party, for which support is spread over many districts. In this way, by obtaining minorities in many electorates, a party can obtain a parliamentary majority out of proportion to its gross electoral majority (Sawer, 1987, pp. 69-70).

However, as the political climate in Australia becomes more volatile, and the numbers of minor party and independent candidates contesting lower house seats increases at every election, the AV system is just beginning to deliver results which more accurately mirror the large number of primary votes allocated to these candidates. For example, on both a federal level and in Western Australia, independents elected increase at every lower house election, and tend to overtake major party candidates due to preference distribution. Now, more than ever before, are major parties reminded of their vulnerability to the preference flows of minor party and independent ballots. Furthermore, this trend tends to be more pronounced under systems of optional AV (particularly in Queensland), in which voters are not required to vote for all candidates, and can thus ignore the major parties altogether when allocating preferences.

3. The AV and Voters

The final aim of this study is to determine exactly how the West Australian voting public understand and perceive the AV. This research has been limited to Western Australia, since this is the state which has been the main focus of this study, and furthermore suits the time and resources available to this researcher. Further studies conducted in the same manner would be advantageous to test the hypothesis that other Australian states would yield similar results regarding understanding and perception of the AV.

This analysis is achieved through data collected from focus group interviews which also includes respondents filling out an anonymous questionnaire. Chapter Five looks more closely at this choice of methodology, while Chapter Six documents the results of the research. Public awareness is an extremely important part of any voting system since it is the voters who, in the end, must use the system to gain their desired representation in Parliament. No amount of theorising about an electoral system is beneficial unless the system is utilised by a voting population who understand the system properly and are able to use it to its full potential.

CHAPTER TWO

THE HISTORY OF REPRESENTATION AND ELECTION

Representation in Antiquity

1. The Greeks

The ancient Greeks had a number of institutions and practices which we would today consider representative, although as Pitkin (1967, p. 241) points out, they themselves had no concept of, or word for, this essentially modern political idea. It is for this very reason that many commentators on representation ignore the Greeks (and other civilisations of antiquity such as the Romans), when looking for the roots of the idea of political representation (for example see: Birch, 1972).

Today, when we distinguish between representative and direct democracy we usually imagine that in the latter all important political powers were exercised by the assembled people. Closer examination of the institutional system used in ancient Athens renders this false. Even apart from the magistrates, three institutions other than the Assembly, namely the Council, the courts, and the *nomothetai*, exercised political functions of the first importance. The peoples' courts and the Council merit particular attention because both institutions played a key part throughout the history of the Athenian democracy. Certain powers of the courts even belonged to what was regarded as decisive power; that is, the ability to overturn decisions of the Assembly. In this way then, the populace did not wield all power. Certain important powers and even a portion of the decisive power belonged to institutions that were in fact, and perceived to be, other than directly democratic. These institutions were what we would term representative.

For the Greeks, representation was a means of limiting rather than extending the participation of citizens in government. The *boule*, or Council, was the main representative machinery within the city-state, which constituted a cross section of the citizen body (Phillips, 1975, p. 29). While in Athens the assembled people were an institution in themselves, unlike modern representative governments they did not perform all aspects of governance. Certain functions were performed by officials elected by lot. Lot has not been used in any form of representative government in the last two centuries. Just recently the idea of lot has been rethought (for an example see Fishkin and his ideas on Citizen Initiated Referenda, 1991), but for a long time has had no place in political culture of modern societies. Although ridiculed by Socrates, it appears that Athenians still considered the advantages to be greater than the disadvantages (Manin, 1997, p. 10).

This random lottery was used to select the Council or Senate, and also other public officials, juries, and administrative bodies. The only exceptions were roles requiring specific skills, such as military offices and officials of public works. In this way, similar to our selection of jurors today, random citizens were

chosen regardless of knowledge or political skill, to probe in depth important public issues and to also try political leaders. It is interesting to note that the decisions or opinions of the Assembly (the paradigm of direct democracy) were considered by the Athenians to be subordinate to the political decisions of this group of jurors, selected by lot, who were empowered as representatives of the rest of the citizenry to explicitly reconsider and overturn the decisions of the Assembly (Fishkin, 1991, pp. 86-91).

The Athenian democracy entrusted to citizens drawn by lot most of the functions not performed by the popular Assembly (ekklesia). This applied mainly to the magistracies (archai). There were several restrictions placed upon the posts to guard against corruption and incompetence (Manin, 1997, pp. 12-17). Members of the Council (boule) were also appointed by lot (Manin, 1997, pp. 17-18). Also, the heliastai was chosen every year by lot from a pool of volunteers thirty years or older. Members of the courts were recruited from this group. These courts performed important political functions (Manin, 1997, pp. 18-22). In the 4th century, a further body appointed by lot was the nomothetai. This body performed legislative action after the oligarchic revolutions of 411 and 404. So, in the 4th century legislative decisions were in the hands of an organ distinct from the Assembly and appointed by lot (Manin, 1997, pp. 22-23).

While it may appear to the contemporary observer that selection of citizens by lot to fill these roles could compromise democratic principles, democracy was preserved through several means. Firstly, rotation in office (Manin, 1997, pp. 28-32) was very important to the Athenians as a method of limiting abuses of power. Also, the absence or restriction of professionals or experts in political roles demonstrated a healthy distrust of professionalism (Manin, 1997, pp. 32-34). Finally, the principle of equality was evident in political thought and process at the time (Manin, 1997, pp. 34-41), although there was some contention over what kind of equality was at stake.

Two conclusions made by Manin about ancient Greeks (1997, p. 41) throw up some interesting thoughts for those considering representation today. Firstly, in ancient Athens the assembled people did not exercise all power, which technically makes some part of their government representative. However, the fact that modern representative governments have never used lot to assign political power shows that the difference between the representative system and direct systems has to do with the method of selection *rather* than with the limited number of those selected. That is, what makes a system representative is not the fact that a few govern in the place of the people, but that they are selected by election only. Secondly, selection by lot was not a peripheral institution for the Greeks, but it embodied a number of fundamental democratic values. Even though they could not explain how it was so, democrats had the intuition that elections did not guarantee the same equality. We can conclude then, that election has an important place not only in facilitating representative government, but is also part of its definition.

2. The Romans

Like the Greeks, the Romans conducted a great deal of business through representative institutions. They

differed from the Greeks however, in that election was the main method of appointing representatives, while lot was used in a limited way in the assembly (comitia).

The Romans had a mixed constitution, a combination of monarchic, aristocratic and democratic features. The popular assembly (comitia) constituted the democratic element of government; the magistrates in general and consul the monarchical element; and the Senate the aristocratic element. The three powers balanced and checked each other, not unlike the three arms of government traditionally used as balances and checks in the Westminster style of government.

Unlike Greeks, Romans did not use lot for its egalitarian properties. In the census based Roman republic, lot had the effect of drawing votes together and promoting political cohesion, first among the propertied classes and then among the people as a whole, because of its neutrality and also the religious interpretation that was placed upon it (Manin, 1997, p. 51).

3. Other Examples of Representation in Antiquity

The use of lot as a method of appointing representatives was not confined to the Greeks and Romans. The Italian Republics of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance often chose magistrates by lot. Similarly in Florence, the intellectual centre of civic humanism and republican renewal, the selection of magistrates by lot was a key institution of the republican system. Florence is especially interesting for study today since for a while, while vacillating between the use of lot and election, there was some debate about the respective merits of the two methods of appointment. Having introduced lot to combat factionalism, the Florentines ended up rediscovering, through experience, the idea of the Athenian democrats that lot is more democratic than election. This sentiment influenced later developments of republican thought, especially in England and the United States. There is reason to believe that the theorists and political actors of the 17th and 18th centuries, who were familiar with the Florentine republican experiment, knew that the belief in the aristocratic nature of elections was not unique to Greek political culture (Manin, 1997, p. 63).

Venice, the 'Most Serene Republic', whose stability gave it an almost mythic status, also practiced a form of lot until its fall in 1797. However, election was still the dominant form of appointment. In fact, Venice was seen by 17th and 18th century observers as the archetype of the elective republic. They had perfected an extraordinarily complicated and subtle system for appointing magistrates that became famous among political thinkers all over Europe. Venice's reputation as a paradigm of elective government seemed to suggest to these observers that somehow a link existed between republican success and the use of election. This view was also reinforced by the longevity of the Roman Republic, in which, as already mentioned, election was also the dominant form.

The Evolution of Modern Representative Government

1. The Middle Ages

It was in medieval times that the early elements of modern representative government emerged, although once again it must be pointed out that normative theories about political institutions usually are not formulated until long after the actual practice has embedded itself in political institutions. Thus, coherent theories of political representation did not emerge until a long time after the development of parliamentary bodies in England and elsewhere in the 13th and 14th centuries.

However, there is evidence that there was some development of theories about the origins of political authority. The *ascending theory* held that political authority originated with the people and was delegated by them to leaders and monarchs. In contrast, those that subscribed to a *descending theory* felt that the authority of some men over others could only be regarded as legitimate if it were divinely sanctioned. Monarchs, rulers and spiritual leaders were God's representatives, ruling over his people (Birch, 1972, pp. 23-24). This was the theory which became widely accepted while the ascending theory was 'driven underground', largely due to the dominant influence of the Christian church in medieval Europe (Ullmann, 1965, p. 13).

The development of representative institutions in medieval Europe was more a result of the financial and administrative needs of kings, rather than any coherent theory of the political right of citizens to choose or influence government. For example, variants of the ascending theory were often used to condone authorities freeing themselves from the influence of the Church, or imposing taxation on their subjects (Birch, 1972, p. 24).

Thus, it was in the Middle Ages that representative institutions were first established as part of the machinery of secular government, although not yet as any form of representative government. European medieval parliaments contained the first seeds of modern representative institutions, in that they allowed commoners to come as agents on behalf of their constituencies and present their grievances, and also act as a channel of communication between ruler and subjects (Birch, 1972, pp. 27-29). However, it wasn't until after the decline of feudalism, and a more repressive 'Age of Absolutism', that ideas like these fully flourished into modern representative government.

2. The Emergence of the Idea of Popular Sovereignty

The concept of popular sovereignty which has its origins in theories such as the ascending theory mentioned above, is the idea that political authority originates from the people and is ultimately held by those people. It is a principle which those of us who today live in Western, democratic societies take for granted, largely since it is the basis for our whole society and system of (representative) government. As recently as the 17th century however, it was a new and radical idea. The following is a very simplified

overview of the development of this idea.

Political upheavals, like the English Civil War in the 17th century, threw up new hopes for democratic ideals. In the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries political theorists began to apply the representative principles formulated in the middle ages to reform parliaments and legislative bodies in order to make them more democratic. For example, the Levellers, a radical movement in 17th century England, demanded such reforms as annual or biennial Parliaments, manhood suffrage, a Parliament that was the agent of the popular will, religious freedom and equality before the law. In conjunction with these democratic reforms they proposed a representative who was a delegate from the people, simply empowered to give consent on behalf of those people through their right to vote. The Whigs, around the same time, proposed a slightly different role for this representative - that of a member of Parliament who was freer to make decisions without the strict approval of constituents. This representative however, was still ultimately responsible to the people, foreshadowing later ideas about representative government. This model of representation - known as the trustee model - was later echoed in the ideas of Edmund Burke, whose ideas have been influential in thought on representative government.

An important contribution to the development of the idea of popular sovereignty and representative government came from the social contract theorists. John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed consent theories to explain the distribution and allocation of political power. Their treatment of the issues of authority and obligation in the political realm led each of them to refer to the concept of representation, albeit in slightly different ways. All three claimed that human beings would find life so difficult in a pre-political 'state of nature' that they would consent - either between one another, or with a prospective ruler - to the creation of political institutions which protected the rights of citizens. This is what Rousseau called the 'social contract'. All three had slightly different slants on representation and what it entailed - Hobbes believed that a people surrendered their power to the ruler within the context of this contract, while Locke believed that power was merely lent, and could be taken back if the ruler was unfit. Rousseau believed more in direct, rather than representative democracy, warning that "The instant a people allows itself to be represented it loses its freedom" (Barber, 1984, p. 145). However, he was influential in his ideas on contract and consent, and the idea of consent is the basis of modern representative institutions. John Stuart Mill, in *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), placed the idea of representation firmly within liberal ideology. For him, this form of government was the most desirable, with ultimate power residing with the people.

While these men established that representation could be adapted to democratic principles, and the idea that ultimate political power resides with the people, representation was taken one step further by thinkers of the French and American Revolutions in the late 18th century. The American Revolution was based upon social contract principles, articulated by thinkers like Thomas Jefferson, who drew heavily on the work of Locke and his advocacy of the right to revolution and government by consent. The Declaration

of Independence followed the final breakdown of communication between the American colonies led by Jefferson on one hand, and the colonial rulers on the other. It justified the revolution partly by citing grievances committed by the colonial rulers under George III, and partly by appealing to the larger, more general principles derived from the writings of theorists like Locke and others of the 17th and 18th centuries who suggested that natural rights and natural law were discoverable by reason (Birch, 1972, p. 42). And, unlike the Whig view (or trustee model) of representation which had gained widespread acceptance in England, the Americans expected their representatives to act simply as delegates from the people. In many ways the new American government was much more radical than its English counterpart in that it took representative government to be a substitute for direct democracy; a way of people ruling themselves.

The French Revolution was even more radical again, basing government upon 'popular sovereignty', derived directly from Rousseau's concept of the 'general will'. This popular sovereignty resided in the National Assembly (formerly the Third Estate), which represented the whole nation. So extreme were the ideas of the French revolutionaries that American and English revolutionaries who migrated to France due to their 'radical' political views found themselves to be moderates compared to their French counterparts - Thomas Paine being one example (Hobsbawm, 1962, p. 74). Interestingly, the French revolutionaries subscribed to a similar view of representatives as that of the Whigs in England, where representatives were not delegates bound by the instructions of their constituents or 'mandates', but were to contrive, in their collective capacity, to act as a voice of the whole nation and so to represent both the government and the governed (Birch, 1972, pp. 46-47).

3. The Triumph of Election

Representative government was seen as a 'republican' form of government by the two men, James Madison and Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, who played a crucial role in establishing modern political representation. They both saw representation as a superior and different form of government than democracy.

In *The Federalist Papers* (1961), Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, defended what was in their day a revolutionary charter - the Constitution of the United States - a blueprint for a modern republic. Madison often contrasted the democracy of the city-states of Antiquity, where a small number of citizens administered government in person, with modern republics based upon representative principles. While forms of representation were not unknown in Antiquity, they existed alongside the popular assembly, another organ of government. According to Madison writing in the Federalist 63, the real difference between ancient democracies and modern republics lies in "the total exclusion of the people in their collective capacity from any share in the latter, and not in the total exclusion of the representatives of the people from the administration of the former" (Hamilton, et al., 1961, p. 387). Madison also argued in Federalist 10 that representation was a superior system because public views are

refined and enlarged by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom is more able to discern the greater good of the whole nation, not just their own individual, or temporary or partial, interests (Hamilton, et al., 1961, pp. 77-84). Madison, like John Stuart Mill, believed that these citizens should be of superior intellect, and that not all people are suited to political office.

They were not alone in this thought. Harrington - champion of republicanism under Cromwells protectorate, admirer of Venice, and reader of Machiavelli - looked into republican tradition for models for future free governments and believed that election, unlike lot, selected pre-existing elites. He argues that when men are left free to choose, they spontaneously recognise their betters, making election the superior system (Manin, 1997, p. 67). Montesquieu, on the other hand, venerated Rome, but concluded that republicanism was a thing of the past. He established a close link between lot and democracy on one hand, and election and aristocracy on the other (Manin, 1997, pp. 70-74).

Rousseau, fond of the institutions of his native republic of Geneva, proclaimed that every legitimate government is republican. Like Montesquieu, Rousseau linked lot with democracy and election with aristocracy, finding that lot is the right selection method for democracy because it allocates office without the intervention of any *particular will*. He concludes however, that because it is possible in an aristocracy to make political use of differences in talent and worth, elective aristocracy is the best form of government.

Both Rousseau and Montesquieu were fully aware that lot can select incompetents, which is what strikes us today, and explains why we do not even think of attributing public functions by lot. But both perceived that lot had other properties or merits that at least made it an alternative worthy of serious consideration, and perhaps justified that one should seek to remedy the obvious defect with other institutions (Manin, 1997, p. 79)

All three of these thinkers - Harrington, Montesquieu, and Rousseau - regarded lot and election as both a part of republican tradition. It was the elites which established representative government as we know it today - based solely on election - which took the use of lot out of the equation (Manin, 1997, p. 44)

Sieyès saw a huge difference between democracy and representation. Sieyès applied the principle of the division of labour to the political realm. For him, representation was superior because it constituted the form of government most appropriate to the condition of modern commercial societies in which individuals were chiefly occupied in economic production and exchange (Manin, 1997, p. 3). Due to lack of time, citizens require representatives for task of government. Thus the position of representative becomes a specialised profession like any other occupation in modern society.

Lot was never seriously considered during the American and French Revolutions. At the same time that

the founding fathers were declaring the equality of all citizens, they decided without the slightest hesitation to establish, on both sides of the Atlantic, the unqualified dominion of a method of selection long deemed to be aristocratic. Manin (1997, p. 79) considers this absence of even a debate about lot an "astonishing paradox" considering the place given to lot in preceding republics which were the source of ideas for the founding fathers of modern representative governments.

4. The Establishment of Representative Government

By the end of the 18th century, a system of representation as we know it today was functioning in US, France (with some hindrances along the way), and England. From these three countries representative ideas and institutions were exported to other parts of the world. From this period of change there emerged two concepts of political representation. The first is the concept of the elected representative as an independent policy maker, who derives legitimacy from having gone through the process of election. The Whig or Burkean view of the representative as a decision maker not bound by mandates, but rather a representative of the whole nation, derives especially from the French and to a lesser extent the British. This is the trustee model of representation. The other concept of representation emerging out of the period of revolution was that of sovereignty resting with the people, with representatives being the peoples' agents. This type of representation is known as the delegate model. This tradition was more strongly American, hence the preamble to the Constitution beginning with the words "We, the people of the United States . . . do ordain and establish this constitution for the United States of America".

The system of representation which emerged out of this period - that is, one with elected representatives - was not the only one ever utilised by different political regimes, but it became the only form which survived into the modern era. The new representative governments of the United States and France, although calling themselves republics (the US from the beginning of the revolution, and France from 1792) were breaking republican tradition in finding no place for lot in their institutions. This tradition was still alive in the 17th and 18th centuries, or at least still in political debate and culture. In the 19th and 20th centuries however, or at least until recent times, the elective model became the accepted norm with no apparent alternative. This was probably due in most part to the legitimacy which election was seen to confer on representatives. This legitimacy becomes especially important when representatives are elected under the British and French tradition of the Whig or Burkean view of representatives, in which representatives have a large amount of freedom in decision making. This is the tradition which Australians have inherited.

In many ways the model of representation which was functioning after the Revolutions is, for all intents and purposes, the same as today. Manin (1997, p. 6) identifies four principles of representative regimes which have been consistent since their invention:

1. Those who govern are appointed by election at regular intervals.
2. The decision-making of those who govern retains a degree of independence from the wishes of the

electorate.

3. Those who are governed may give expression to their opinions and political wishes without these being subject to the control of those who govern.
4. Public decisions undergo the trial of debate.

However, representation in the 20th century, while retaining these basic features, has gone through some major changes. Two of the most relevant (to this study) will be discussed below. They are: the extension of the franchise; and the rise of party politics.

Representation in the 20th century: Universal suffrage and the rise of party politics

Probably the most obvious contribution to the evolution of representative democracy was the inauguration of mass suffrage in western democracies which ensured the representation of previously unrepresented groups. In Australia, by 1904 the vote was extended to women and by 1962 indigenous peoples were enfranchised. The 20th century also saw the formation of political parties. In Australia, by 1910, a two-party class-based system had crystallised, following similar trends in other western political systems (Sawer, 2001a, p. 73).

The rise of party politics is one of the most important developments in the 20th century. A review of the literature of the politics of any Western nation delivers a clear message - that modern representative government is party government, and that the concept of political parties is essential to the analysis of power distribution in the political realm (Jaensch, 1994, p. 1; Sartori, 1976, p. ix; Duverger, 1954). Merkl (1980, p. 1) claims that "political parties and party systems are among the most important political institutions of twentieth century society". Elections in representative democracies like Australia have become dominated by contests between parties, thus making parties, elections, and representation in the Australian context inseparable (Jaensch, 1997, p. 389).

The major parties not only act as avenues of representation but also as barriers to representation (Sawer & Zappala, 2001, p. 2), structuring and limiting the choices available to the individual voter (Hague, Harrop & Breslin, 1992, p. 196). Political parties then have become the 'middle men' of representational politics, in that they represent the interests or groups that support them and translate this into actual seats in government. There is no longer a dialogue between the elector and the representative; a third party has come between them, radically modifying the nature of their relations. Electors simply ratify the party's choice of candidate(s), and so in a way, the representative receives a double mandate, one from the party (which seems to carry more weight), and one from electors (Duverger, 1954, p. 353).

Parties also simplify the representational process; they stand for set policies on issues making choices between candidates easier for voters who have neither time nor inclination to research into every candidate's policies. Voters choose between parties which represent ideologies, and therefore it is parties that are brought to account when the electorate is dissatisfied (Hughes, 1998, p. 321). A liberal democratic party is expected by voters to "transform the party's ideological beliefs and the demands of its supporting interests into sets of policies" (Smith, 1997, p 167). Voters vote for representatives, many of whom are total strangers, simply because they are endorsed by parties which the voter feels best reflects his interests (Hughes, 1998, p. 294).

It is interesting to note then, as Birch (1972, p. 97) does, that many theoretical writings about political representation ignore the existence of organized political parties. Of course, many of the earlier theorists on representation wrote before the advent of party politics. And more recently, modern theorists have found it difficult to justify the existence of political parties and the discipline they entail. How can a representative justify voting along the party line if his constituents or even the whole national good is not in accordance with this line?

One theory which has been formulated to answer this problem is the electoral mandate theory. Very simply put, this theory holds that electors are presented with two or more programs of action, these being party platforms and policies. The party elected on their program/policies then has a mandate to carry out these actions. In turn, this will not put too much power in the hands of party leaders if the parties are democratically organised. Individual MP's are then expected to support party policy in Parliament since this was the platform along which they were elected.

The electoral mandate theory holds well if all players involved behave as they should. For example, if party leaders do not have undue amounts of power, and if parties carry out those platforms upon which they were elected. Of course, practical experience tells us that this is not always the case, and in fact is a major issue for most voters. The focus group research conducted for this study and outlined in Chapter Six, finds that many voters today are dissatisfied with party politics, and recent evidence shows that Australians are now voting for more independent (non-party) candidates than ever before, and are shunning the two major parties at election time.

Some argue the failure of representative democracy in political systems in the 20th century, due the increasing dominance of the executive and extension of government activities in many areas (for example, the popularity of Keynesianism in economics for a large part of the century). As Phillips (1995, pp. 113-114) asks, does this represent a shift away from the 'representational' concept of the legislature envisioned by John Stuart Mill, in which the representative assembly controls and watches a government performed by experts?

It is true that the late 20th century demonstrated increasing calls for a more participatory, as opposed to representative, democracy (Barber, 1984). These calls can be understood as an attempt to respond to widespread recognition that many representative democracies today face serious problems stemming from inadequate political understanding and information among the electorate, increasingly low levels of voter turnout, corruption and other violations of democratic accountability by public officials, all of which can be attributed to the non-participatory nature of large scale representative democracies (Gutman, 1995, p. 415). Regarding Australia, Solomon (1988) observes:

It is not at all surprising . . . that there is little general interest or participation in [Australian] politics. Compulsory voting, backed by the threat of fines, ensures a high turnout on election day, but there is no indication that those who are forced to the polls (and would not have gone voluntarily) have much interest in what happens as a result of the ballot that they cast. (p. 7)

The issues involved in the above statements are many and complex, and can be seen as posing serious problems for representative democracy in the 21st century. Many of these issues merit separate investigation. The ones which this study will take up are those to do with elections, electoral systems, and lack of voter understanding of these, achieved through analysis of the AV in Australia.

CHAPTER THREE

THE HISTORY AND EFFECTS OF THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE AT A FEDERAL LEVEL

History

Australia's political institutions and practices work within a complex and peculiarly Australian framework which is an amalgam of three influences. The first is the Westminster system of responsible government; second, the American system of federalism and judicial review; and third, the 19th century liberal and 20th century European tradition of proportional representation. Often these influences have been contradictory and resulted in argument and conflict in Australian political history, resulting in fairly unique formulations such as the alternative vote (AV).

Australia has long been regarded as a laboratory for democratic political innovation, being described as the first nation created through the ballot box, with much of its early identity as a nation revolving around its democratic experiments (Sawer, 2001b, p. 69). Electoral reform was one area in which Australia caught the attention of such champions of representative democracy as John Stuart Mill, who drew on the Australian interest in PR to argue the case for parliamentary reform in the United Kingdom. Thomas Hare's proposal for a new electoral system for Great Britain and Ireland in 1859 was influenced by Mill's ideas on representation and was essentially what we know today as the STV. The AV, or preferential voting system, for single-member constituencies was developed and refined in Australia, and in fact, has been largely unique to the Australian experience.

The main reason behind the development of the AV was to adapt the STV for use in single-member constituencies. The first documented method of this reworking of the STV appears to have been by Professor W. R. Ware of Harvard in 1871, in experiments of voting procedures on college students. He demonstrated that, where no candidate has an absolute majority, the sequence of elimination of the lowest placed candidate and the transfer of his or her votes to continuing candidates, could work in single-member electorates just as effectively as in Hare's complex scheme of proportional representation.

An influential campaigner for electoral reform in Australia was E. J. Nanson, Professor of Mathematics at Melbourne University from 1875-1922. He promoted this system of AV (as of yet, unused anywhere else in the world) as a viable choice for the House of Representatives during the framing of Australian constitution in the 1890's. It was clear that political pressures would ensure that the House of Representatives would utilise single-member electoral districts and Nanson wanted at least to ensure the choice of the AV which he saw as being far superior to other single-member systems.

Nanson did have considerable influence on the first Electoral Bill presented to the new federal Parliament in 1902, which provided for AV in the lower House, and STV in the Senate. He was not alone. In fact, Australia, on the eve of Federation, boasted an impressive array of theorists on representation whose many written commentaries on the ideals of representation provided the Australian political community with a stimulus to further reform, should there be political will (Uhr, 2000, p. 5).

At this stage in Australian political development, three bodies of thought had emerged regarding electoral systems. One was made up of the champions of proportional representation (PR) and preferential voting (the AV), now referred to as 'proportionalists'. Proportionalists believed that only when all significant social groups were given an effective voice in Parliament, would the political community be stable. They argued that only when the legislature had become a microcosm of the whole society, in all its variety of interests, could real political integration be achieved (Graham, 1968, p. 203). This group included Liberal politicians such as Alfred Deakin and Sir George Turner, who were concerned about the growing power of party organisations. Middle class intellectuals, greatly influenced by the ideas of John Stuart Mill, also supported proportional methods of voting. Mill and his circle were of considerable importance in Australian electoral history, with supporters from women's suffrage to the representation of minorities clothing themselves in his intellectual authority (Sawer, 2001b, p. 76).

It must be noted at this point that often arguments for PR and the preferential voting system (the AV) went hand in hand, and supporters of one were usually supporters of the other. Similar outcomes were anticipated for both; that is, provision for greater scope of representation, particularly of minorities, in Australian politics, and the lessening of the effect of the 'wasted vote' which occurs under more simple plurality systems (the AV being a more complex plurality system). It has become apparent however, that the effects of the AV have been largely different from those of the PR system advocated by the proportionalists and now used in upper houses in Australia.

The two other groups of opinion at the time were closely aligned with each other against the proportionalists. Firstly, the conservatives argued that representation of groups and classes within the legislature would encourage factionalism within politics. They wanted voters to identify themselves with broad political movements, thinking in terms of national interest. The interplay of two large parties each concerned with the general good was accepted by the conservatives as natural and desirable (Graham, 1968, p. 204).

The other group in Australian political thought at the turn of the century, the dualists, believed that a two party system perpetuated by a simple majority electoral system, was not so much desirable, but necessary. They claimed a third party would use the balance of power under a proportional system to extort concessions from the governing party (Graham, 1968, p. 204). None of these three groups fully realised that the AV, advocated by the proportionalists for the federal lower house and opposed by the other two

groups, would actually promote the development of the two-party system and ensure that voters thought in terms of broad political movements, due to the AV facilitating a 'politics of the centre'. It must be pointed out that these debates were taking place at a time when the party system was in embryonic stages in Australian politics, and it is evident in hindsight that the formation of the party system was bound closely to electoral law developments.

In the end however, conservative opinion held sway and the systems of AV and STV were deleted during the passage of the first electoral bill, to be replaced with first-past-the-post systems for both Houses. In spite of the efforts of reformers and idealists such as Professor Nanson, Andrew Inglis Clark, Catherine Helen Spence, and the Ashworth brothers, elected politicians proved themselves rather evasive in the application of the very relevant ideals of the Australian theorists regarding representation and electoral reform (Reid & Forrest, 1989, pp. 87-94). These politicians were not willing to introduce electoral law which they were not certain would further their own interests, and as of yet there had not been any sustained experiences with the AV anywhere else to provide a working example.

Before the third federal election in 1906, protectionist Prime Minister Deakin wrote to his Labor counterpart, Chris Watson, suggesting an exhaustive ballot (compulsory AV) which he hoped would isolate the free trade forces of George Reid, and provide an electoral "safety valve" for them both (Reid & Forrest, 1989, p. 114). The Labor Party however, benefited from the vote-splitting amongst non-Labor candidates making it uninterested in this kind of electoral reform. This very issue of vote-splitting would soon prompt Liberal governments to persist with the introduction of the AV.

After the failure of two more bills, in 1915 a Royal Commission into Commonwealth Electoral Law and Administration handed down the following recommendation (cited in Parliament, 1983):

preferential voting [the AV]: . . . there must necessarily be many shades of political opinion, which, in a democratic country, should be given expression to in the freest possible manner. In order that public opinion may be portrayed in distinct broad tones of thought, we strongly urge the adoption of preferential voting for the House of Representatives. (p. 8)

As always in matters political, considerations of partisan advantage were behind the initiation of this Royal Commission by Sir Joseph Cook's Liberal government (1913-1914). Liberals were concerned because, more and more often, minority Labor candidates were defeating divided conservative candidates.

In 1917, the Nationalist Party under Hughes was able to defeat Labor and form a governing majority. Under this government, legislation to provide for the AV in the lower house was introduced in 1918, following a nasty scare in which a Labor candidate with a mere 35 per cent of the vote won the by-election for the seat of Swan in Western Australia. In the Flinders by-election in Victoria in May of 1918 the Victorian Farmers Union candidate withdrew his nomination after the National Party, afraid of the

consequences of a split vote, promised to introduce a bill providing for the AV in elections to the House of Representatives. The result of the Swan by-election was in danger of being repeated at the Corangamite by-election in Victoria later that year. The farming lobby threatened to split the Nationalist's vote by standing its own candidates unless the electoral system was reformed. The resulting *Commonwealth Electoral Act* of 1918 remains, in effect, the statute governing electoral competition at a national level today. Thus, the Corangamite by-election was won on the preferences of the Victorian Farmer's Union, in spite of the Labor candidate leading the on primary vote. Following this, the practice of distributing how-to-vote cards outside polling booths, showing voters a suggested preference ordering amongst all candidates, quickly served to institutionalise such arrangements without placing excessive expectations on the interest or memory of voters (Reilly, 2001, p. 85).

The influence of political parties in the establishment and amendment of electoral law is a foregone conclusion. While many electoral reforms date to an earlier period before the crystallisation of the two-party class-based system around 1910 (Sawer, 2001a, pp. 73-74), after 1910 liberal reformers were no longer an independent force and electoral reform became bound up in party politics. The proposals of 1902 were defeated on their own merits, in spite of coherent and logical argument for the adoption of the AV and STV, and the perceived benefits to a new and flourishing democracy. However, when it became politically expedient for these very same electoral reforms to be adopted by those who had previously rejected them, in both cases the reforms came not only as a result of the pursuit of principles of electoral justice - although this must be recognised as a contributing factor - but largely from pragmatic considerations of party gain.

The conventional approach amongst researchers toward analysis of the history of electoral law and policy, has been to reduce the introduction of electoral systems wholly to the self-interest of the political parties dominating Parliament at the time. Although the role of the political parties as key stakeholders in the electoral system has received prominent attention, it is important to note that parties rarely obtain voting methods entirely appropriate to their needs. As Uhr (2000) states:

Parliament is more than the sum of the interest of the political parties represented in it. Just as the political parties represented in the early Commonwealth Parliaments had to adopt standing orders consistent with the long-term interest of Parliament as an institution of national governance, so too those original parties had to adopt electoral laws compatible with the wider institutional role of Parliament in Australian national governance. (p. 4)

Commonwealth electoral legislation is more than just an outcome of the interests of the parties, although they do play a role. It is necessary to regard the Electoral Acts of 1902 and 1918 as carefully weighed pieces of legislation, passed, not as casual expedients, but as a means of providing what were considered to be appropriate conditions for the interaction of parties at the electoral level (Graham, 1968, p. 202). As becomes evident through this study of the AV, those who engineer electoral acts are not always able to

predict accurately how the method they choose would work in practice.

It is very likely that the unpredictability of new electoral systems has played a large part in there being very little experimentation with the AV outside of Australia. This being in spite of a favourable and comprehensive study in the United Kingdom of the likely workings of the AV contained in the *Report of the Royal Commission Appointed to Enquire Into Electoral Systems* (1910). Other notable experiments with the AV, however, occurred in the Canadian provinces of Alberta, Manitoba and British Columbia. They were slightly different than as practiced in Australia. Firstly, the AV was not used as uniformly as in Australia. The AV in Alberta and Manitoba was utilised in conjunction with PR, with rural areas to be the only constituencies to be elected with a system of AV. And, in British Columbia, the AV was used in both single and multi-member districts simultaneously, leading to much confusion and delays when determining election results, particularly in the first (1952) election (Phillips, 1976, p. 277). Secondly, the AV utilised optional preference marking, unlike the majority of the Australian experiment which has been with compulsory preference marking. Thirdly, Australia has the compulsory vote which adds an extra dimension to analysis of any voting system implemented (Phillips, 1976, pp. 239, 245-247, 275), as will be discussed later in this chapter. While not the primary focus of this study, reference will be made throughout at times to the Canadian experience with the AV when comparison can shed light on the workings of this system of voting.

Outcomes

The main reason behind the introduction of the AV (commonly called 'preferential voting' by those who introduced it) was to secure majority representation in single-member seats by giving more effective voice to neutral or non-party opinion in order to ensure that the seats were won on the basis of an absolute majority of votes. It is certainly true that the AV system in a sense 'manufactures' a majority vote for the winning party, avoiding the possibility inherent in first-past-the-post systems of a candidate in a three or more cornered contest gaining a seat even while the majority of electors did not vote for them. The distribution of preferences ensures that a candidate has the support of an absolute majority of voters, thus enhancing the legitimacy of the government. The way in which parties with similar ideological views are then able to form coalitions without their votes working against each other is often seen as a positive effect of the AV (Reilly, 2001, pp. 78-79).

During the debates on the electoral bills of 1902 and 1918, it was recognised that the AV would have this effect of manufacturing majorities, and it was indeed considered desirable. However, it was not foreseen that the use of the AV in single-member constituencies would work to the advantage of centre parties rather than extreme candidates. The failure to predict this in 1918 had far reaching consequences for all parties involved (Graham, 1968, p 213). Due to the reliance on preference assurance of other candidates

for victory under an AV system, the application of this method in a system of right, centre, and left parties results in a high proportion of centre victories in constituencies where political forces are evenly balanced. Over time, "such victories could have the cumulative effect of exaggerating the electoral and parliamentary strength of the centre party - or of a minor party treated by the electors as if it were a centre party" (Graham, 1968, p. 214). This situation occurs because for a party to gain enough votes to win a seat under a single-member preferential system, a candidate must appeal to a majority of voters in order to gain, if not first preference votes, then either second or third preferences of those who vote for more obscure candidates. Parties then are encouraged by this voting system to tailor their policies toward the centre of the political spectrum. Graham (1968, pp. 214-215) further points out that if the Barton government had appreciated this fact and persisted with its original intention of introducing the AV for the election of Representatives, the Protectionist Party may have fared better in the 1903 and 1906 elections. Not only would it have countered vote-splitting, but also would have checked the defection of voters to the extreme candidates and enabled the Protectionists, as a centre party, to win contests which were evenly divided between three parties.

After the introduction of the AV in 1918, the Country Party, viewed as a centre party by voters, thus benefited from the preferences of both the National and Labor votes. The farm groups themselves were very likely surprised and delighted by this unexpected effect of the AV. While they had pressed for the reform in order to counter the effects of vote-splitting which benefited Labor because it discouraged farmers to support sectional candidates, the AV did help the party make a decisive rather than partial breakthrough into politics (Graham, 1968, p. 215). However, the assertion by Duverger that the introduction of the AV was crucial to the birth of the Country Party (1954, p. 218), has been largely discounted by Australian researchers (Goot, 1985, p. 223) who also look to other factors as being important in the success of this party.

An immediate, though unintended, effect after the AV was introduced in 1919 for voting in the House of Representatives, was that at the next election in 1922 many voted informally or did not vote. This was one reason why in 1925 [1924] Parliament was persuaded to vote for compulsory voting (Rydon, 2002, p. 172). Compulsory voting, coupled with the AV utilising compulsory preferences, as employed in the Australian context, ensures that candidates and governments are elected on a true majority of votes. A strong argument for compulsory voting is that participation and consent of all citizens legitimises government and provides citizens with a "sense of proprietorship" (Phillips, 2001, pp. 14-15).

The exchange of preferences between candidates within parties so as to encourage multiple endorsement by parties, was another early hope of the conservative parties who introduced this system on a federal level. They saw the use of the AV as means of abolishing pre-selection, which is often viewed as undemocratic. The 1915 Royal Commission found that this would be a beneficial result of the AV, allowing electors to have some choice within party lines. Many hoped that this would temper the strict

party discipline of the Labor Party by making pre-selection unnecessary (Parker, 1960, p. 66). Even amongst the champions of PR there were those who conceded that if an end to 'caucus control' within the Labor Party was the sole object of their reforms, then the AV would be enough to achieve this (Jowett, 1917, pp. 6-7). However, by the end of the 1920's it was conceded that the AV had failed completely in this area of federal politics (Goot, 1995, p. 225). Maybe the only positive outcome was that some of the first women elected, such as Edith Cowan and Dame Enid Lyons, were elected in seats where conservative parties practiced multiple endorsement and gave their supporters a choice between male and female candidates (Rydon, 2002, p. 173). The failure of the AV to promote multiple endorsements, both in the past and in recent times, is unfortunate for Australian democracy, since often the only effective contest in elections is party pre-selection, particularly if the electorate is a 'safe' seat for either of the major party groupings (this factor is discussed in more detail below).

As attested to above, one of the main intentions behind the introduction of the AV in the House of Representatives was to counter the effects of vote-splitting. On a federal level at least, there is no doubt that the AV system has adversely affected the ALP for much of the twentieth century, and hence was a target of Labor hostility during most of this period. This was especially true in the first half of the century. Benefit to non-Labor parties was particularly noticeable in the first three elections after the introduction of the AV (1919, 1922, and 1925). In these only 9 per cent of successful ALP candidates were returned after a count of preferences, compared to 25 per cent of Nationalist candidates, and 42 per cent of Country Party candidates. Although just over half of these non-Labor candidates had been leading on first preferences anyway, the insurance that the AV provided still definitely contributed (amongst other factors) to the survival of the infant Country Party. As established in the literature review in Chapter One, plurality systems, of which the AV is a variant, tend to favour a two-party system and the emergence of small parties can be difficult unless they are based on a special regional interest, like the National (Country) Party.

The table in Appendix 2 shows all the elections for the federal lower house between 1919 and 2001. The table shows the number of electorates which required preference distribution in each election, and also the number of electorates in which the candidate who was leading on the first count (i.e. with a plurality of votes) was defeated due to preference distribution. For all the federal elections between 1919 and 1951, of the 73 seats in which preferences changed the results, non-Labor won 58, and 49 of these were taken from Labor candidates. Labor won only 15 of these contests, with 10 being taken from their non-Labor counterparts. The other 5 were won from other Labor candidates, 3 of these from Labor splinter groups (Rydon, 1968a, p. 191). Furthermore, almost all of the cases where Labor benefited from preference distribution and came from behind to win, date back to the Langite splits of the thirties and forties when the breach was on the left of the main federal ALP, so that an ALP candidate might "gain from the preferences of either Labor left-wing schismatics or ordinarily anti-Labor voters to his right" ('Australian Electoral System', 1969, p. 154).

The period after Labor's split in the 1950's has been much cited as a time when the AV worked against Labor. The federal elections of 1958, 1961, 1963, 1966, and 1969, after the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) became a nationwide party, demonstrated a certain disadvantage to the ALP from preference distribution under the AV system. Of the four elections in the 1960's, all of which were won by the Liberal-Country coalition, two would have been won by Labor under a first-past-the-post system. In 1961 for example, the ALP won 47.9 per cent of the primary vote, compared to the Coalition's 42.09 per cent. The DLP vote amounted to 8.71 per cent of the primary vote (without them gaining any seats), a substantial amount for a minor party, which when distributed as preferences ensured the Coalition victory (Government and Politics database).

In all these elections (1958-69), many Liberal and Country Party candidates had either initial leads confirmed by preferences or came from behind to win, while very few ALP candidates benefited from preference distribution. An anonymous writer in the *Current Affairs Bulletin* in 1969 concluded: "So long as the DLP remains at its present strength and as implacably opposed to the ALP, the retention of preferential voting [i.e. the AV] appears certain to disadvantage the ALP" ('Australian Electoral System', p. 155). Indeed it was so - until the mid-70's the AV was most beneficial to; firstly, and most obviously, the non-Labor coalition; but secondly, also to the Democratic Labor Party who, while not gaining any House of Representative seats themselves, found their votes were not wasted in that for many years they helped keep the ALP out of office (Solomon, 1988, p. 135). This, then, is an example of the AV sustaining the presence of a minor party, although not necessarily allowing actual representation (i.e. seat share in Parliament).

Some commentators go as far as to argue that the use of the AV in House of Representatives elections up until the mid-1960's (although 1961 would have to be considered an exception) behaved no differently to a straight plurality (first-past-the-post) system of voting (Rae, 1971, p. 108). Rydon (1966, p. 153) and Butler (1973) claim that the AV affected only the division of seats between rival Liberal and Country Parties, rather than the overall outcome. Lakeman, in her assessment of plurality and proportional voting systems published in 1970, concluded that under the AV the results are as "unrepresentative as those of a British general election [which operates under a straight plurality system]" (pp. 65, 70).

Since the mid-1970's developments in federal politics have meant that the effects of the AV have changed somewhat. Jaensch (1994, p. 92) describes this era as "characterised by instability at all levels of party and electoral politics" with "unprecedented turnovers in seats". As well as some other minor factors, he attributes this largely to how voters distribute preferences amongst parties. He points to the emergence of non-aligned parties such as the Australian Democrats who (at least until very recently) have not directed supporters' preferences (unlike previous minor parties such as the DLP, who were strongly anti-Labor), and which reject any formal coalition or informal alliance with either Labor or the Coalition (Jaensch,

1994, pp. 92-93). This factor then creates a new situation in which major parties need to court the interests of these minor parties in order to gain the second and subsequent preferences of those who vote for them.

Already noted was how the preferences of DLP during the fifties and sixties affected the seat share won by the ALP. The decline of the DLP after 1972 temporarily lowered the number of electorates in which preferences were counted (see table in Appendix 2). The emergence of the Australian Democrats in 1977 brought the number of such electorates up again but at a lower level of impact on the final results, at least during the seventies and eighties (Hughes, 1983, pp. 226-228). When Democrat preferences did affect the results significantly, it was almost always to Labor's advantage. Because the Democrats avoided directing their supporters' preferences (unlike the DLP), they affected the results in less seats. However, by avoiding the painful choice in House of Representatives contests between the two major parties, the Democrats kept their supporters together. They thus became in the nineties, as far as the AV allowed, a viable minor party in lower house elections which was able to influence the policy of the major parties in being a constant alternative for disaffected voters. The advent of centre-oriented minor parties in the 1970's has resulted in the advantage enjoyed by the Coalition from the AV being substantially reduced. Since the 1990's, the ALP has been more likely to benefit from minor party preferences.

Another factor which has reduced the advantage enjoyed by the Coalition through the AV in recent times is the decline in the number of three-cornered contests where preference distribution has been required to determine the winning candidate (see table below). Previously these kinds of contests were largely important in determining the number of electorates which required preference distribution, and delivered results which favoured the non-Labor parties. It was, of course, one of the main reasons behind the introduction of the AV. However, as their numbers decrease, so does the number of electorates in which preference flows favour non-Labor (Department of the Parliamentary Library website).

Table 3.1

Three-cornered contests in Federal House of Representatives elections (1984-2001)

Election year	Total electorates requiring preference distribution	Number of three-cornered contests
1984	44	35
1987	54	41
1990	92	29
1993	63	30
1996	65	15
1998	98	16
2001	87	16

Source: Department of the Parliamentary Library website

More important in recent elections has been the increasing share of the primary vote allocated to minor parties and independents, which has meant that the major parties have come to rely more on preferences from a wider variety of parties and independents for their seats in the House of Representatives. As the two major party groupings are increasingly seen as distant from, and unrepresentative of, the Australian populace, more voters are choosing to allocate their first preference vote to minor parties and independents. Thompson (2000) identifies a rise of 'new politics' which broadly encompasses such movements as women's rights, student rights, gay rights, black rights, environmentalism, and participatory open government, and which has challenged the role of the major parties as effective representatives of all the people in Australia. Thompson states that 'new politics' brought with it an awareness that the members of Parliament, despite party differences, were largely homogenous. They were white, male, 'Anglo-Australians', and as such did not represent the diversity of all Australians (Thompson, 2000, p. 12). While some of these claims could be contentious, thus meriting separate critical discussion, the basic logic behind these statements - i.e. that Australians feel that Parliament needs to be more representative of all of society - is largely sound. This has resulted in more first preference votes for minor parties and independents, thus requiring more preference distribution to determine winning candidates.

This increase in the number of electorates which have required preference distribution to determine winning candidates reached a peak in the 1998 federal election, with 98 out of 148 electorates requiring preference distribution. There has not been however, a corresponding increase in the number of divisions where the result has been changed by preferences (see Appendix 2).

This development makes it vital for major parties to consider the interests of the minor parties, thus ensuring that the minorities represented through these parties do have input, albeit indirectly, into policy formation. To take a much cited example, in the 1990 Federal election, the ALP was trailing the Coalition in opinion polls leading up to the election. However, because the ALP managed to garner substantial support from the Green and Democrat voters by tailoring their policies accordingly, it achieved election victory with less than 40 per cent of the primary vote. It is now widely accepted that federal Labor governments are more likely to be elected with the help of Green and Democrat preferences under a full preferential (AV) system (Jupp and Sawyer, 2001, p. 218). Reilly (2001, pp. 87-88) sees this kind of outcome as a 'win-win situation' for both groups, obviously for the ALP, but also for the minor parties, "who did not win any lower house seats, but nonetheless saw their preferred major party in government and committed to favourable policies in their areas of concern".

As votes for major parties decline with more choosing to vote for minor parties and independents, the AV system will come to have a greater role in ensuring that the government elected is the most preferred government of the Australian people, even if this majority is 'manufactured' to a greater extent than ever before in Australian political history. In the last Federal House of Representatives election in 2001, the

first preference vote share for a candidate other than from one of the two major parties was nearly 20 per cent (Government and Politics database). In other words, over 2 million voters preferred to vote for a minor party or independent. From these 2 million votes, direct representation in only 3 seats resulted (all won by independents), which means that preference distribution was extremely relevant for these two million voters to have their say without registering a 'wasted vote'.

Another factor which may make preference flows all the more important in future elections is what political analyst Laurie Oakes calls the "genteel decline" of the National Party (2003a, p. 14). Many of the issues that have given the Nationals their impetus over the years have lost their political appeal, with party membership steadily declining. The National (formerly Country) Party, benefited from the AV for many years with consistent over-representation in the federal lower house. Recent elections however, have seen them lose seats to their Coalition counterparts, the Liberals, as well as to independents. While in most the states the Liberals have been cutting into the Nationals for years, at the Federal level the process has been "quiet but inexorable" (Oakes, 2003a, p. 14). Although Liberals only contest federal National seats when a vacancy occurs through retirement or death, due to an agreement to avoid three-cornered contests, independents on the other hand are a very real threat for National Party seats in crisis. So, as preference flows become more important in determining the outcomes in many electorates, the voting system which once was the protector of the National Party could now be its nemesis. And furthermore, if the Liberals are increasingly unable rely on National seats to form government in the lower house, going into the next Federal election in 2004 with a majority of just seven seats will make the Liberal Party as vulnerable to preference flows as its Labor counterpart has traditionally been. Considering that most commentators see Labor benefiting more from Green and Democrat preferences than the Liberals, the AV does not bode well for the current government.

One final outcome of the AV which needs to be assessed is the representation of diverse elements of Australian society under the system, as this was one of the original intentions behind it's introduction. The proportionalists, discussed earlier in this chapter, who argued for the adoption of the AV for lower house elections during the debates about electoral law at the beginning of the last century, did so in the hope that the AV would provide for greater scope of representation, particularly of minorities. This group also advocated PR for the federal Senate for similar reasons. However, the two systems, while superficially similar, have delivered quite different results.

In his discussion of the functioning of legislative assemblies, John Uhr points out that majorities must eventually win. He argues that "deliberative assemblies are not entrenched protection for minority forces, although they seek at least to delay the hand of automatic majorities and, more especially, to mould the very process by which majorities are formed" (1998, p.94). This last point is especially relevant for the electoral systems which choose these assemblies (although not expressly what Uhr himself was getting at). While not achieving final seat share, a minor party or parties can influence the policies of major

parties under a system of AV through the use preference flows as a bargaining chip, such as the Greens and the Democrats influenced ALP policy in the 1990 election.

The AV then, in some ways could be argued to be a workable compromise between majority and minority representation. While giving some scope to minor parties and opinions, the AV does tend to 'manufacture' majorities which is considered by some to be essential for a stable democratic government. For this same reason, others criticise this system because it does not allow for accurate direct representation in parliament of a minority, or support for a minor party, which is spread over many constituencies. Support for a minor party has to be fairly concentrated in one electorate to enable that party to gain representation through a seat.

The power of the major parties then, enhanced by the use of the AV in single-member constituencies, is clearly an obstacle to *direct* minority representation in the lower house on several levels. Firstly, internal party machinations, especially pre-selection processes, are accorded heightened importance under the AV system, in spite of one of the early hopes for the AV being the abolition of party pre-selection. This is because the majority of lower house electorates, state and federal, are safe seats for one of the major parties due to several factors related to the use of the AV. As mentioned above, this ultimately makes the only effective contest in these seats party pre-selection. Preselection processes are often effectively closed to 'outsiders' and generally favour white, Anglo-Celtic, middle-class candidates (McAllister, 1992; Jupp, 1988, p. 168; Allan, 1995). Added to this is the tendency for the AV to work against candidates who do not hail from one of the two major party groupings. Over-representation of one or more of the three entrenched parties in the Federal House of Representatives has occurred consistently since the 1940's, a direct result of the use of the AV in single member electorates. For many years the Liberal Party, although at times the Labor Party instead (especially more recently during their election victories in the 1990's), were over-represented in federal lower house elections. The National Party has been consistently over-represented since the 1940's (Jaensch, 1994, pp. 85-86; 1997, pp. 404-405).

At this point, PR systems provide a useful contrast to the AV. PR is often argued for by activists representing political minorities such as women or ethnic/cultural groups, because under this system minorities have greater power through direct representation and clear overall majorities are rare, thus lessening the power of major parties. However, it is often argued that if first-past-the-post systems give too little weight to smaller parties, PR gives them too much. Under PR, smaller parties are often in a pivotal position in post-coalition negotiations, able (in theory at least) to form an alliance with either major party (Hague, Harrop & Breslin, 1992, p. 196). Under the Australian system of PR in State and Federal upper Houses, minor parties and independents can hold the balance of power on crucial issues, giving them a power disproportionate to their votes. Theoretically, these situations can have a potentially destabilising effect, with frequently shifting alliances and bargaining for support of minorities. It must be noted that in practice however, ideological factors limit the range of feasible bargaining partners, thus

maintaining some stability (Hague, Harrop & Breslin, 1992, p. 196). The AV then, which sustains the presence of some minor parties while electing stable majority governments, provides a compromise between simple plurality electoral systems and proportional electoral systems.

In conclusion, the effects of the AV in federal politics must be classified into two sections. The first kinds of results are more the effects of single-member constituencies in general, which apply to the AV as it falls within this wider grouping of electoral system. The most significant feature of the single-member electorate system is that it always tends to exaggerate the representation of the winning party, and the greater the victory, the more it will be exaggerated proportionately (Rydon, 1968a, p. 179). This is effect of 'manufactured majorities' discussed previously. A related effect is the way in which minor parties are discriminated against unless they hold concentrated support in one electorate. This discrimination is moderate against the second party, but against the third, fourth, fifth and so on, the discrimination becomes progressively stronger until it extinguishes their chances of winning altogether (Rydon, 1968a, p. 180). Thus the two-party system in Australia is probably more a result of single-member electorates than anything else.

As has been demonstrated above, the AV, although it has somewhat modified the trend of the single-member electorate system to produce a rigid two-party system, has not encouraged the multiplicity of parties, nor the emergence of a third centre party. Single-member preferential systems such as the AV favour a centre party as opposed to extreme candidates. This encourages parties to become broad-based in order to garner enough votes and preference flows to win. It follows then, that it is not practically feasible for more than two groups to be this broad and operate in the centre of the political spectrum; in this kind of a system only a government and an opposition to 'watch' the government is necessary. Any other party which enters the political scene must differentiate themselves in order to entice vote share away from an existing party, and to do this must then be further along to the right or the left of the political spectrum. And, we have already seen that the system of the AV will generally favour a centre party. So, unless support for minor party is concentrated in one electorate, or unless there is widespread discontent with one or other of the two major players, minor parties under the AV must operate merely as preference suppliers.

Thus, the second set of results of the AV are those to do expressly with the allocation of preferences, as opposed to a cruder first-past-the-post system. These have modified, but not changed dramatically, the effects of single-member electorates. The AV has in essence: prevented vote-splitting within the two main party groupings; favoured moderate candidates; made multiple endorsements feasible although not widely practiced; sustained the presence of some minor parties; and lessened somewhat the psychological effect of the 'wasted' vote. Overall, it has had a consensual, moderating effect on what has the potential (under a simple plurality system) to be a 'zero-sum' electoral process.

The Alternative Vote and 'Two-Party-Preferred' Analysis

As well as the practical outcomes of the AV in Australia outlined above, there has also been the development of a whole system of analysis and theory peculiar to the AV and electoral statistics. This is what is commonly known as the 'two-party-preferred' method of analysis. Because traditionally only one or other of the two major parties has been expected to win electoral contests under the AV system, this form of analysis has been designed to measure the level of support for each of the two parties at any given time, incorporating potential preference flows from other candidates.

This method of measuring electoral support for one or another of the two major parties is a direct indication of the way in which the AV has perpetuated the two-party system. Although muted to some extent by the AV, Duverger's theory of the 'psychological effect' of plurality systems still seems to stop voters utilising the AV system to its full potential. As Sharman (1997) observes:

The institutional context of state lower house party systems makes them very resistant to change. The naturally bifurcated character of parliamentary politics divided between government and opposition means that most voters have a dichotomous view of politics. This is reinforced by *single member preferential voting* [emphasis added] . . . which fosters the belief that electoral politics, no matter how many candidates are on the ballot, is really about voting for one of two big parties. (p. 61)

This then exacerbates, and is exacerbated by, the fact that many single-member electorates are still safe seats for one or other of the major parties (Jupp and Sawyer, 2001, p. 223).

The concept of the two-party-preferred vote has passed into the conventional wisdom of Australian psephology and is promoted by analysts such as Malcolm Mackerras (1975) who claims:

In Australian elections no elector who wishes to cast a formal vote can avoid casting a vote which expresses either a higher preference for the Liberal-CP candidate or a higher preference for the ALP candidate; even if he gives his first preference to a minor party candidate his effective vote is his preference between Liberal-CP and ALP. The elector's only way of avoiding this choice is to vote informal. (p. 275)

This two-party approach is questioned critically by Dean Jaensch who argues that the assumption that it all boils down to a choice between one of two parties is not acceptable. As he points out, Mackerras' analysis, which assumes qualitative equality of each preference allocation, would not explain the recent elections of minor party and independent candidates in lower house elections. Furthermore, his lumping together of Liberal and National parties becomes increasingly questionable as Coalition tensions show no signs of abating (1994, pp. 78-79). The implications of using a system such as this are broader than just

simple election analysis. Mayer (1980) points out the faults of this system of analysis:

Mackerras and those who uncritically use his two-party preferred vote and the pendulum again and again, seem unaware of how they have fashioned an Iron Maiden which crushes the minor parties and independents till they yield nought but preferences Mackerras' approach is not just one among many: it has a grossly misleading and crudely positivistic facticity which hides its ideological assumptions and that of the presentation of data on which it rests. It is visual, widely publicised, mechanistic and has the great merit of being easy to grasp Our hunch is . . . that its artificer and those academics who uncritically use it are not aware of the problems of big party chauvinism, reductionism and minor parties as mere preference suppliers. (pp. 352-353)

Irrespective of the technical difficulties with this system of analysis, the psychological impact of two-party-preferred statistics becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as voters who wish to have their vote count vote only for those parties they deem have a chance at electoral success.

Furthermore, to accept the allocation of preferences as the main contribution of minor parties to the political process concentrates media interest on this area. For years the DLP suffered from this, then the Democrats, and more recently the Greens. When these parties did not play the usual game as preference suppliers, the media simply ignored all the work done on more in depth issues and policies (Mayer, 1980, p. 352). This sets the agenda in a very narrow way, where minor parties are failures because they do not score seats in lower house elections. In this way, the tactic of blaming the victim is used here. The failure of the minor parties is defined in terms set by the large parties - their definition of success (i.e. seat share) is accepted universally by voters and the media alike.

In recent times, as the number of first preference votes going to candidates other than the two major parties increases, two-party pre-dominance has come into question. The increasing presence of independent candidates in both state and federal lower house contests makes the reduction of the final results into a two-party preferred figure somewhat contentious. Is it meaningful or accurate to use a two-party preferred figure when independent candidates are still present in the final count, and especially when the numbers of these situations are increasing?

Increasing support for minor parties presents a similar problem. A recent article in *The Bulletin* (Wright, 2003, pp. 16-20) points to the recent surge of support for the Greens and the fallacy of using two-party preferred methods to document support for either the Liberals or the ALP in the present political climate. Although a recent Newspoll (taken October 2003) rated Labor higher than the Coalition on a two-party-preferred basis, this was done simply assuming that Green second preferences would flow to Labor, since this is what happened in the last federal election. One Labor strategist is quoted as calling this two-party figure "fools gold" (Oakes, 2003b, p. 23). With the Greens now occasionally in a position to win House

of Representative seats in their own right, as Green candidate Michael Organ did in the NSW Cunningham by-election last year, the position of minor parties as mere preference suppliers in a two-party-preferred style of analysis becomes increasingly questionable.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE HISTORY AND EFFECTS OF THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

The analysis of the history and outcomes of the AV in Western Australia is included in this study to provide more insight into AV in practice. While later used in other Australian states, as well as a handful of other places around the world (see Appendix 1), Western Australia was the first state to introduce the AV with compulsory preference markings for any length of time long enough to determine some long term results. Western Australia is important in demonstrating the way in which regional differences can influence the outcomes of electoral systems like the AV. Finally, there has been little attention given to the workings of the AV in Western Australia as a separate study.

History

In spite of attempts to install a system of AV in the Federal Parliament sooner, the AV was first introduced in the Western Australian State Parliament by the Electoral Act of 1907. This Act introduced an entirely new method of voting, primarily designed to prevent the election of candidates who failed to win a majority of valid votes cast. At this stage, the exercise of preference votes was optional, with voters allowed a choice in listing all preferences.

This system was relatively untested as yet anywhere else in the world, with Queensland being the only other state thus far to have experimented with optional preferential marking under a similar system introduced in 1892 (to be replaced in 1942 by a simple plurality system). The system used in Queensland however, was contingent voting, slightly different from the AV. As outlined in the previous chapter, many reformers had championed the use of preferential voting (the AV), along with PR, with efforts to introduce it in the Federal Parliament continuing concurrently.

The introduction of the AV with optional preference marking in 1907 was part of a broad electoral bill encompassing several reforms, dealing with issues such as the qualification of electors, absentee voting, and postal voting. The principle of the AV (called 'preferential voting' at this time), being quite novel, was sometimes confused by those debating the bill with a system of PR. No doubt this was also due somewhat to the fact that reformers championed both systems in the same breath, with PR being promoted for the federal Senate and the AV for the federal House of Representatives. As well as this, PR (the STV in Australia) also requires the distribution of preferences similar to the AV system. At this time, the West Australian members of parliament did not fully understand the difference between the two systems of preference allocation. This lack of understanding was acknowledged in a moment of candour by the Attorney General when introducing the clause to Parliament (WA PD, 1 August 1907):

I know members have an idea that when I spoke on preferential voting on a former occasion I did not quite understand the subject; but I hope to be able to-night, whether I understand it or not, to make the House understand it. (p. 621)

The push for PR throughout Australia was acknowledged by those debating this bill, as well as the fact that PR would probably be introduced in the Western Australian upper house in the future. While it was established that for single-member constituencies PR was not workable, it seems that the debate surrounding voting systems in 1907 reflected an overall trend in political thought throughout the country at the time; that was, to better ensure adequate representation of all sections of the community.

The decision to make preference marking under the AV optional was questioned by another MP, with the Attorney General conceding that "it may be advisable after some years to make the system compulsory" (WA PD, 1 August 1907, p. 621). The rationale for making the system optional at first was to avoid the occurrence of too many informal votes from an electorate making the change to a completely new system of voting, and thus risking discrediting the system altogether before the benefits became apparent. It was anticipated that once the electorate were educated regarding the system, then it would possibly be made compulsory (WA PD, 1 August 1907, p. 623).

The introduction of the AV as an optional form of preferential voting was expected to alleviate the problems associated with the selection of candidates in West Australian Legislative Assembly elections. By 1905 in Western Australia, politics had begun to polarise into two very clear camps - Labor and non-Labor, although the term 'Liberal' was not used in relation to non-Labor until 1911. Vote-splitting plagued the (Liberal) leagues, which were as yet quite unorganised and fragmented (Black, 1979, p. 194-195). In the 1908 election, after the introduction of the optional AV, the Ministerialists listed up to four candidates in some electorates, leaving the choice between them up to the voters. It was assumed that the most popular candidate from this party would collect the preferences of the other non-Labor candidates and thus be elected on a majority of votes (de Garis, 1977, p. 353). This tactic proved unworkable, since voters did not, in most cases, go beyond their first choice of candidate. With only about one in three voters listing further preferences, there were "several instances" where a candidate was elected with only a relative majority of votes (Stenberg, 1911, p. 25). Although the optional AV did alleviate the vote-splitting to some extent, the Ministerialists lost one seat they ought to have won, due to the failure of Liberal and Ministerialist candidates to exchange preferences. This factor contributed "probably in large measure" to the adoption of compulsory AV (Black, 1979, p. 194). In the 1908 election, preference votes were largely ineffective, being counted in only seven out of fifty electorates, and affecting the results in none of these (see table in Appendix 3). It must be mentioned though, that this figure is somewhat distorted by the high ratio of seats held by acclamation (uncontested seats) prevalent in early West Australian elections (Buxton, 1979, pp. 35-36). There were nine uncontested districts in the 1908 election (see Table 4.1 later in this chapter).

In 1911, the Attorney General introduced a bill to the West Australian Parliament for compulsory preferential marking, using the Albany by-election as an example of the failure of the optional system. In this by-election in the Albany Legislative Assembly district in 1909, of the 1587 valid votes cast, 47.5 per cent showed only one preference, 49 per cent two preferences, and only 3.5 per cent three preferences. As a result, the successful candidate was declared elected on 745 valid votes - 49 short of an absolute majority (Byrne, 1960, pp. 26-27). This then was yielding the very results that the AV was designed to prevent; that is, a candidate being elected on a minority of votes. Although then opposition leader Scaddan claimed that compulsory preferential marking would keep voters away from the polls rather than register a vote for a candidate they conscientiously objected to (Byrne, 1960, p. 27), the merits of the system were, on the whole, perceived by most to outweigh the disadvantages. Thus the AV with compulsory marking was introduced by a non-Labor government in Western Australia, for reasons including both electoral advantage to non-Labor and majoritarian principles of democratic government.

Outcomes

The surprising thing about Western Australia is that there has been little research into how the AV system has affected politics overall since its introduction. It is likely that most commentators would assume that the effects of this system would be the same as at the federal level of politics. The most salient aspect of electoral politics in Western Australia for most of the twentieth century has been electoral weighting and malapportionment, surfacing again recently as the 'one vote, one value' issue. This issue has tended to overshadow other electoral issues. Recently, however, other electoral issues have become more topical, and the increased usage of preferences in determining election outcomes has meant that the AV is due for closer scrutiny at all levels of Australian politics.

This comes at a time when Tonkin (1984, p. 45) reports a diminished respect and confidence in single-member electoral systems (of which the AV is one) as opposed to an increasing prestige of proportional systems, with this trend being most pronounced in Western Australia and Queensland. However, what is sometimes overlooked in cruder analyses of voting systems is that the presumed fundamental contrast between single-member and multi-member districts is now more a matter of degree than of kind, as observed by Kitzinger (1959) over forty years ago. The AV is a good example of this, being essentially a multi-member system (the STV) reduced to the AV for use in Australian single-member districts. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, the AV can be seen as a workable compromise between simple plurality systems and proportional systems.

Established in the previous chapter was that the AV was largely introduced at a federal level to combat the rising influence of the Labor party by lessening the effects of vote-splitting between non-Labor

candidates. As with federal politics, the introduction of electoral laws like the AV in Western Australia has long been viewed as the outcome of machinations of blatant political self-interest, rather than the application of principles upon which the Australian political system is based (Gallop, 1998, p. 76). Also discussed in relation to federal politics however, is the way in which electoral systems take on a life of their own and often have outcomes which are unforeseen.

For example, in 1911, the first election in Western Australia to be held under a full (or compulsory) preferential system of the AV, the non-Labor party which had introduced this system (the Ministerialists) lost to the Labor Party under Scaddan! As a result of these kinds of outcomes in Western Australia, the Labor Party's attitude to the AV was varied over the course of the first half century under this system. In 1916, at a Congress of the State branch of the Labor Party, a motion that compulsory preferential marking under the AV be abolished was carried after it was concluded that it did not favour the Labor Party. This was in spite of Labor success at the two previous state elections under the compulsory AV system. At the next Congress in 1919, a motion affirming PR was debated, with one supporter of it arguing that under a system of PR the Great Southern district would return four or five Labor members. There was much disagreement over this however. At the 1922 Congress of the Labor Party a speaker pointed out that the system of PR had actually operated to the injury of the Labor Party in NSW. In the end however, Labor MPs in Western Australia did not put forward any bills to either end the use of the AV, or to introduce any different system such as PR for the lower house. It is probable that their success in the election of 1924 shortly after these debates made this seem irrelevant (Byrne, 1960, p. 27). The AV system appears to have been accepted more easily in the early years by the WA branch of the Labor Party, than on a federal level where for many years Labor opposed it and indeed seemed worse off under it.

This acceptance could be attributed to the fact that up until the 1960's, transfer of preferences between non-Labor parties was poor, with leakage of preferences high (Byrne, 1960, pp. 28-29). Partly, this was due to the fragmentation of the early Liberal Party and its predecessors in Western Australia (Black, 1979). Added to this was the fact that traditional party allegiances and territorial/sectional interests, extremely pronounced in many Western Australian electorates, limited transfer of preferences between non-Labor candidates. Much of this had to do with the background behind the origins of Country Party in WA, which was the first in Australia. The Country Party was formed due to a failure of the Liberal Party to adapt itself to West Australian conditions and adequately represent agricultural and pastoral interests without appearing to favour urban interests. Agriculturalists and pastoralists of the (now) wheatbelt area, and dairy farmers and agriculturalists of the state's south west, loathe to vote Labor, supported the formation of a second conservative party to more adequately represent rural interests. Prominent Liberals, such as former premier John Forrest, were implacably opposed to the formation of another non-Labor party which they felt would be detrimental to the total non-Labor vote and which they perceived would not survive at any rate. The Country Party fielded their first candidates in the 1914 election, and all but one of their resulting eight seats in the Legislative Assembly were won from the Liberals.

Although forced to come to a formal coalition agreement in 1916 which included preference exchanges, for many years unofficial tensions, and indeed often overt hostility, between the two non-Labor parties and their supporters usually resulted in a marked lack of preference exchange in Legislative Assembly contests (Willcock, 1961, pp. 45-60).

For example, Liberal party candidates polled so poorly in wheatbelt areas that the Liberals rarely even contested these seats, leaving them to Country Party candidates. Rather, the Country Party consolidated their support in rural areas, leaving the Liberals to oppose Labor in urban electorates. Indeed, West (1965, p. 80) claims that in many areas triangular contests failed to reach their full potential due to some Country Party members directing their preferences away from their Coalition partners, in spite of a formal agreement between the Liberal and Country parties to swap preferences. An example of this hostility was the 1959 State election where the Country Party did not contest one Labor-held seat, but opposed the Liberal Party in three electorates (West, 1965, p. 82).

It appears then, that transfer of preferences between candidates from similar ideological backgrounds was poor in Western Australia up until the 1960's. Evidence from this era demonstrates that other factors such as the personality vote, local issues, and entrenched sectionalism were more influential in preference allocation. For instance, rebel (unendorsed) candidates from various parties rarely exchanged preferences successfully with their rival endorsed candidates from the same party. Similarly, the transfer of preferences between two candidates of the same rebel group (for example two National Labor candidates), was also poor. In the same vein, candidates from rival organised Country Parties had nearly the same amount of (high) preference leakage as those from rival Labor Parties. Maybe the only exception to this trend against ideologically driven preference allocation was the successful transfer of preferences between Nationalist and National Labor Party candidates. Whether endorsed ALP candidates were able to exchange votes effectively is unknown since multiple endorsement was precluded under Labor's pledge system. There is some evidence however to suggest that it may have worked more effectively than for the other parties, if it had occurred.

Other factors which Byrne (1960 pp. 31-32) claims affected preference allocation are: position on the ballot paper, with higher positions scoring better; number of candidates on the paper, with leakage increasing with the number of candidates; the closeness of many of the contests; and a general carelessness on behalf of voters to allocate preferences thoughtfully. These factors lessened the extent to which preferences were kept within party labels or coalition agreements. So, as far as uniting the non-Labor vote, the AV system seems to have been rather ineffective in Western Australia, despite being a reason behind its introduction. In other Australian states also, there is scant evidence to suggest that three-cornered contests under the AV have been overly beneficial to non-Labor (Goot, 1985, pp. 223-224), although Victoria appears to demonstrate more disadvantage to Labor under the AV in early years than others (Rydon, 1968b, p. 237).

For the sake of comparison, it would appear that it has not been unusual for the AV to fail to ensure preference exchange within ideology or coalition agreements even with non-Australian experiences of the use of the AV. It is likely that those who introduced the AV in British Columbia, which used the AV (with optional preference marking) for the provincial elections of 1952 and 1954, looked to how the AV had apparently worked *on a federal level* in Australia to disadvantage less conservative parties, as well as favouring more centre rather than radical candidates. The AV was introduced by the conservative coalition (Liberals and Progressive Conservative Parties) who expected to gain from each other's preferences, and thus keep the socialist CCF (Co-operative Commonwealth Federation) from forming government and "wrecking" British Columbia's economy (Phillips, 1976, pp. 271-273). Ultimately however, the system worked to the disadvantage of the conservative parties and actually enabled a new party, the Social Credit League, to benefit from the preferences of all three of the original parties and form government. The AV did, however, prevent the CCF from winning government on a minority of votes and "upsetting the free enterprise system" (Phillips, 1976, pp. 276-281). Again, those who introduce electoral law cannot always predict how it will shape outcomes. The conservative coalition in British Columbia were right about the disadvantage to the CCF, but misjudged the benefit the AV would bring to their own chances of electoral success.

Covered in the previous chapter was the early hope that introduction of the AV would enable the abolition of pre-selection since candidates from the same party would be able to exchange preferences. While at the federal level the AV was deemed to have been a failure as far as abolishing pre-selection was concerned, in some states it was more successful, with Western Australia being one of these. Although success was limited, it did see the Liberals in Western Australia endorse multiple candidates with positive results (i.e. minimal leakage of preferences), and there was evidence that it had the potential to work well for the ALP also (Byrne, 1960, pp. 28, 31), should there be an end to the party's opposition to it. As demonstrated above however, the refusal to endorse was not particularly effective in enforcing party discipline in Western Australia, especially in non-Labor camps, with many rebel candidates holding seats due to, or even in spite of, preference distribution (Byrne, 1960, p. 28). The election of some women in electorates where the Liberal Party gave electors a choice between male and female candidates through multiple endorsement was mentioned in the previous chapter. In 1921 in the lower house in Western Australia, Edith Cowan was thus elected and became the first woman in parliament.

As far as other effects of the AV in Western Australia up until the mid 1970's, these are a little more difficult to determine. For example, on a federal level the AV has ensured the government elected has had the support of the majority of voters. In Western Australia however, the number of uncontested seats (seats held by acclamation) and 'not genuine contests' up until the mid 1970's distorted the functioning of the electoral system for the state's lower house, making raw electoral figures for this period open to contention. Table 4.1 (on the following page) shows the number of uncontested seats and 'not genuine'

contests for the period between the introduction of the AV and 1977. A contest was considered not genuine in this era if there was no choice between Labor and non-Labor, such as a contest between ALP and Communist candidates, or between Liberal and Country Party candidates only. This situation changed after the mid 1970's when both the ALP and the Liberal party followed the general rule of contesting every seat (Buxton, 1979, pp. 35-37).

Table 4.1

Uncontested Districts and 'Not Genuine' Contests (Western Australian Legislative Assembly 1908-1977)

Election year	Uncontested districts	Not genuine contest	Percentage of seats	Percentage total electorate
1908	9	13	44.0	37.1
1911	10	1	22.0	21.4
1914	15	8	46.0	35.8
1917	10	15	50.0	49.8
1921	6	8	28.0	25.9
1924	12	8	40.0	29.5
1927	9	6	30.0	17.9
1930	11	7	36.0	33.4
1933	9	9	36.0	30.7
1936	15	9	48.0	36.1
1939	10	7	34.0	24.7
1943	12	3	30.0	27.0
1947	20	2	44.0	38.3
1950	12	5	34.0	29.1
1953	22	4	52.0	47.5
1956	16	8	48.0	44.8
1959	11	8	38.0	37.1
1962	11	6	34.0	26.5
1965	11	3	28.0	23.3
1968	14	4	35.3	22.3
1971	0	2	3.9	2.7
1974	1	1	3.9	2.4
1977	0	3	5.5	3.6

Source: Buxton, 1979, pp. 35-36

As on a federal level, fundamental changes have affected state politics over the last few decades. Preferences have come to be more important in determining election outcomes and seat share in the lower house. Much of this has to do first and foremost with the "period of flux" in which all major parties across western liberal democracies are finding themselves (Sharman, 1997, p. 50). Major parties in Australian politics are becoming increasingly executive dominated, run by party elites (Ward, 1989). Furthermore they are increasingly appearing as ideologically indivisible, and removed from ordinary people. The high levels of stable party identification characteristic of the Australian system has weakened considerably over the last 30 years (Jupp & Sawyer, 2001, p. 222).

Western Australia appears to be a little more responsive than the norm to these trends. It has already been mentioned that dissatisfaction with electoral systems is most pronounced in Western Australia and Queensland. Consider the One Nation phenomenon in the 1998 Federal election which was born in Queensland and resounded firmly in Western Australia. In a massive show of dissatisfaction with the two major parties, this minor party polled nearly a million primary votes without gaining any direct representation in the House of Representatives. Voters from Western Australia were in the vanguard of this protest with 9.3 per cent of West Australians voting One Nation, compared to 8.4 per cent nationally. Overall, some 22.4 per cent of West Australians voted for groupings other than the two major alternatives, as compared to 17.6 per cent nationally (Sharman & Miragliotta, 2000, p. 134).

In Western Australia specifically, the 1990's saw a serious erosion of public trust in political institutions, including party politics, following a series of political scandals which led to several commissions into the operation of government (Sharman, 1997, p. 49). The WA Inc. Royal Commission (known more formally as the Royal Commission into Commercial Activities of Government and Other Matters) and the Commission on Government have had a significant impact on West Australian political culture, and "to attempt to understand contemporary politics from the 1990's without a special reference to these inquiries would be difficult" (Phillips, Black, Bott & Fischer, 1998, p. 235). These commissions, particularly WA Inc., have largely negative connotations for most West Australians which appear to have permeated state politics in the new century. The following chapter which covers research conducted on focus groups within Western Australian electorates has one resounding theme: the 'average' voter is extremely disenchanted with the two major parties, both seen as 'corrupt' and removed from the people, while minor parties and independent candidates are becoming increasingly popular.

The loss of trust in the 1990's coincided with major changes in the lower house in Western Australia. In 1991 due to internal problems within the state branch of the ALP, defections by several Labor MP's created a minority government, dependent for its survival on the support of independent members. For the first time in Western Australia, in the 1993 state election, candidates from the two more prominent minor parties, the Australian Democrats and the WA Greens, contested seats in the Legislative Assembly. Since 1993, the number of independents elected to the lower house in Western Australia has increased at every election: three in 1996; four in 2001. The continuing small but significant number of independent members in most state parliamentary chambers is an indication of a dissatisfaction with major party politics (Sharman, 1997, p. 51). Minor parties and independents now have a unique opportunity, due to this dissatisfaction, to influence election outcomes through preferences even if they do not gain any seats in the lower house. While also true for Australian politics generally, this seems especially pronounced in Western Australia where the minor party and independent vote was the first in Australia to exceed 10 per cent. This fact has not gone unnoticed by the minor parties in Western Australia - they contested a record number of Legislative Assembly electorates in the 2001 State election, rightly assuming that they had the power to influence results with their preferences. For example, Pauline Hanson's One Nation

Party contested a record 54 out of 57 electorates, directing their preferences away from all but a few sitting members (Black & Phillips, 2001, pp. 357, 360).

An indication of the increasing importance of preferences in West Australian elections can be determined by looking at how many electorates usually require the distribution of preferences to determine the winning candidate. Appendix 3 is a tabulation of all the elections in Western Australia since the introduction of the AV 1907, showing figures for both the number of electorates which required preference distribution to determine outcomes, and the number of electorates in which a candidate came from behind to win due to preferences. As the table shows, up until very recently, the majority of candidates who won, won on first preference votes. At times the number who won on first preference votes were only slightly more than half of the winning candidates, but there was never less than thirty-two candidates who won on first preference votes (i.e. with an absolute majority of primary votes) up until the 1990's. During recent elections this number has started to decline, with quite a dramatic fall in the last state election. In the last state election (2001), preferences were required to determine absolute majorities in forty-three out of fifty-seven electorates. Put simply, this means that in very few electorates do candidates now win outright with an overall majority of primary votes. In other words, if a simple first-past-the-post system of voting was in use in Western Australia during the last state election, then forty-four members of the lower house would have won their seat with electoral support of a minority of voters, with this support sometimes as low as twenty-five per cent of the total valid votes cast (Government and Politics database). This fact has important implications for the AV system. The two major parties are now more than ever required to accommodate the policies of the minor parties in order to be assured preference flows. The last state election in 2001, in which the Labor government was swept into power on platforms of environmental concern and sustainable development, also demonstrated a marked increase in the Green vote in Western Australia. Without courting this vote, it is unlikely the Gallop government would have claimed victory.

The WA Greens polled remarkably well in the 2001 state election. While not gaining any direct representation in the assembly, their first preference vote share was up 2.54 per cent from the 1996 election. As previously mentioned, it is only due to the fact that support for these minor parties tends to be spread over many electorates that they don't gain any seats in the lower house under the system of the AV. This was certainly true for another newcomer in the 2001 State election - Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party. It is quite obvious, as shown in Table 4.2 below, that the number of first preference votes for a party is not an accurate indication of seats won.

Table 4.2

Western Australia Legislative Assembly Election - 10 February, 2001

Party name	First preference vote (n)	First preference vote share (%)	Seats won (n)	Seat share (%)
Australian Labor Party	382,308	37.24	32	56.14
Liberal Party	319,927	31.16	16	28.07
Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party	98,321	9.58	0	0
Independents	78,952	7.69	4	7.02
Greens WA	74,641	7.27	0	0
National Party	33,450	3.26	5	8.77
Australian Democrats	27,102	2.64	0	0
Other	-	1.17	-	-

Source: Government and Politics Database

Examination of these figures shows that while Pauline Hanson's One Nation Party polled nearly 10 per cent of the primary vote, it failed to gain even one seat in the lower house. Compare this to the National Party, polling a mere 3.26 per cent, but winning five seats. Obviously, support for the National Party is concentrated in rural electorates, while support for One Nation is more evenly spread throughout the state. One Nation's national vice-president, John Fisher, complained bitterly that preferential voting had worked against them, both in the lower (with the AV) and upper (with PR) houses in the election (ABC News Online, 2001).

While this is a valid criticism from a minor party's point of view, maybe what Fisher should have considered is the way in which major parties must now more than ever, under the AV system in the lower house, take into consideration the policies of minor parties in order to maintain their vote share. These minor parties may run candidates in elections as a way of influencing government policy on particular issues. They can also use the electoral process as a way of publicising their policies by ranking the candidates of other parties according to their sympathy towards the party's goals on their how-to-vote cards (Sharman, 1997, p. 53), this being exactly the tactic One Nation utilised.

This tactic used by One Nation is what is sometimes known as strategic voting. Sometimes strategic voting can mean parties adopting strategies such as running independent candidates which effectively take votes away from the opposition. More often it denotes situations in which parties, and sometimes independent candidates, forego ranking candidates on their how-to-vote cards according to ideological

considerations. Instead they use how-to-vote cards as a way in which to oust parties with which they have other, more pragmatic, grievances. In the 2001 Western Australian state election One Nation directed preferences against nearly all sitting members, except for a few Liberal MP's who had not openly attacked One Nation (Black & Phillips, 2001, p. 357). This was primarily a response to the way in which major parties had been seen to combine forces against One Nation in this and previous federal and state elections. One Nation polled 9.58 per cent of the primary vote (see Table 4.2 on previous page), which in the end impacted heavily on all sitting members, and especially Coalition members. Knockout blows such as the loss of One Nation preferences in Albany and Geraldton sealed the fate of the Coalition (Black & Phillips, 2001, p. 357-358), which ideologically was not considered too far removed from One Nation.

The two over-riding factors which made this tactic all the more potent was the loss of first preference votes given to major parties by voters, and the sheer number of seats contested by minor parties. Recent trends in WA seem to indicate an increased primary vote share going to minor parties and independents in future elections. And, along with this, an increase in the number of minor parties and other candidates contesting seats in the lower house, which, since 1945, has traditionally been strongly dichotomised with a small National Party playing a crucial role in non-Labor politics. Couple these factors with more closely contested elections, and we could see the AV working for the first time to actually give more scope to those 'many shades of political opinion' as the architects of this system envisioned.

Another way to assess the impact of the AV is to look at the number of seats in which the candidate with a plurality of first preference votes was defeated after preference distribution. That is, where preference distribution changed the result. This is the most telling exercise since this is where the AV (preferential system) distinguishes itself from a cruder first-past-the-post system of voting. Although the number of electorates in the Western Australian 2001 state election which required the distribution of preferences was high, the number of seats in which the results which were actually changed due to preference distribution was fairly relative to previous elections. In only six electorates was the candidate leading on primary votes overtaken by their rival due to preference distribution. This number has fluctuated somewhat over state elections since 1911, and in the last state election was the highest since 1930, but it cannot be said unequivocally that there has been a marked increase in this over recent times. In fact, on a percentage basis, in both 1917 and 1930 the percentage of seats in which preferences altered final results was greater than 2001 (see Appendix 3).

What is important to recognise however, is that unlike a simple plurality system of voting, the AV at least *offers* this chance for candidates to draw on preferences in order to gain a majority of votes. So, while the number of candidates who come from behind to win has been small (anywhere from none up to 18 per cent), in theory there is the chance for any candidate to gain a lead from preference distribution. In effect, any major party which ignores the policies of those minor parties which direct preferences their way, will

soon feel the full effect of the AV system.

Most importantly, the two different methods of looking at the results of the AV utilised above need to be combined to find some overall conclusion about the workings of the AV, as compared to a simple plurality system. We have seen that the number of electorates which require preference distribution in order to determine final electoral outcomes (absolute majorities) appears to be on the increase. On the other hand, the actual number of seats in which preferences alter the final outcomes appears to be remaining fairly consistent over time, with some variation from election to election. This means that elections are becoming more closely contested, with a larger number of seats which require preference distribution to *confirm* the winning candidate. And, with the ever present chance that preference distribution could change the primary result, major parties must, more than ever before, ensure their policies appease not only their staunch supporters, but also that increasing portion of the electorate who are voting for an alternative to one of the two major party groupings.

On both a state and federal level, the AV in recent years has appeared to take on a life of its own due to other various political factors, reinforcing the view supported earlier in this chapter about electoral systems being independent of political parties and their aspirations. As we saw, on a federal level the AV has tended to benefit the Labor party in recent times. This trend appears even more pronounced in Western Australia. If ever the AV did disadvantage Labor in WA, and evidence for this is patchy at best, it is certainly not the case at the present time. In the 2001 state election, of the six electorates in which results were changed due to preferences, four (Swan Hills, Bunbury, Joondalup, Albany) saw a Liberal candidate leading on the primary count with a Labor candidate finally claiming victory. Only one (Kalgoorlie) saw a Labor candidate conceding defeat to a non-Labor candidate. The remaining electorate (Alfred Cove) saw a Liberal candidate lose to a former Liberal turned independent who campaigned heavily on the conservation issue.

Green, Democrat, and (rather surprisingly) One Nation preferences appear to have played an important part in Labor electoral success in Western Australia in 2001. While it could be argued that Labor would still have won the election under a first-past-the-post system, it would have been a tenuous victory with a margin of only one seat giving them the majority in the lower house. Such a narrow margin calls into question a government's mandate to represent the majority of voters and does not leave much room for error. However, largely due to minor parties and independents contesting record numbers of seats in the lower house, the 2001 state election was a decisive victory for Labor due to the preferences of the nearly 30 per cent of West Australian voters who chose not to give their first preference vote to one of the major parties (Black & Phillips, 2001, pp. 355-362).

With elections becoming increasingly closely contested in recent times, and with preferences determining a party's lead on its opposition, it is very possible that in the future in Western Australia we will see

election victory being determined through preferences. It is also probable that minor parties will gain seat representation as has already happened in other states. The results of the focus groups, covered in the following chapters, indicate that minor parties are being seen more and more as a viable alternative to the major parties. In fact, this research appears to indicate that if voters better understood the amount of freedom they had in preference allocation, and could also overcome the fear of the 'wasted vote', then the AV would deliver somewhat different results than it now does. The possibility that the AV can deliver results not unlike a cruder first-past-the-post system simply because that is how voters perceive it, is considered in more depth in the following chapters.

It is very possible that in future elections in WA all the factors discussed above - voter discontent with the major parties, increasing importance of preferences in achieving majority government, growing support for minor parties and independents - will all come together to produce quite different results under the AV system than what Western Australia has witnessed previously.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE METHODOLOGY OF FOCUS GROUPS

Introduction

The analysis of public perception and understanding of the AV in Western Australia is achieved through data collected from focus group interviews which included respondents filling out an anonymous questionnaire. Public awareness is an extremely important part of any voting system since it is the voters who, in the end, must use the system to gain their desired representation in Parliament. If voter knowledge about the system in place is found to be lacking (quite probable in the case of a more complicated system such as the AV), then it doesn't matter how effective the system is in theory because it will not be utilised by the voting public to its full potential. In this case it could be said that representation becomes flawed.

Before proceeding further with methodological considerations, a point must be made here regarding terminology. Because voters are largely unfamiliar with the term 'alternative vote', the more common terms 'preferential voting' or 'preference voting' were utilised during the focus group research, both by the researcher and participants. This choice was made in order to eliminate confusion, especially since many participants in the study were already quite confused about the mechanics of the voting system in question. Therefore, in this chapter and the next, when the terms 'preferential voting' and 'preference voting' are stated, they refer explicitly to the alternative vote (AV) as used in the lower house in Western Australia and in the House of Representatives in the Australian Parliament. Furthermore, in this chapter and the following, when a direct quote is used from the focus group discussions, they will be italicised to avoid confusion with the rest of the text.

The use of focus groups for qualitative research

The choice of focus groups to research political issues is unusual. However, public understanding and perception of a voting system is not a topic which lends itself to public opinion polling techniques, as it is difficult to reduce the issues researched to one or two quantitative poll questions. Given this, it is surprising that group work, as a research technique in the social sciences, is still relatively under-developed and un-acknowledged as a legitimate way of collecting data. More often, focus groups are used for illustrating a theory generated by other methods or as a cost effective way of interviewing more than one person at a time (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 104).

One example however, is the variant of focus group research used by prominent Australian social

researcher Hugh Mackay. He uses these to draw out generalisations regarding public attitudes to political issues in Australia (Mackay, 1993; 1999). Mackay uses small group discussions - that is, people meeting in familiar environments discussing issues without anyone directing the conversation or asking structured questions - to gain his information. One critic of this method is Murray Goot (2002a, p. 20) who criticises this method on three accounts. First, he claims, it is difficult to generate reliable historical insights from evidence gathered this way, and impossible to show the extent to which the distribution of opinion has actually changed. Second, he feels that this method does not readily lend itself to generalisation; to do that typically requires some approximation to random sampling and much larger numbers. Goot finds that Mackay's conclusions are lacking scope, since they are based upon limited age groups, limited socio-economic strata, and limited geographical distribution. Finally, he contends that these findings, however representative, need to be checked and validated through other methodological tools. This would involve asking respondents direct questions, one of the most basic forms of attitudinal research.

Applying the above three criticisms to the methodology used in this study is beneficial in that it serves as a reminder of the limitations of all attitudinal research. However this case is slightly different in several ways. To the first point regarding historical value, the objective in this study is to research attitudes towards a voting system currently functioning; thus more focus will be more on present attitudes, rather than in attempting to gain historical insights on how these attitudes have changed. Furthermore, since this is a topic which has received little previous attention in Western Australia in its own right, there are not many specific previous findings to compare with to gain information on how opinions have changed.

The second point Goot makes about needing a greater random sampling and larger numbers to make generalisations, presents maybe a greater obstacle for the focus group method. However, since the range of people covered is smaller (i.e. only West Australians) the geographical boundaries are somewhat smaller and more manageable. Attempts are made to cover both rural and urban Western Australia in the focus groups, although admittedly the extremities of the state are untouched. Every effort is made in this study to cover a fairly broad spectrum of the voting population, while taking into account those factors that tend to influence peoples attitudes towards political issues. Five key demographic factors underpinning political attitudes which are recognised by researchers are gender, age, region, religious denomination and church attendance. Added to this are the key social structural variables of education, occupation, employment, trade union membership, and subjective class. All these factors are used by Bean and McAllister to analyse voting behaviour in the 2001 election (2002, pp. 274-277). The research conducted for this study suggests that these factors affect not only partisanship, but also basic political attitudes and understanding. In fact, balancing these factors could be argued to be more important in attitudinal research than simply obtaining random, approximate samples of a target population, since any research which does not balance all these factors has the potential to be seriously biased. Rather interesting is the way in which the same Murray Goot who presented these criticisms of Mackay's methodology has also more recently outlined some biases which can be inherent in polls conducted in a

broad and random manner (2002b, p. 89). This must not be interpreted by the reader as an inconsistency in Goot's analysis, but rather as a reminder that all methodologies have limitations. Therefore, the focus groups in this research - while maybe not large, random samples - were constructed taking into account the above distinctions used by Bean and McAllister, which this researcher perceived in preliminary studies to be largely influential.

The third point outlined above regarding analytical tools, such as asking direct questions of respondents, is accounted for in this study. The focus groups used were asked questions in a more structured way than in Mackay's methods, these being questions regarding their attitudes and understanding of the preferential voting system (the AV) in Western Australia. Also, the completion of the questionnaire, which asks questions about issues covered in the focus group discussions, provides a more structured framework for analysis, as well as opportunity for cross comparison between the recorded conversations and questionnaire results.

Another problem with any kind of surveying of attitudes is that the issue being addressed could have an impact on the outcome of the questions. For instance, respondents may not wish to disclose their views on certain issues, especially in a focus group situation where others are present, and therefore falsify their response. However, we can suppose that this would be more of a problem in cases of emotive or controversial issues. For electoral issues, as in this study, the only foreseeable problem could be that respondents would maybe want to appear more politically engaged than they would otherwise be, perceiving this to be a requirement of participation.

In spite of the limitations of focus group research, Kitzinger, in her article on AIDS research and focus groups, (1994, p. 116) outlines the advantages gained by interaction between respondents in a focus group situation. This interaction:

- highlights the respondents attitudes, priorities, language, and framework of understanding;
- encourages a great variety of communication from participants - tapping into a wide range and form of understanding;
- helps to identify group norms;
- provides valuable insight into the operation of group/social processes in the articulation of knowledge (for example, through the examination of what information is censored or muted within the group);
- can encourage open conversation about embarrassing subjects and facilitate the expression of ideas and experiences that might be left underdeveloped in an interview or questionnaire.

The questionnaire used in conjunction with the focus groups is also a technique which Kitzinger advocates (1994, p. 105). The questionnaire is valuable in providing data on each participants attitudes and beliefs before the discussion has affected them in any way. It allows for some comparison between initial, individual responses and later group responses, as well as maximising subsequent debate and

encouraging participants to express their own point of view because, as other authors have noted, “the process of writing things down reinforces a person’s commitment to contributing them to the group, even in the face of apparent disapproval” (Morgan, 1988, p. 58). Furthermore, this way every respondent has a chance to express opinions on every issue discussed, negating to a certain extent the criticism that focus groups only reflect the opinions of the most dominant or talkative in the group.

Participants

The way in which respondents are chosen is important for this kind of research. All the participants in each group (except one) were drawn from pre-existing social groups. That is, clusters of people who already knew each other through living, working, or socialising together. All members of any one group came from similar backgrounds, lived in similar geographical areas, and were of similar age, socio-economic status, and political persuasion. Religion and church attendance were also taken into consideration, with some focus groups taken from larger church groups. These kinds of pre-existing social groupings are those in which political sentiments are naturally discussed, albeit to a less structured degree than in a focus group. These kinds of focus groups are considered by some researchers to be particularly suited for attitudinal research (Morgan, 1988, p. 17), although admittedly more in sociological or anthropological studies. A focus group, although essentially a contrived setting, can be used to “encourage people to engage with one another, verbally formulate their ideas and draw out the cognitive structures which previously have been unarticulated” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 106).

This study evidenced that people will more readily discuss their political views in an honest and spontaneous way within a group in which they already feel confident and comfortable. In order to validate this hypothesis, one of the focus groups (focus group number three - see following chapter for focus group profiles) was made up of respondents who did not know each other. In all other respects this group of people were similar - they all came from a similar geographical area, were of a similar age and background. They closely mirrored the other focus group (Group 1), with the only difference being that the participants were unfamiliar with one another. This group were either very reluctant to talk (especially initially), had separate discussions within themselves, and it was more difficult to formulate coherent themes from this group.

The methodology of focus groups

The section above lists several ways in which focus groups facilitate interaction between respondents, which in turn tells the researcher some important things, not only about participants’ views and perceptions, but also about the contexts in which these are formed. Firstly, recall that Kitzinger claims

that focus groups “highlight the *respondents*’ attitudes, priorities, language, and framework of understanding” (1994, p. 116). Group work is invaluable for grounded theory development - focusing on the generation rather than the testing of theory and exploring the categories which the participants use to order their experience (Glazer & Strauss, 1967). Or, as Kitzinger (1994, p. 108) puts it: “Group work ensures that priority is given to the respondents’ hierarchy of importance, *their* language and concepts, *their* frameworks for understanding the world”.

This is invaluable for researching attitudes to, and understanding of, a voting system which impacts on each participant’s political life. A more structured method of research (such as a poll question, for example) may overlook the ways in which different groups of people express understanding and attitude. In this study, each group had quite characteristic ways of understanding the political process and voting system, as was relevant to their own experience or understanding of the world. For example, the group which were mainly in the teaching profession or similar white collar occupations with high levels of tertiary education, talked about voting systems in terms of abstract values and concepts, policy outcomes, and the importance of education about the whole political process. Education and knowledge figured highly in their discussions. On the other hand, a group with a particularly low level of education in which respondents held up a tradition of generations of working class labor values, talked in terms of first-hand, practical experiences (predominately negative in regards to politics), and with a well developed cynicism of political jargon and abstract values/concepts such as democracy or stable government.

Use of language becomes important here. Analysis of the way in which certain forms of speech facilitate or inhibit discussion and clarify or confuse issues, becomes advantageous for the researcher to engage. For example, in this study, the use of humorous or derogatory words often covered an underlying lack of understanding and interest in subjects like voting systems. In those groups which were more alienated and disaffected by politics in general, this was more prevalent.

However, this is not to take away from the importance and relevance of comments like these. On the contrary, focus groups encourage “a great variety of communication from participants - tapping into a wide range and form of understanding” (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 116). This includes not only basic language, but also other more advanced forms of communication such as anecdotes, jokes, expressions, and loose word associations. As a researcher, listening to communication between participants allows one time to acclimatise to language, and the values, concepts, and understandings that this represents. The fact that participants provide an audience for each other encourages a greater variety of communication that is often unexplored in more traditional methods of research such as questionnaires. Take for example, the focus group comprised of wheatbelt farmers and their wives. One female participant in this group, after being asked about whether she used how-to-vote cards responded: “*well, I do use the cards because I’m really not knowledgeable most of the time about it, but I check with my advisor first*”. Her ‘advisor’, she indicated, was her husband seated next to her. This generated shared laughter within the group as they

recognised that it was typically the men in their group who were more knowledgeable about, and engaged in, political issues. And furthermore, that everyone was quite at ease with this situation. However, this very same comment in another of the groups would quite possibly have generated discomfort or derision. To quote another example from this group which may have been lost on another group: One participant who had previously been a Liberal candidate for the state seat of Eyre, when asked whether he was a 'swinging' voter (i.e. one who changes who they support with minimal discomfort) responded "*I'm a swinging voter - I swing between all the conservatives*". This response generated much laughter from the rest of the group who mutually understood that none of them really fit the category of swinging voters - they were all entrenched conservative voters.

Another example of this kind of communication at work was the youngest focus group (aged between 20-25) talking about minor parties. Minor parties were high on the preference list for this group. However, when one less well informed participant asked who some of the minor parties were, she got some rather humorous responses. When looking deeper into this apparently meaningless caricature of minor parties, it was evident that these voters, although they all tended to place minor parties first on their ballot, still perceived them to be rather ineffectual and, in the words of one respondent, "*out there man*". Later comments backed this up, such as: "*no-one expects them to get in*", and "*if a minor party actually got in . . . it would be interesting . . . obviously the conservative parties keep everything fairly level*". It is also interesting to note the use of the word 'conservative' here - to these younger voters it means *either* major party grouping. It became obvious to this researcher that these participants were talking at a much more spontaneous and honest level than they would if say, an older person was a part of the focus group.

These examples demonstrate how group research helps to identify group norms, and facilitates the collection of data on these norms. For instance, often a particular phrase will help to mobilise an assertion of group consensus (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 109). Phrases such as these occurred often throughout the groups in this study. For example, during one discussion on minor parties being often under-represented by the preferential system, one respondent said regarding One Nation and democracy, "*you've got a million votes, and you still haven't got a say*". The general consensus on this comment summed up what that whole group felt about democracy in Australia - that it was little more than an ideal, which didn't exist in the 'real' world.

In relation to this, probably one downside of this kind of group work is that the group may censor any deviation from these group standards or norms (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 110). However, if the researcher is alert and adept, they can usually pick up on whether every respondent is in agreement with the statements being made. The researcher must attempt to recognise what information the composition of some groups may inhibit. On the positive side however, this in itself can be illuminating for the researcher. Especially relevant to this study was whether every respondent really had the same level of understanding of the voting system in question, or whether some quieter respondents disguised a lack of understanding, or

even a greater understanding in some cases. Surprisingly, the groups which tended to censor information were those with a lesser understanding of the voting system, and also those which tended to be more alienated from, and disaffected with, politics altogether. In one group for instance, one respondent who suggested that the onus fell back to the individual to become more involved and educated was largely ignored by the rest of the group who were happier to discuss how they had no interest in politics because they had been 'let down'. On the other hand, groups in which knowledge and political engagement were viewed as desirable, tended to promote these attributes and looked down upon those who did not participate or educate themselves. In this way then, focus group discussions provide valuable insight into the operation of group/social processes in the articulation of knowledge - or, as in these examples, through the examination of what information is censored or muted within the group.

Finally, focus groups can "encourage open conversation about embarrassing subjects and facilitate the expression of ideas and experiences that might be left underdeveloped in an interview or questionnaire" (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 116). Many participants would not consent to be interviewed separately, especially if they felt that they did not know enough. Often when beginning the group discussions on preferential voting, many participants worried aloud that they did not know enough about it to join in. Once the discussion was in progress however, they often found they had some valuable contributions to make. It is very probable that without the support of their friends who had similar views, many of the participants would not have been so honest about their lack of understanding of the voting system, for example.

Probably the most limiting aspect of this study is the fact that the number of focus groups (and therefore, population sample covered) is quite small due to the time and resources available to this researcher. Further exploration of these issues through a more random, representative sample would be advantageous to any conclusions drawn by this researcher. On the other hand however, statewide opinion polls may be hampered by confusion about the mechanics of a voting system. This was certainly evidenced in this study. The questionnaire completed by all the focus group participants, which is quantitative such as a poll question would be, showed little of the depth and variations of perceptions regarding the preferential voting system which came to light during the focus group discussions. For instance, most participants chose the neutral opinion option in the questionnaire when asked whether they thought the preferential system was democratic and effective. The focus group discussions however, showed that the participants had more opinions on this than they themselves realised, or at least would commit to on paper. As this study showed, a complicated issue such as the mechanics of a voting system becomes difficult to reduce to a simple poll question for the electorate to answer.

Although much political research has traditionally been conducted through opinion polls, the use of polls in the last (2001) federal election raised some questions about their reliability. Well known is the way in which pollster Gary Morgan, who wrongly predicted a Labor Party federal victory, lost his contract with *The Bulletin* after the election. There are many ways in which polls can be biased and unrepresentative

(for some examples see the reference given earlier: Goot, 2002b, p. 89), making focus groups a viable option for this kind of research.

While a questionnaire on its own may be lacking for this research, a strength of this study is the use of the questionnaires for comparison to the recorded group conversations. This structures the research somewhat. The questionnaire is valuable in providing data on each participants attitudes and beliefs before the discussion has affected them in any way. It allows for some comparison between initial, individual responses and later group responses, as well as maximising subsequent debate and encouraging participants to express their own point of view. Furthermore, this way every respondent has a chance to express confidential opinions on every issue discussed, which balances the claim above that groups may censor some information.

Rather than viewing this data as an accurate depiction of the whole population of West Australian voters, rather view the focus groups as being random pockets, or samples if you like, of the West Australian voting population at large. Every attempt has been made to sample diverse groups of people, covering the key demographic and social variables mentioned earlier. These factors are well documented in having an influence on interest in, and understanding of, the political process. However, each focus group is in itself reasonably homogeneous, so that the groups can be compared and contrasted on a whole to other groups without having to account for too much variation within each group.

CHAPTER SIX

VOTERS AND THEIR PREFERENCES : THEIR UNDERSTANDING AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE

Introduction

This chapter covers the results of the research conducted through the focus groups. Broadly speaking, the aims of this research are firstly; to determine what level of understanding the West Australian voters have of the AV system used to elect representatives to the Legislative Assembly; and second, to determine what these voters think of this system.

This data is presented in several formats. Firstly, a profile of each focus group is given, along with an outline of the outstanding themes deducted from that particular group. In this section, reference is made to Tables 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4 which are formulated from the results of the focus group questionnaire. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix 4 and the tables can be found in Appendix 5. In the second part of this chapter, some common themes from all of the groups are looked at in more detail. These themes are compared and contrasted firstly in relation to each other; and secondly, in relation to existing theory about the relevant topic.

Focus Groups: Profiles and Responses

Focus Group One

Profile:

The first group studied consisted of six people, all residing in the same street. Respondents ranged in ages from 30 to 40, with four males and two females. They could be loosely described as being of working class origins. They fit the profile of traditional Labor voters, hailing from generations of Labor voters, although they also could be described as now being somewhat disaffected Labor supporters.

Themes:

There were several main themes emerging from this group. The first was that all the respondents had very little understanding of the AV or how it operated, as shown in Table 6.1. Most of this group thought that somehow the parties chose where the preferences went, rather than the voters themselves. They didn't realise how much control they had over where their own preferences were allocated, although none of them claimed to use how-to-vote cards. This confusion points to a distinct lack of understanding of just how the system works. This group perceived that the system was utilised by the two major parties for

their own political ends. As a whole, this group were very cynical toward politics in general and showed no interest in learning more about the voting system since, in the words of one respondent, *"its not going to count anyway"*. According to information taken from the questionnaire, the only two things about government which generated any amount of interest were the law making role of Parliament and its procedures. In keeping with this, one very pervasive theme in this group was a lack of trust in politicians. This group felt unrepresented on a whole and very alienated from the political process. Their discontent with politics in general appeared to affect how they perceive the voting system - as unfair, unrepresentative and corrupt. One respondent summed up what everyone in the group felt about preferential voting: *"it gets you nowhere [and] I'm not in favour of it"*.

Focus Group Two

Profile:

This group consisted of six people, all familiar with each other. Ages did vary slightly in this group, from 30 to 50. There was only one male in the group. All respondents hailed from a middle class background, having white collar professions with half the group working in the education sector. All were tertiary educated, several of a very high level. They described themselves as traditional Liberal voters, but while also sympathetic to Green politics.

Themes:

This group had a similar understanding of the preferential voting system to the previous group, with areas of confusion also the same. Areas which these respondents were confused about included how-to-vote cards, and how parties control preference flows. Interestingly, this whole group claimed to use how-to-vote cards and were very influenced by them. In fact, most of them didn't realise that they didn't have to use them, so in this way were less canny about the system than the previous group. This group took their political choice very seriously, giving some thought to preference allocation. Table 6.2 shows the results of the relevant question from the questionnaire. This group appeared to be quite politically engaged (this did vary with age slightly with the older respondents being more so). They saw voting choices as affecting them directly, unlike the previous group who felt alienated from the whole process. For example, policies regarding education were close to home for these participants. They perceived that they had a fair to poor understanding of the voting system, as shown in Table 6.1. On the whole, they were unsure about the effectiveness of the system, or its democratic qualities, as shown in Tables 6.3 and 6.4.

Focus Group Three

Profile:

This group was comprised of eight people, divided evenly between male and female. This group was very similar to the first, being aged between 30 - 40 and with no tertiary education, but were mostly unfamiliar with each other. Residing in a safe Labor seat, they were what one could term upper working class. Most were employed in blue collar jobs, and perceived themselves to be disaffected Labor voters.

Themes:

As mentioned this group was similar in demographic to Group One, and the responses to the discussion questions and questionnaire were very similar (compare the results for the two groups in Tables 6.1, 6.2, 6.3, and 6.4). The main difference to the first group was that the respondents were mostly unfamiliar with one another. The reasoning behind this, as discussed in the previous section, was to determine whether this factor mattered to the group discussion. It eventuated that this group discussed issues and perceptions less readily and fluidly than the other groups, although some conclusions could still be drawn.

What was evident however, was that this group recognised their lack of understanding of the preferential voting system, as shown in Table 6.2. While in the questionnaire some indicated that they would like to know more about this system, most participants during the discussion professed a marked disinterest in politics altogether. Like those in the first group, they felt alienated from the whole process and let down by the voting system which according to one respondent *"makes your vote jump the fence"*. Politicians are seen to be in cahoots with big business and those who are powerful - *"Liberal shortchanged us, they sold us out"* - while minor parties like One Nation and the Greens are seen as the *"under-dog"* and discriminated against by preference voting. While professing to have no firm party affiliation - *"just who-ever speaks the most rubbish"* - they were all very anti-Liberal and the present conservative (federal) government was perceived to be the fault of preferential voting because *"no-one I know voted for him"*.

What was interesting in this group (like the first) was that no-one used how-to-vote cards. Participants allocated preferences along the lines of *"just to whoever I think is worth it"* and *"just . . . my favourites"*. Of all the groups studied, this one was probably the most uninterested in, and alienated from, the political process.

Focus Group Four

Profile:

This group was made up of six participants, three males and three females, aged between 20-29. The group were well known to each other through a church group, meeting once a week at a member's home. All hailed from Liberal/National and other conservative voting backgrounds. Several had tertiary qualifications.

Themes:

As with the previous groups, this group had only a very basic understanding of the preferential voting system (see Table 6.1). All admitted that their understanding of the system was poor, and once again most confusion originated over to what extent parties controlled preference flows. As with previous groups, they felt that parties somehow 'controlled' where their votes went - the myth that somehow parties commandeer votes. They were aware however, that they did not have to follow how-to-vote

cards, although these still appear to be very influential. Most participants claimed to check them when they wanted to know what order of candidates their party of choice recommended, or when they were not aware of any of the policies of other parties. As one participant commented, *"if I'm voting a party line I look at their recommendations but I don't always follow it to the letter . . . but sometimes . . . if I don't know the difference between them and them . . . I will put them in the order they say"*. Often the candidate which the parties placed last (i.e. that party's least preferred candidate) on a how-to-vote card influenced their choice regarding who to place last.

However, while understanding in this group was fairly low, and most were unsure about the democracy or effectiveness of the system (Tables 6.3 and 6.4), there was a great deal more interest in politics and the voting system than usual. Most participants acknowledged that they needed to know more in order to vote more effectively, and that education of the electorate was important. On the whole this group appeared quite politically active, with some participants having written letters to MP's and attending protest rallies on a regular basis. Although when asked directly they professed to be *"totally uninterested"*, they seemed to be, on the whole, slightly more politically engaged than the average participant. Although this is not to say they were totally happy with the political scene - the usual cynicism towards party politics was still evident. As one participant said about his allocation of preferences under the current voting system, *"personally, I would take it seriously if I thought it would count"*. At the end of the day they felt unanimously, like the group before them, that - in the words of one participant, *"the voice of the people isn't being heard"*.

Focus Group Five

Profile:

This group was quite a different demographic than the previous groups. Aged between 50 and 60 years old and all close friends, this group consisted of farmers and their wives living in the central wheatbelt of Western Australia. All attend the same church regularly in the nearest town. One respondent was an ex-member of the Liberal Party who once ran for the seat of Eyre against Labor's Julian Grill. All were traditional Liberal/National voters, coming from a long line of conservative political persuasion.

Themes:

In the same way as previous groups, this group felt that their understanding of the preferential voting system was poor (Table 6.1). The one exception in this group was the participant who had run for political office, who understandably had an above average understanding of the voting system. However, although this group rated their own understanding quite low - and there were indeed areas which they were not quite sure about when it came to preferential voting - they were in fact probably the most educated about the system of all the groups interviewed. They were aware that they did not have to use how-to-vote cards, although the majority of the time did tend to use them (especially the females of the group). This was largely due to the fact that they did not feel they were sufficiently aware of each

candidates policies and ideological standing to rank them any differently than their chosen party advocated. In a similar way to the previous group, they would change their preference ranking however, if they felt that they wanted to vote for someone their party did not support, or vice versa. Also, in a similar way, one participant pointed out that he used how-to-vote cards as a guide to where candidates fell along the ideological spectrum. For instance, as he stated, *"you know the Labor party's card, they're going to support, say, the independent who is a bit of a 'leftie' "*. Another participant acknowledged the fact that the more politically aware and interested a voter is, the more likely they will be not to follow how-to-vote cards. He stated, *"regarding whether we use how-to-vote cards or not, I haven't for quite a few years. I used to when I was younger, mainly because I wasn't really interested in politics, but in recent years no. I . . . ignore them and chose the candidates in the order that I think they should go"*.

This comment would also point to the fact that maybe older voters take more of an interest in where their votes are going. This group was, in comparison to the other groups very politically engaged, and furthermore very interested in politics and especially the preferential voting system. Whether this was due to the fact that they are slightly older than previous groups, or whether they come from a rural area, or both, is hard to determine. Either way, they were the only group who came close to even grasping the theoretical arguments for and against preferential voting, probably due largely to their interest in politics and the voting system which came without much of the cynicism and political alienation evidenced by some of the other groups. Also, this group were a little more sure about the voting system being democratic and effective, as shown in Tables 6.3 and 6.4.

Focus Group Six

Profile:

This group was the youngest group studied, with respondents aged between 20 and 25 years of age. They were all employed, except for one university student. The group was made up of three males and two females, and all close friends. Three of the respondents had lived and worked in rural areas at times, although all lived in Perth at the time of research.

Themes:

This group had a surprisingly high level of interest in politics, with the questionnaire showing most of them wanted to know more about several aspects of Parliament. They ranked their understanding of the system similar to the oldest group - mostly poor, but two a little better (Table 6.1). This group was divided into two camps. The first were respondents who had grown up in the country and had a little better understanding of the voting system and politics in general. They attributed this to listening to ABC radio on the tractor or harvester. Interestingly radio, the ABC and its youth counterpart Triple J, were very influential on this group, more so than television. The others in the group, while less informed, still demonstrated a desire to be more educated on the issues, rather than the total disinterest and cynicism which had been exhibited by some other groups. Even although one respondent claimed that *"politics*

bore me to death", most of the group appeared quite interested and engaged, although maybe slightly ignorant of some aspects of the voting system. As a whole, this group viewed the preferential system in quite a positive light, although some were unsure about the effectiveness or democracy of the system (Tables 6.3 and 6.4). Minor parties were important to this group, with most giving their first preferences to these, and the system was viewed as positive in that it is, in the words of one participant, *"keeping the little guys in the running"*. As in this example, this group demonstrated some remarkable insights into how the system operates although most professed to have a low level of understanding of it. Furthermore, all of them were aware that they were not required to follow how-to-vote cards to the letter. In fact, some of them mixed up the order of candidates on purpose, perceiving this to be a way of unsettling the major parties, while others just gave how-to-vote cards *"a quick squiz over"*. The usual areas of confusion raised themselves, however, with most respondents not understanding that parties do not control where voters' secondary preferences go, other than by suggestion on how-to-vote cards. For instance, one respondent stated that a shortcoming of the preferential system in his view was *"parties receiving secondary votes that weren't meant for them"*.

Common themes within the groups studied

This section presents the common themes (relevant to the aims of this study) derived from each of the groups. Some current statistics and/or literature are presented within the analysis to add relevance and context.

1. How well do voters understand the AV?

Dr Geoff Gallop, present Premier of WA, claims in an essay regarding electoral reform in WA (Gallop, 1998, p. 80), that the system of electing the Legislative Assembly from single-member constituencies through compulsory preference voting is "well established and understood" and therefore should remain. Further justification for this system which he suggests is that since the system is similar to the federal system of electing representatives to the lower house, there will be less confusion, thus promoting stability and consistency.

In contrast to the claim that the system is well understood, at a forum on the ideal electoral system for Western Australia in 1985, Democrat Senator Richard Jeffreys used several examples to demonstrate that the present system of single-member constituencies elected under the preferential voting system is little understood. He (Jeffreys, 1985) claims:

Most voters do not know how preferences operate. The myth of a 'wasted vote' is widely prevalent. The idea that following one or other "How to Vote" is compulsory is very common . . . I believe that fewer than ten percent of voters are aware that they can, for example, register a first preference vote for a new party or independent and have their vote counted again at full value for the traditional party of their choice if the first candidate is eliminated. (p. 14)

During question time at the end of Jeffreys' presentation, another speaker, respected Australian political scientist Dean Jaensch, agreed vehemently with Jeffreys' point regarding how to vote cards, claiming (Jeffreys, 1985):

There are actually people out there . . . who still believe that if you go away from one of the official how-to-vote cards, your vote is informal. So why not ban the darn things? All they do is entrench a mindlessness and a tendency for people not to think when they go towards an election. (p. 15)

Table 6.1 shows the distribution of responses to Question 4 in the focus group questionnaire. Of the total of the thirty-four participants who completed questionnaires, the most chosen response was a 'poor' understanding with twelve responses. Eleven responded that their understanding was 'fair' and nine chose the 'very poor' option. Only two responded as having a good understanding and not one participant (not even the ex-Liberal party member) chose 'very good'. As we can see from the table, the majority of responses ranged between 'fair' to 'very poor'. While some participants were maybe a little conservative in their estimation of their own understanding, on the whole the focus group discussions backed up what the questionnaire responses showed. That is, that most voters have only a very basic knowledge of how preferential voting works, with some having very little idea at all. The following comments are a fairly representative range of responses:

"I think I have a general idea how it works but I wouldn't be able to sit down and explain it to someone exactly." (Group 6)

"Not how it fully works, just how it works as how it goes to that person." (Group 1)

"I wouldn't have a clue." (Group 1)

There were several common areas of misconception or confusion. First and foremost was the way in which parties appear to voters to have more control over preferences than they actually do. Surprisingly, more than half the respondents claimed during the course of the focus group discussions to not use how-to-vote cards, and/or appeared to understand that their vote was still valid even without using them. However, as Dean Jaensch claims (cited above) there were still some that did not realise this, although quite possibly the number was less than what he maybe would have estimated. If they did realise this fact through the course of the focus group discussion (which some did), they were then astounded at the effort the parties put into gaining these preference assurances on other parties' cards. What these participants probably don't realise, is how influential these cards actually are, with preference 'leakages' - especially

at a federal level - still relatively low (Australian Politics website).

Thus the most widespread misconception was that parties somehow 'gave' preferences to, or 'took' preferences from, other parties without voters 'knowing'. The following comments are quite representative of the sentiments expressed by most participants:

"[Pauline Hanson and One Nation] had heaps of votes . . . but it went to Labor or Liberal . . . whichever one at the time, all her votes went that way. That's wrong mate, if I'm voting for someone it stays for that person." (Group 1)

"[A shortcoming of the voting system is] that voters may not understand where their secondary preferences will go." (Group 2)

"Your vote should go to the person you vote for, and if they don't get in then it goes to someone who you don't reckon should get in." (Group 3)

"I don't know much about it, but if the minor parties lose out then their votes can go towards something else that you don't want them to . . . so you could end up voting for someone you don't want in." (Group 4)

"Minor parties always give their preferences to a major party." (Group 6)

While having a vague idea as to how the system operates, most participants could not explain exactly how preferences were allocated, or why the above comments appeared to them to be true. These comments are in some respects correct, since usually the contest does just come down to a battle between Liberal and Labor candidates, and often minor party ballots end up yielding a major party preference vote at some stage. However, the participants did not realise that the order of these preferences was still ultimately up to them, and only controlled by a party to the extent that they followed this party's how-to-vote card.

In the course of this research, how-to-vote cards emerged as a specific problem area for many participants. How-to-vote cards have been around for almost as long as the AV has been in use in Australia. As mentioned above, academics such as Dean Jaensch have called for their abolition in recent times. They are not alone. The Democrats also have called for the distribution of how-to-vote cards at polling booths to be banned, and for each polling booth to display registered how-to-vote information (Australian Politics website). On the other hand, the West Australian Commission on Government found in favour of retaining existing rules for how-to-vote cards, despite some opposition to them (COG, 1995, pp. 32-33).

As proved by this research there is a degree of ambiguity when it comes to how-to-vote cards and whether or not a voter is required to follow them to ensure their vote is valid. Others are not sure how exactly preferences are traded between parties, or how these cards affect this. Take for example the following question submitted to the Australian Politics website recently and published on that site:

I do not fully understand the allocation of preferences, particularly how party A can guarantee that its preferences will be allocated to party B. We are talking about a more concrete arrangement than the publication of 'how to vote cards' aren't we?

As the authors of the site pointed out, how to vote cards are simply 'the beginning and the end of the matter'! As they also pointed out, overall 'leakages' from major party how-to-vote cards are rarely high, with these voters tending to follow their how-to-vote cards quite faithfully. The website points to evidence that minor party voters are less likely to follow them than major party voters, with Coalition voters being the most faithful in following the cards. This was definitely borne out by this research, which found that the major party voters, especially the conservative voters, tended to follow how-to-vote cards more closely than those who would tend to vote for a minor party.

Some participants in the focus groups called for the abolition of how-to-vote cards also. One participant commented: *"Minor parties are now supporting Labor. They know they can only win elections by preferences, so they will do anything they can to try and get those preferences on a how-to-vote card, and I think you people are so dumb. They're only how-to-vote cards - you can vote however you want."* This respondent was one of the few who actually grasped this concept. Another participant, a younger voter from Group 6 also had a strong view regarding how-to-vote cards with which Dean Jaensch would be impressed: *"I honestly believe that how-to-vote cards should be abolished . . . if you are going to vote you should have enough dignity to understand what you are voting for, and inform yourself on what you are voting for."*

One thing which most participants understood was that the preferential system favours the two major party groupings. However, most did not understand enough how the system works in order to explain why this was so, or to change it with their own ballots. There was more a feeling of resignation that there was nothing anyone could do - *"it is all too complicated"*, according to a participant in Group 1. Take for instance these comments:

"Preference voting, from what I see here, it's going to keep it that we'll always just be voting Liberal or Labor." (Group 1)

"Well, no-one has ever got in apart from Labor and Liberal." (Group 3)

And, more often than not, this is seen as a negative thing since both major parties appear to be a little out of favour at the moment. This, however, was more true for some groups than others. The more conservative voters were more happy to have a 'stable' two-party system with a more mainstream party in government (even a Labor candidate was perceived to be more preferable than a minor party candidate to these voters). On the other hand, other more disaffected voters (which tended to be traditional Labor voters and younger voters), preferred the minor parties over major party groupings, and tended to put minor parties first on their ballot.

Reference must be made at this point to the concept of strategic voting mentioned briefly in Chapter Four. Recall that sometimes parties arrange candidates on their how-to-vote cards, or even run independent candidates, in a strategic (rather than ideological) manner in order to isolate other parties or candidates for various reasons. It is also possible for voters to use a form of strategic voting. There was, however, little evidence of most voters understanding the AV thoroughly enough to do this, or even understand the concept. Only a few participants appeared to allocate preferences on other than ideological grounds, or with any specific strategy in mind. As a rule, unless participants were firmly against the policies of one candidate/party, they tended to follow ideological considerations when allocating preferences, often following to some extent the how-to-vote suggestions. As far as voting strategically, the few examples were firstly some younger candidates who intentionally changed the order suggested on how-to-vote cards, more as a protest than anything else. There were also some voters from rural areas who ignored a conservative party (e.g. Liberals) due to regional tensions, while placing other ideologically similar parties (e.g. One Nation, Nationals) higher on their ballot. This research appears to indicate that voters in rural and regional areas are more politically minded and more likely to engage in, or recognise, strategic voting.

It appeared from this research that the more conservative a voter is, the more likely they are to be in favour of the preferential voting system. And further, the more conservative the voter and the more they are in favour of the system, then greater also was their general understanding of how the system works. From this research at least, there appears to be a causal link between the three characteristics, although it is hard to determine from such elementary research in what order these three factors occur, and if they are consistent throughout the voting population. This could be an interesting point for further research.

2. Do voters think that the AV is a good system for electing representatives?

Having established a tentative link between political persuasion, level of understanding of the voting system, and sentiment towards this system, let us delve a little more into what voters think about the voting system in terms of the following: effectiveness, democracy, and representativeness.

Well established in the previous chapter was the way in which voters in Australia today are increasingly registering a protest vote when voting for representatives in lower houses by giving their first preference vote to minor parties and independents. While the proportion of voters doing this are still the minority (around 20 per cent in the 2001 federal election, and 30 per cent in the 2001 West Australian state election), relatively speaking this is a large figure and is on the increase at every election, thus posing some serious questions for the two major party groupings. In an analysis of the 2001 federal election, Mackerras (2002, p. 295) found that there is a long term trend in declining first preference vote share to the three main parties from the mid 1980's onwards. He finds that in the 2001 federal election Labor voters, while not really defecting from Labor on a two-party-preferred basis (keeping in mind the

problems with this method of analysis covered in Chapter 3), simply gave their first preference to minor parties (especially the Greens) and placed Labor second on the ballot paper.

Following on from this trend of voting away from the major parties, the preferential voting system was seen accordingly in varying ways. Some did feel that the voting system was effective in that it offered more scope for these minor parties and those who vote for them to have more of an input into final outcomes in elections. “[Preference voting] allows a democratic society to function with adequate input from the populace”, was the assessment of a more politically engaged participant from Group 2.

However, others felt there was no real choice, and that therefore the system was flawed, since the final outcome is usually a Liberal/National or Labor candidate in any given seat, whether preferences were used or not. This view was more strongly held by those who appeared to be more disillusioned and alienated from the political process - usually those who took very little interest in politics because ‘they’re all the same anyway’.

It has been established that West Australian voters are in the vanguard of the trend of voting away from major parties, and without doubt the focus group research reflected this trend. The general dissatisfaction with party politics, and especially the two major parties, often spilled over into dissatisfaction with the preferential voting system. This is not uncommon as voting systems frequently attract the blame for more general failures in the representative process, and are often the butt of voter discontent with politics and politicians. Dunleavy and Margetts (1995, p. 9) point to “recurrent evidence from many contemporary liberal democracies of large-scale discontent with aspects of their voting systems”. This is probably not surprising since it is the voting system which elects politicians, and even the most politically naive can see that different voting systems produce different results.

However, this sentiment did vary slightly between focus groups, as would be expected from the conclusions drawn above. It appears that the less informed and/or educated a person is, the more distrustful they become of the political process, including the preferential voting system. While more highly educated respondents did not necessarily wholeheartedly embrace the preferential system, their criticisms and questions regarding the system demonstrated a willingness to be convinced that the system had advantages before writing it off completely. Those who fit the typical blue collar, traditional Labor supporter profile also tended to be less educated and more distrustful, probably in part due to a slightly more pronounced lack of understanding of the whole system.

These conclusions were borne out by the questionnaire responses, although participants were less willing to commit themselves on paper, probably due to their own perceived lack of understanding of the voting system. Most found it easier to speak about their perceptions of the system rather than answer questionnaire scales, this being one of the justifications of this kind of research. According to Table 6.3

and 6.4, most participants (22 out of 34) chose the neutral opinion when stating whether they saw the voting system as being effective or democratic. Of those who did register an opinion, overall more were positive than negative, although as the tables show, this varies group to group.

3. The fear of the 'wasted vote': myth or reality?

Richard Jeffreys' comments regarding the myth of the 'wasted vote' and the value of secondary votes were cited earlier in this chapter. It has already been demonstrated that most participants in this study recognised that the AV perpetuates a two-party system of politics, although none could explain in a theoretical way why this was so. Following on from this, many respondents, especially those who were not supporters of either major party grouping, felt that voting was then a waste of time because only these two ever won seats in the lower house and/or formed government. This feeling is then exacerbated by the fact that many participants felt that major parties somehow took votes away from minor parties. This then leads to voters not wanting to vote for a party which they perceive will either not have a chance of success, or that will give their vote to, or have their vote taken by, another party.

With the two major parties largely unpopular, it is little wonder that many voters, due to a lack of understanding of how the voting system actually works, felt that they had no desirable options when allocating preferences. Major parties are viewed as 'crooks', with their members removed from the 'common people', while minor parties are seen as rather ineffectual and making no difference to the final outcome, or even worse, taken advantage of by the major parties.

While most preferred to back a potential winner, some respondents were still willing to vote for the minor parties, but with an air of resignation that it is probably a wasted, or ineffective, vote. The only advantage in this was the realisation that a major party wouldn't get that vote as a first preference. Take the following comment of a respondent who votes minor parties, mainly as a protest: *"I don't want any major party there so I try and stuff it up by voting backwards and stuff, and whoever gets in, gets in"*. There is no expectation here that this respondent's chosen minor party will succeed. The best he can hope for is to 'stuff' things up a little.

While a large proportion of respondents involved were in favour of the minor parties and their policies, there was a feeling that they were somehow rather ineffectual. For instance when one participant in Group 1 said that she always voted minor parties, another participant countered with *"but how much say do those minor parties have?"*. Others also realised that minor parties do not get as much media attention as the two major parties. Recall the comments expressed in Chapter Three regarding the role of the media in perpetuating a two-party style of politics. Consider the following comments:

"We don't know a lot about minor parties. Labor and Liberal is basically what is pushed." (Group 3)
"[A shortcoming of the preference voting system is that] major parties have the numbers to over-ride minor parties." (Group 2)

"A vote for a minor party is a vote for a major party." (Group 6)

The fact remains however, that even while many perceive a vote for a minor party as often a wasted or effective vote, there still appears to be a very strong trend toward voting for minor parties as either a protest vote, or simply because some do appreciate the policies of these parties and hope that they may just get in. This was especially true for the Greens. Voters right across the spectrum were in favour of Green policies, which is borne out by previous research on the last state election, with issues such as old growth forests extremely relevant. A participant from Group 4 commented:

To some extent I have been party driven, coming as I do from traditional good Liberal stock, and sometimes I do kind of think of the overall philosophy behind the parties as well - you know, capitalism versus socialism . . . but I have noticed lately though, particularly the last couple of elections, I have definitely varied who I support a lot more. Like, I've actually dropped the Liberals down on some of my forms, with issues like old growth forests being important to me, you know, you have to be a bit more responsible.

What a comment! A (quite young) conservative voter who feels that a Green vote is more 'responsible' than a vote for his traditional party. This seems to be the way (particularly young) voters in Western Australia are heading. This in turn has definite implications for the importance of preferences in future elections.

This research seems to indicate that, in spite of the increasing number of first preference votes allocated to parties other than the two major groupings, Duverger's psychological effect of the 'wasted vote' is a reality in Western Australia. Although, it is somewhat lessened under the AV as compared to simple plurality systems. It is the conclusion of this researcher that, if the electorate were better educated regarding the voting system, then there would be a marked increase of primary votes given to minor parties at both ends of the political spectrum.

Conclusion

If there had to be one main conclusion regarding voters' understanding of the AV, it would be that the mechanics of the system are generally little understood. It appears that voters understand some aspects of the system without fully understanding how the system works to ensure that the candidate elected has been elected taking all voters' preferences into account. Furthermore, it appears that a widespread distrust of politics and politicians in general influences how voters perceive electoral systems. Perhaps a better educated electorate, with improved civic education incorporating the voting system, would mean that voters could become less suspicious of the electoral system, which at present is mysterious and unclear to the average voter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AN ALTERNATIVE TO FULL PREFERENTIAL VOTING: AN OPTIONAL PREFERENTIAL SYSTEM FOR THE ALTERNATIVE VOTE

As pointed out in Chapter One, the AV is divided into two basic types: optional and compulsory (or full) preference marking. Most of this study has been concerned with the compulsory (or full preferential) form of the AV, since this is the system used in both West Australian and Commonwealth elections, and is the dominant form of the AV used in Australia. However, due to the increased popularity of an optional system of preference marking under the AV, and its use in two states thus far, a brief look at this form of voting will complete an analysis of the AV.

Unlike full preferential voting under the AV system, which requires voters to express preferences for all candidates listed on the ballot paper in order for the vote to be valid, optional preferential voting allows voters to number only a minimum of candidates - as many as are to be elected. Voters may number further preferences if they wish, but Legislative Assembly ballots are valid even if only one preference is indicated. Both Queensland (in 1992) and New South Wales (in 1981) have adopted optional AV systems for their lower houses at a state level. Some commentators point to this system being used earlier in these two states, which is technically incorrect. The form of preference voting used in Queensland in 1892-1942 and New South Wales in 1926-1928 was contingent voting (see Chapter One for detail) which is very similar in its workings to the AV but can deliver quite different results. This method will not be treated in this study.

As detailed in Chapter Four, optional AV was first implemented in Western Australia in 1907 but was changed to compulsory AV in 1911. This was because, in most cases, voters did not go beyond their first preference, thus making the system operate no differently than a first-past-the-post system for the 1908 election and the 1909 Albany by-election. When voters do not number candidates beyond a first choice this is known as 'plumping' for one candidate. In spite of the high rate of plumping when the optional AV was first used in Western Australia in 1908, in 1995 the West Australian Commission on Government came to the following conclusion with its 8.3.9.5 Recommendation: "A system of optional preferential voting [i.e. optional AV] should be adopted for the election of members to the Legislative Assembly." (COG, 1995, p. 313)

In its analysis of the arguments for and against optional preference marking under the AV, the COG report (1995, p. 312-13) recognised that the principal advantage of full preference marking as used in Western Australia is that it "reflects the expression of individual and collective choice . . . [and] ensures that . . . a candidate has the support of an absolute majority of voters". On the other hand, optional preference marking under the AV was seen in this report to provide "greater freedom and flexibility to

voters” in that it does not require voters to register a preference for a candidate with whom they are unfamiliar or do not agree. The report concludes that “this flexibility more accurately reflects the principles of accountability and representation, as members of parliament recontesting their seats are then judged on their past performance and all candidates are more likely to be chosen because of what they represent”. The report does point out the disadvantage with the optional system, which was also cited by those who introduced compulsory AV in WA in 1911. That is, that there may be a large number of exhausted ballots. A large number of exhausted ballots, whose preferences cannot be determined beyond the first preference, result in a candidate being elected with the support of only a small number of second or subsequent preferences. This means a candidate can be elected with only a very small percentage of electoral support, which detracts from the representativeness of this system.

It may be useful at this point to make reference to the experiments with an optional AV system in Canada. In all three Canadian provinces where the optional form of the AV was used, voters were reluctant to go beyond their first preference. This then led to the failure of some elected members to eventually win an absolute majority of votes (Phillips, 1976, pp. 245, 278-279). In British Columbia, this plumping, or lack of preference transfer, also hurt the old coalition partners that would have been expected to gain under an AV system which, in theory, avoids three-cornered contests (Phillips, 1976, p. 279). In fact, many of the problems and unpredictabilities experienced by the Canadian provinces which experimented with the AV can be, at least in part, attributed to the system using optional, not compulsory, preference allocation.

As noted, candidates being elected on a minority of votes was indeed a problem when the optional AV was first used in Western Australia, and is still happening in states where optional preference marking is currently allowed. The rate of plumping for one candidate only, without marking subsequent preferences, is actually increasing over time in both New South Wales and Queensland, where optional AV is used (Electoral Systems website). In Queensland for example, at the first election which used optional AV in 1992, plumping rates stood at 23 per cent (Electoral Systems website). A survey conducted by the Electoral Commission of Queensland found that in the February 2001 state election, 60 per cent of Queenslanders cast a ‘number 1’ only vote. Another 32 per cent allocated all preferences, while only 8 per cent chose a partial preference vote. This survey was held in 11 electorates, and in all but two of these seats the results were decided on preferences (Australian Politics website). This means that the 40 per cent of voters who did decide to allocate some or all preferences had more of a say than those who chose to vote for only one candidate. Those voters who choose to allocate only one preference run the risk of their ballot becoming exhausted and being eliminated from the count. On the positive side however, these voters were not obliged to vote for candidates they did not support. Premier Peter Beattie, who had launched his “Just vote 1” campaign quite successfully it seems, claimed that the results of the survey cited above meant that “voters are increasingly endorsing the reason why optional preferential voting was introduced - that voters should not be forced into voting for candidates they do not support” (Australian Politics website).

In the 2001 Queensland election, because the ALP managed to increase its primary vote to around 48.5 per cent, preferences were less important. In many seats the ALP needed only a handful of preferences to get to 50 per cent of the vote (Australian Politics website). However the problems with optional AV are exacerbated if more preferences are required to determine winning candidates, due to large numbers of exhausted ballots. New South Wales analyst Antony Green, who designs computer software to analyse elections, presents a convincing argument that optional AV demonstrates a definite advantage to candidates and parties with the highest primary vote in any electorate. Using statistics from the 1999 New South Wales election to back up his theory, Green (1999) concludes that:

In most cases, by simple mathematics and with no assumptions about the flow of preferences, OPV [optional AV] tends to assist the candidate with the highest primary vote.

Every exhausted vote cuts the number of votes available to the second candidate to catch the leading candidate, before the leading candidate reaches 50% of the vote. (p. 69)

Green (1999, p. 69-70) shows that even in contests where preferences were strongly against the victorious Labor Party, the exhaustion of preferences worked to its advantage by cutting dramatically the number of preferences flowing to the second candidate. This factor is made all the more effective due to the sheer number of exhausted votes increasing in recent elections in New South Wales. As the number of candidates in lower house elections increases, and furthermore as the vote for non-major parties and independent candidates increases (a trend reflected in other states and federally), so also do exhausted ballots under the optional AV system. This is due to increased rates of plumping and decisions such as that by One Nation in the 1999 election to avoid directing preferences to any of the three major contenders (Green, 1999, pp. 68-73). In this way then, optional AV can work in a similar way to a first-past-the-post system in that the candidate with the most primary votes is more likely to win, especially if voters do not express full preferences.

This factor becomes more problematic when large numbers of electorates require preferences to determine winning candidates. For example, in the 1998 Queensland election under optional AV, preference distribution was required in nearly 80 per cent of electorates (Queensland Electoral Commission, 1998). In this election it was important for voters to express a full set of preferences in order to have a greater influence on outcomes.

Generally though, in Queensland elections, the number of electorates requiring preference distribution is less than in the examples studied of those using compulsory AV. While the last four elections in both Western Australia and the Commonwealth exhibit anywhere between around 43 and 76 per cent of electorates requiring preference distribution per election (see Appendices 2 and 3), the amount of electorates requiring preference distribution in Queensland elections under optional AV has been (excepting 1998) less than 46 per cent. However, care must be taken when comparing this figure between states using compulsory AV and optional AV. Returning to Green's arguments for New South Wales

elections under optional AV, the use of optional AV actually has an effect on the calculation of the number of electorates requiring preference distribution. Green explains that to win an election under compulsory AV, a candidate must receive more than 50 per cent of the formal vote, which often requires some distribution of preferences to be calculated. However, under optional AV, a candidate needs only 50 per cent of the *vote remaining in the count*, that is, formal votes less exhausted votes. Exhausted votes effectively reduce the number of votes remaining in the count, and therefore the number of votes required to achieve a majority. By cutting the number of votes in the count, the candidate with the highest primary vote is closer to victory, and therefore less preferences are required to determine a majority (Green, 1999, p. 69). Therefore, in some electorates in which preferences would be required under compulsory AV, this need for preference distribution is alleviated somewhat. So, not only do exhausted ballots tend to favour the candidate leading on the primary vote, they also have the potential to reduce the number of electorates in which preferences are even required. This then makes comparison between optional and compulsory AV systems somewhat arbitrary.

Another related problem which Green identifies concerning optional AV is the use of the two-party-preferred form of analysis under this system. The weaknesses of the two-party-preferred form of analysis were discussed in Chapter Three and these criticisms can also be applied to its use under an optional AV system. The use of this analysis becomes even more problematical under optional AV due to the fact that large numbers of voters do not distribute preferences such that they are still current in the final count. With two-party-preferred analysis, exhausted preferences are treated in the same way as informal votes; they are excluded from the total vote in calculating percentages. This tends to inflate the percentage vote for the winning candidate in an electorate, but should not, however, significantly affect the state-wide totals (Green, 1994, p. 3).

Keeping in mind that comparison between systems of optional and compulsory AV can be arbitrary due to the mathematical workings of each system, it should probably still be noted that the incidence of preference distribution actually changing results under optional AV is, on the whole, comparable with compulsory AV. In Queensland in 1992 and 1998 these rates are actually quite high, being nearly 17 and 18 per cent respectively (Queensland Electoral Commission, 1993; 1998). However, the figures for the other elections in Queensland and New South Wales are on par with recent elections for Western Australia and the Commonwealth. That is, there does not appear to be any overall trend in relation to the number of electorates in which preferences have changed results and the AV being either optional or compulsory.

It appears then, that since many voters under optional AV systems abstain from voting for all candidates, parties are affected in different ways under optional AV. There appear to be clear partisan patterns to rates of plumping in New South Wales and Queensland, which is often noted by commentators. These reflect the long standing coalition arrangements between the Liberal and National parties to exchange

preferences. In both states, Labor voters are considerably more likely to plump than coalition voters, or minor party and independent voters (Electoral Systems website). There is also evidence that how-to-vote cards are influential - where the how-to-vote material from one of the major parties does not suggest second and subsequent preferences, rates of plumping are significantly higher. In a survey conducted at two by-elections using optional AV in 1992, 75 per cent of voters followed how-to-vote directions, resulting in plumping rates of 43 per cent in one district (Gordon), and 63 per cent in another (Kuring-gai) (Electoral Systems website).

It follows then, that for political parties, the choice between optional and compulsory AV depends upon how they perceive they will fare under that system. Take for instance the submission by the National Party to the Commission on Government arguing the retention of compulsory AV for the West Australian house of government:

[Full] preferential voting ensures votes for minor parties and independents are not wasted and therefore has the effect of increasing the level of effective competition at elections. Under 'first-past-the-post voting', a person who votes for a 'minor candidate' has no influence on the election result.

Preferential voting encourages parties to develop constructive relationships with other parties and candidates (in order to attract their preferences). (1995, p. 311)

The 'constructive relationship' which the National (formerly Country) Party has had with the Liberal Party for many years has sustained the presence of this minor party under a full preferential system of AV.

It is probably to be expected that Labor governments will endorse the employment of optional preference marking, since the ALP, for most of the twentieth century has been disadvantaged (at least at a federal level) by the full preferential system of the AV. Originally, until 1974, the Labor Party was formally committed to a return of first-past-the-post (simple plurality) voting. During the election campaign of 1974, Gough Whitlam altered the party's policy to optional preference marking under the AV whereby voters would not be compelled to express a full range of preferences. Whitlam claimed that the optional form of the AV was "perhaps the only electoral procedure in the world which allows electors to express their indifference to candidates" (Electoral Systems website). Subsequently, the Labor controlled State of New South Wales implemented this change for its lower house elections.

The Labor Party has indeed fared well under optional AV in New South Wales and Queensland. This is probably due in some part to candidates leading on the primary vote being advantaged under optional AV. In Queensland particularly, ALP supporters appear to use the optional AV system as a first-past-the-post system, plumping for Labor candidates at a remarkably high rate. In the 2001 state election in

Queensland, of the 66 seats (out of a possible 89) won by the Labor Party, only 22, or one third, of these required preferences to determine the winning candidate. In none of these seats did the Labor candidate come from behind to win on preferences - all were leading on the first count anyway, and simply had their plurality confirmed by preferences (Queensland Electoral Commission, 2001). The 2004 Queensland election, conducted as this study was being completed, demonstrated only a slight loss of ground to the ALP who seem assured 63 seats in the new parliament.

It also makes sense for minor parties today to be in favour of optional preference marking over compulsory preference marking. A earlier minor party like the DLP, which sought to trade tightly disciplined second preferences for policies wanted would never have agreed to optional AV, but more recent minor parties, such as the Australian Democrats, who have at times even left their supporters to make their own choices between the major contestants, would also be ready to let them abstain from that choice altogether (Hughes, 1983, p. 226).

It must be said at this point though that, given the choice, these minor parties would tend to favour a system of PR over either AV system. This is because PR has been demonstrated to return a broader range of candidates from all the political parties rather than just those from the two main party groupings, as has been evidenced by the patterns of elections to the Federal Senate and most State upper houses. This aside however, the introduction of optional AV would have a major effect on all political parties, especially on the power of the major parties, in that a choice of candidate would not inevitably come down to a choice between one of the two major parties. As the Commission on Government found:

In keeping with the theme of the public submissions, this method of voting may reduce the dominance of the major parties as well as improving the standard of their campaigning. Voters would no longer be required to make an ultimate choice between two candidates whom they wish to see as the Legislative Assembly member. If the voters preferred neither of the major parties, or did not like the preselected candidates, they would be able to ignore them when determining their preferences. As a result, the major parties would have to work harder when campaigning to convince voters in each electoral district to mark a preference for their candidate. (1995, p. 313)

The optional AV system has appeared to favour the One Nation Party in the 1998 and 2001 Queensland elections, although the recent 2004 election has seen the party down to one seat. This was particularly evident in 1998, where support for this party (which amounted to 23 per cent of the primary vote) was more accurately reflected in terms of seat share than would have been demonstrated under a system of compulsory AV. For instance in Western Australia, where support for One Nation was also high in both 1998 and 2001, this party obtained no seats in the lower house under compulsory AV. Of course, it must also be taken into consideration that support for One Nation tended to be concentrated in several electorates in Queensland. However, the fact that the choice for voters did not inevitably come down to

two major parties (as under compulsory AV) was also an important factor in the success of One Nation in Queensland.

In New South Wales, the optional AV system has not worked to secure seat share for minor parties to the same extent as Queensland. However, an important qualification which must be added here is the fact that Queensland has only one House of Parliament, while New South Wales, like Western Australia and the Federal system, has two. Further research would be required to determine whether this factor influences the way in which Queenslanders allocate preferences. It is possible however, that this House of Parliament is utilised differently by voters, who maybe wish to see some minor party representation in their single representative body, thus compensating for the minority representation which tends to be found within the upper house of a bicameral system like Western Australia.

This fact aside, it is difficult to determine whether the optional system has made much difference to representation in New South Wales as would have been evidenced under a compulsory AV system. The Labor Party at the last two state elections has managed to maintain majority government, with a seat share of 59 per cent. The Greens, as in WA, have increased their vote share considerably over the last few elections, obtaining only slightly less votes than the National Party (Government and Politics database), without much success until recently. The Greens won their first seat in the New South Wales lower house in the Cunningham by-election in 2002. Whether they continue to increase this vote share and gain more seats remains to be seen, but is very probable given the percentage increase at each state election. And, there is no doubt that optional allocation of preferences will make it slightly easier. However, this prediction could also apply to Western Australia which has compulsory AV, although in this state minor parties would face a slightly more difficult task due to the compulsory allocation of preferences.

It might be logical to assume then, given the above arguments, that in states with optional AV more voters would choose an alternative to voting for a major party grouping. Evidence shows however that the rates of voting for other than a major party grouping in New South Wales and Queensland are fairly relative (and even a little less) than Western Australia which has a compulsory system of preference allocation. In the Queensland election in 2001, and New South Wales in 2003, votes for other than a major party amounted to nearly 23 per cent. This is actually less than the nearly 30 per cent for Western Australia in the 2001 election. So, while this figure appears to be on the increase as in other states, an optional AV system does not appear to persuade more voters to vote for minor parties and independents than would otherwise do so.

The above arguments partly explain why the Liberal Party favours the retention of compulsory AV, in spite of the fact that the system has not always benefited them in recent times (Western Australia being a prime example). It is likely that optional AV would disadvantage the Liberal Party even further, in that they would not automatically be assured National Party preferences, and would be even less likely to pick

up other important minor party preferences. In essence, the Liberal Party is unlikely to advocate change to a system which has, in both states in which it is operative, predominately returned Labor governments.

Finally, would voters prefer optional AV over compulsory AV? The focus group research covered in the previous chapter canvassed the way in which many voters in Western Australia are dissatisfied with the two major party groupings and consequently voting minor parties first on their ballot. It is quite probable that if the above arguments were put to these voters then they would be in favour of optional preferential marking for the AV system, which would be more beneficial to minor parties.

The overall tone of public submissions to the Commission on Government indicate that much of the public is in favour of a change to an optional system (COG, 1995, pp. 311-12). The main reason given was that voters did not feel they should have to express a preference for a candidate for whom they did not wish to vote. While no survey has looked at Western Australia specifically, a national survey in May 1979 showed 72 per cent of voters (83 per cent of Australian Democrat voters, 78 per cent of ALP voters, 66 per cent of Liberal voters, and 57 per cent of NCP voters) were in favour of a change to optional preference marking for the AV system, with only 26 per cent wishing to retain compulsory preference marking (Hughes, 1983, p. 226). Furthermore, this survey indicates that voters who vote minor parties like the Democrats recognise that it would be more in their favour to not have to indicate a choice for either of the two major parties. It is interesting however (according to this survey at least), that even a large proportion of major party voters appear to be in favour of optional AV. Although this could be because they do not fully understand all the arguments for and against optional AV, it remains true that Labor governments in Queensland and New South Wales, elected under this system, have managed to retain government in the face of considerable support for minor parties in recent elections.

One final advantage of the optional AV system which must be mentioned is that the problems of spoilt ballots due to numbering errors associated with the compulsory AV version are largely negated. Thus, the optional system is better for conditions of low literacy or numeracy. However, due to Australia being relatively literate, and current rates of informal voting fairly low, this consideration may not be as important as some of the others mentioned.

The arguments for and against optional preferential voting are fairly balanced either side and the choice between an optional or compulsory system, like all considerations regarding electoral systems, depends on how the individual perceives representation should work. Those who tend to favour that which delivers definite majorities, and a stable, predictable two-party system, would, in theory, choose compulsory AV for the lower house in state parliaments. On the other hand, there are those who maybe prefer the contest widened a little to allow minor parties more of a chance, and who also value choice to abstain from voting for a candidate above having subsequent choices to fall back on if their first choice is eliminated, and would therefore prefer optional AV.

Most research so far indicates that the majority of public opinion seems to be in favour of optional AV. There could be a variety of reasons for this. Firstly, it is quite possible that most voters are not fully aware of what effects a change to this system would have in terms of limiting their ability to influence the final result. The research conducted in this study indicates that most voters only have a very basic idea of how the AV operates, with many not realising just how much influence they can actually have under the current system in Western Australia. Secondly, and also indicated by this research, many voters resent the influence that the major parties appear to have, and would welcome the chance to vote for an alternative without having, at some stage, to indicate a preference for either of the major party candidates. Thirdly, as mentioned in Chapter Six, electoral systems currently in use tend to take the brunt of more general voter discontent, and it is possible that any reasonable change to the electoral system may be viewed as positive. And finally, it is just possible that a small percent of voters are aware of all the above arguments and would still opt for a change to optional AV.

It would appear that this choice would best be made by the voting public since political parties will only choose a system which ultimately benefits them. Recommendations made by independent bodies such as the Commission on Government in Western Australia and the Electoral and Administrative Review Commission (EARC) in Queensland, which both found in favour of optional preference marking, are maybe good examples of a balanced argument to which the public may refer. It must be realised though, that it becomes problematic to allow the voting public to make decisions on electoral law when studies such as this one find voter understanding of these issues alarmingly low, and the will to educate themselves mostly lacking.

CHAPTER EIGHT RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Retrospect: Representation and the Alternative Vote thus far

The concept of certain people representing others in the political arena is not new. As this study demonstrates, the strands of political representation can be traced back to ancient civilisations. The use of elections to choose these representatives is not much newer, although is used more exclusively to allocate modern representatives, whereas the ancient civilisations used both lot and election in varying degrees and constantly debated the advantages and disadvantages of both. The triumph of election as the sole method by which modern representatives are chosen is probably more interesting and less well known, and expounded more fully in Bernard Manin's *The Principles of Representative Government* (1997). In retrospect, this development can be seen as a watershed for the evolution of representative government as we know it today. It is difficult to imagine the difference in our political system if lot had been chosen by reformers during the revolutions of the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, as the method by which to appoint politicians! However, while this tradition was still alive in political debate and culture during the 17th and 18th centuries, by the 19th and 20th centuries a form of representative government with representatives chosen by election became the accepted norm with no apparent alternative.

Not only did this form of representative government become the accepted norm, but it also came to be associated with the democratic values which have become entrenched in most Western political systems. This is particularly true in Australia where the concept of democracy is held in high regard, and indeed considered to be our birthright as Australian citizens. There was not one participant in the focus groups studied in the course of this research who was not in favour of democracy, or 'democratic' government. There were, however, some participants who felt that democracy was not brought about by the Australian political system of representative government, particularly the electoral system of the AV.

It is true that democracy has been only relatively recently married to the idea of political representation, and the relationship has often been, and continues to be, problematic. It was this union however, along with the triumph of election, which has made representative government what it is today. Representative institutions which were established in the middle ages were converted by reformers and thinkers of the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries to more effectively serve democratic principles such as majority rule, popular sovereignty, and the values of liberty, equality and justice for all. Some see that democratic principles were in a way enhanced by the establishment of elected representative government. For instance, thinkers like James Madison and John Stuart Mill pointed out that representative institutions refine and enlarge public views making them more representative of the whole nation, not just a few select interests. Others view democracy as a less important consideration for modern governments than

efficiency. Emmanuel-Joseph Sieyès, for example, felt that representation, although maybe not truly democratic in the real sense of the word, was superior because the occupation of political office is just another specialised profession open to those particularly suited to it, not unlike a doctor or banker. These kinds of debates to do with democracy and representation show no signs of abating in the present, and if anything have become more complex. To look into these would entail a separate study however, and this thesis was more concerned with tracing the evolution of modern representative government, and its culmination in different electoral systems, the AV in particular, and how representation is affected by this.

This study demonstrated just how the AV has affected representation in Australia, focusing particularly on Western Australia, while looking at the Commonwealth level also. As seen through this study of the AV, any electoral system will have its own inherent bias and influence on outcomes. Also demonstrated was that electoral systems, although more often than not introduced with specific (usually partisan) considerations in mind, often take on a life of their own which those who introduced it did not fully foresee. It also became evident that these factors at times varied between Australian politics on a federal level and the West Australian experience of the AV.

The outcomes of the AV on a more general and federal level were classified in Chapter Three into two sections. The first were the effects of the AV which were largely the results of this voting system being utilised in single-member constituencies. Any single-member electorate system will always tend to exaggerate the representation of the winning party, and also lead to the formation of a two-party system. Unless a minority, or a minor party, has concentrated support in one electorate then it will not stand much chance of gaining seat share in lower houses which operate on a single-member electorate system. It was also noted that even if some minority groups do have this kind of concentration in one electorate, as in the instance of some ethnic or Aboriginal groups, then other factors such as party pre-selection or cultural barriers can become an obstacle to 'mirror' (i.e. actual) representation. Some consider the way in which the AV in single-member constituencies manufactures a majority for the most preferred party - the most preferred being determined through preference distribution - an important advantage of this system. Others prefer a system of PR which ensures more accurate mirroring of all the sections in society and used in multi-member electorates, usually those like minority groups or minor parties who are disadvantaged by the AV system. PR is used in the Senate and state upper houses and indeed does ensure that more diverse candidates are elected.

Those who support plurality systems such as the AV do so on the grounds that the prime aim is the formation of strong and stable governments - one major party, under normal circumstances, can usually win a majority of seats. The AV system ensures that no candidate is elected until they have, not just the greatest number of votes, but also an *absolute* majority. The problems of over-representation and under-representation remain however, with many 'wasted' votes and malapportionment can be built in (Jaensch, 1992, p. 364).

The AV however, has moderated somewhat the more harsh effects of plurality systems. Firstly, it has prevented vote splitting within the two main party groupings. On a federal level one of the intentions of the introduction of the AV was to unite the conservative vote against Labor. This was found to have worked fairly well, with tight preference exchange occurring between the coalition partners. On the other hand, this was not generally the case in Western Australia, where regional animosities and other factors led to leakage of preferences between the Liberal and National/Country parties being high.

Another intention behind the introduction of the AV on a federal level was to make preference exchanges between candidates from the same party possible in order to encourage multiple endorsements and thus end, or at least alleviate to some extent, caucus control. By the end of the 1920's this was seen to have failed at a federal level of politics, but was slightly more successful in Western Australia, with the exception of Labor candidates. It remains, however, that multiple endorsements are still feasible under the AV system, in theory allowing more choice for voters when it comes to representation by their party of choice.

The AV has also facilitated the favouring of more moderate, or centre, candidates. Discussed in Chapter Three was the way in which the system of preference allocation under the AV has the effect of pulling parties towards the centre. Minor party preferences then, are expected to favour either of the two major party groupings with those on the left (e.g. the Greens, Democratic Socialist Party) and the centre (e.g. the Democrats) favouring the ALP, and with those on the right (e.g. the Christian Democratic Party, Australian Shooters Party) favouring the Coalition (Parliament of Australia: Department of the Parliamentary Library website). These minor parties keep their distance from the two major parties just enough to differentiate themselves, but not enough to alienate themselves totally from the electorate at large and thus lose their power to affect preference flows. The more radical these parties are, the less votes they receive, and the less chance they have of affecting results through preferences. Just recently, Gerard Henderson (2003), executive director of the Sydney Institute, writing in *The West Australian*, found that "in Australia, politics gravitates toward the centre. Partly this reflects the nation's essentially pragmatic character. But it is also influenced by the prevailing electoral system, which is not reflected in the democracies of North America or Western Europe". He claims that compulsory voting plays a big part in this because people who would not normally vote do so in Australia, and these votes are usually formal. Parties are then attempting to gain these votes, as well as the second and subsequent preferences of those who would not vote for them in the first instance. Thus their policies gravitate toward the centre in order to garner as many of these votes as possible. Henderson compares this to the situation in the US where "the Centre does not have a vote to be captured", with the swinging vote at the extremes, placing polarising issues which are marginal in Australia (such as abortion, gun laws, and capital punishment) at the forefront of American politics. Compulsion to vote, coupled with the AV, produces a unique form of politics in Australia, with close elections and parties which converge ideologically.

Compulsory voting - another fairly unique Australian electoral experiment - is a separate issue large enough for a study, or many studies, of its own. However, for the purposes of this study, it was recognised that compulsion to vote adds an extra dimension to any voting system under scrutiny. Under an AV system, not only does it require that parties tailor their policies to suit a broad spectrum of the voting population, it also ensures that the government or candidate elected under this system is truly elected by the majority of citizens. It is also claimed that compulsory voting facilitates the operation of more difficult voting systems, such as the AV (Phillips, Black, Bott & Fischer, 1998, p. 225). Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter Three, the introduction of the AV in the federal House of Representatives required the compulsory vote to alleviate the higher levels of informal voting initially experienced under this system.

Australian electoral policy exhibits its unique fascination with compulsion within the functioning of the AV itself. Most of this study was concerned with the compulsory (full preferential) AV, which is the form used in the majority of Australian lower house elections. However, the non-compulsory (optional preferential) AV was considered also, looking briefly at those Australian states where it is used: that is, New South Wales and Queensland. On the whole, there were found to be some inherent problems with the optional form which are similar to those found under a first-past-the-post electoral system. It was also noted that many of the problems with the AV in the Canadian experiences could be largely attributed to the system being optional rather than compulsory. The main problem with optional AV in both the Canadian context and in Australian experiments is the large proportion of voters which tend to not go beyond a first preference. 'Plumping' for one candidate was found to be increasing over time in both states where optional AV is used. On one hand, allowing voters the freedom to abstain for registering a vote for every candidate is one of the main reasons why optional AV is considered desirable. On the other hand, if large numbers of voters plump for one candidate only, a candidate can be elected on a minority of over-all votes, which is essentially undemocratic. The occurrence of large numbers of exhausted votes under an optional AV system also has the potential to reduce slightly the number of electorates in which preferences are required, and tends to favour candidates which are leading on the primary count, both of which have been demonstrated in New South Wales elections. If plumping continues to increase at the current rate in those states with optional AV, then those who choose to allocate only one preference are dramatically disadvantaging themselves when it comes to influencing election outcomes. This situation becomes in many ways worse than a simple plurality system, because some voters (those who go beyond first preference) have a disproportionate amount of influence over outcomes. However, the choice is up to voters and not restricted to a select few, and this in itself is an advantage of the system.

Thus, the main advantage of optional AV is the freedom of choice in the allocation, or non-allocation, of preferences, and the proposed benefit to minor parties. In New South Wales and Queensland, there is

more of a tendency for minor parties to gain seats in the lower houses. This occurs more easily under an optional AV system because voters can refrain, at some stage, from registering a vote for one or other of the major parties. If voters do not have to make this ultimate choice between Labor or the Coalition, then these parties have to work harder when campaigning to convince voters to vote for them. As noted previously however, there does not seem to be any marked difference in the amount of voters voting for a choice other than a major party grouping in states with optional AV. For instance, the amount of voters voting for other than a major party is comparable with WA, which has compulsory AV.

While optional AV does make the election of minor party candidates somewhat easier, a major effect of the compulsory AV system which was considered in some detail was the way in which this system has sustained the presence of some minor parties, without allowing a great deal of actual representation. The importance of minor parties to the average Australian voter was clearly demonstrated by the focus group research. Minor parties are seen to represent more diverse parts of the electorate which remain unrepresented by the major parties. As previously noted, the system of allocating preferences does mean that elections ultimately come down to a contest between (what become under this system) the two main party groupings. Mackerras (1975, p. 275) recognised this in pointing out that no elector under the compulsory AV system can avoid casting a vote which expresses either a higher preference for the Liberal-National candidate or the ALP candidate, even if his/her first preference vote is for a minor party. However, the fact that minor parties can direct their supporters' preferences quite effectively toward either of the major parties and thus play a part in determining the winning candidate, makes their presence important.

The main beneficiary of compulsory AV has been the Country Party in early years, and even in recent elections the National Party remains consistently over-represented in lower houses, both state and federally. Over the last decade, other minor parties such as the Democrats, Greens, and more recently One Nation, have played an important role in influencing election outcomes through the preference flows of their supporters, thus requiring that the major parties take note of their policies and moderate their own policies accordingly. And, provided the trend of increasing numbers of voters supporting minor parties in lower house elections continues, it is likely that minor parties will secure enough votes to win seats in future elections, in spite of the bias toward major parties within the AV system.

Some claim that the AV has lessened somewhat the psychological effect of the 'wasted' vote. This claim may be a little more contentious, given the results of the research conducted in this study. The AV system, for many years, worked not much differently to a cruder first-past-the-post system in terms of real outcomes, although as mentioned above some of the more stark effects of plurality systems were moderated somewhat by the AV. The way in which this system, like all plurality systems, tends to perpetuate a two-party style of electoral politics was expounded by Duverger, as pointed out in Chapter One and investigated more fully in later chapters. As also mentioned, this factor was recognised in a less

theoretical way by the participants in the focus group discussions. They all recognised that government was always either a Labor or Coalition government. Remember from Chapter One that Duverger also considered this factor. This was what he called the psychological effect of plurality systems, which holds that voters perceive that under the system only one of two parties have a chance of winning election, and therefore a vote for any other party will be, in effect, a wasted vote. Recall that this was also one of Jeffrey's criticisms of the system cited in the chapter on the focus group research. Sharman (1997, pp. 61-64) also discusses the way in which the institutional context of the state lower house party systems makes them very resistant to change, in that the dichotomised view most voters have of lower house politics is reinforced by the single-member preferential (AV) voting system. This view is further reinforced by the 'two-party-preferred' method of analysis of voting in lower house elections, discussed in Chapter Three.

These assertions were largely borne out by the focus group research. Many voters did feel that minor parties were not successful because they did not win seats in the lower house, and that thus, the AV system was especially failing those who did not wish to vote for one of the two major party groupings. In spite of this however, voters are increasingly placing minor parties as their first preference on their ballot. This appeared especially true for the younger participants in the study, who were more likely to place more extreme (left or right wing) candidates first on their ballots. Bean and McAllister (2002, pp. 274-275) in their analysis of the 2001 federal election find that party identification in Australia is still strong, but the change is in that more of a proportion of this identification is with minor parties, and this trend is especially pronounced in younger voters. According to the focus group research, it appears unlikely that this is seen as *only* a wasted vote by these voters, although this is definitely a factor at times. Entwined with this is a protest vote, an ideological vote, and a vote in faith that one day the voting system will work in their favour and that the numbers will be there for a minor party to win the seat for their electorate.

The focus group research provides some direction for further research into electoral reform and education. Overwhelmingly, the research demonstrated that most voters in Western Australia have only a very basic understanding of how the AV operates. While some recognised the need for education and better knowledge, many were uninterested in knowing more about how the system operates and how their votes are distributed. The main area of misconception was how parties direct their supporters preferences, with many not understanding the amount of control that they, as voters, have over their own preference distribution. This confusion could maybe due to the fact that at times in Australian upper house elections, voters have been given a choice to vote 'above the line', or ticket voting, whereby the voter allows his party to distribute his preferences for him. The South Australian House of Assembly has been the only lower house in Australia to utilise ticket voting. This was introduced in 1985 ostensibly to make voting easier, but in reality offering increased partisan benefit for the obvious reason that parties have more control over preference flows (Jaensch, 2002, pp. 87-88). However, the research appeared to demonstrate that there was simply a general lack of understanding regarding the AV altogether, with the media being influential because parties are always talking about preference 'deals'. Lack of voter

understanding of this voting system has been a problem since its introduction, both federally and at state levels.

Surprisingly however, many voters do not follow how-to-vote cards, or, if they do, they still realise that this is not necessary for a formal vote. Only a few of the voters surveyed thought that they needed to follow how-to-vote cards in order to vote formally. Interestingly, there seems to be a push across the voting spectrum for the abolition of how-to-vote cards, especially from those who had a slightly better than the average understanding of the system. Many voters find these confusing and unnecessary. Some of the less informed (and usually conservative) voters valued their guidance, and a few claimed to use them as an indication of where some of the less well known candidates fall along the ideological spectrum, but in most cases voters felt them a waste of paper (especially the Green voters!).

In conclusion, this study established that votes for candidates which hail from other than the two major party groupings is steadily rising, both in the states and on a federal level. Also increasing is the number of candidates contesting most seats, giving more choice in assembly elections than ever before. This in turn has meant that more electorates are requiring the distribution of preferences to determine which candidate has an absolute majority of votes. On a federal level, calculated on the last five elections (since 1990), we can expect preference distribution to be required in around 55 per cent, or just over half, of all electorates. Compare this to the average 32 per cent, or a third of all electorates requiring preference distribution, for the five elections prior to 1990 (1977 - 1987). In Western Australia, the trend is similar, with the last four elections demonstrating a sharp rise of the number of electorates requiring preference distribution (see Appendix 3). The last election in Western Australia (2001), required preferences to be distributed in 43 out of 57 electorates, whereas prior to 1989 the highest number of electorates which required preference distribution in any one election was 18.

On the other hand, the number of electorates in which the distribution of preferences change the results has remained fairly consistent over time. This has been true for both the Commonwealth and Western Australia (see Appendices 2 and 3). On a federal level, preference distribution has affected no more than 14.6 per cent of results (in 1922), and in Western Australia no more than 18 per cent of results (in 1917). Interestingly, both of these cases occurred not long after the introduction of the AV in the respective Houses, which means that there is not any correlation between the rise in preference distribution in recent times and any rise in the number of candidates being defeated due to this distribution.

What can be concluded then, from these findings, is that while more electorates now require preference distribution to determine an absolute majority for a winning candidate, it is still the exception rather than the rule for preferences to change the final result. So, once again, we can come to conclusion that while the AV does not always work much differently to a simple plurality voting system, it rather moderates the extremes of such a system by ensuring that the candidate elected has true majority support. At those

cases where a first-past-the-post system would be inaccurate in its judgement of the majority, the AV amends this by occasionally altering the final result.

However, can it really be proposed that much of the time results under an AV system would be similar to those under a first-past-the-post system of voting, *presuming that voters would vote the same under a different electoral system*? This last point is an extremely important qualification since some evidence from the focus group research suggests that many would not vote in the same way under a different system. There is even some danger in comparing the results of compulsory and optional AV systems, since some voters may vote differently if they are required to express a preference for each candidate. This results of this study lead to the conclusion that voting behaviour both affects, and is affected by, the mechanics of, and perceptions about, the voting system in use.

Prospect: Where are we heading with representation in Australia?

What remains to be determined is some conclusions we can come to about representation in the Australian context through this study of the AV, and the direction this is taking us. This study has demonstrated some of the assumptions regarding representation which are inherent in the system of the AV. Firstly, the overwhelming purpose of representation which the AV fulfills is that a government is elected which has the support of a majority of voters. As was pointed out in Chapter One, the manufacturing of majorities is generally considered a positive thing since normative theories of democracy, widely accepted in our society, suggest that government should have this majority support. There was not one participant in this study who felt that this majority support for governments was unnecessary or undesirable. Normative theories of democracy suggest that if a government has this kind of support, they then have a mandate to make decisions on behalf of their constituents.

It becomes obvious that the AV delivers a result with which voters agree theoretically. Why then does there seem to be such a large amount of voter dissatisfaction with this electoral method for selecting representatives and forming governments. It is easy to simply say that electoral systems attract the blame for larger failings within the political system, and to some extent this is maybe true. There are other factors at work however, and these are to do with the purposes and outcomes of representation inherent in this electoral system, and the fundamental concepts of representation which exist in the Australian psyche.

To progress with this line of thought, let us return briefly to the history of representative government. Discussed in Chapter Two was the history behind the idea of the representative, and the variations between the way in which the American revolutionaries envisioned their representative should behave, and the Burkean view of the representative which gained widespread acceptance in England and (with

some variation) in France. The American tradition was to view a representative as simply a delegate, with representative government a substitute for direct democracy, or a way of people ruling themselves. On the other hand, the style of representative government which Australians inherited from the English was that which saw the role of a representative as - in Whig and Burkean tradition - a trustee empowered to make decisions without the strict approval of constituents. So, rather than 'mirroring' constituents accurately (both in a physical and ideological sense), a Burkean representative is one who represents constituents and the nation at large in a metaphysical sense.

At the time of the American Revolution, the writers of the United States Constitution developed an account of representation based on the political 'man' which debunked the Burkean tradition of the representative. How could British parliaments represent Americans if there were no Americans in them? On the other hand, the English concept of representation suited those who framed the Australian Constitution, and "is exemplified in the fact that for the Australian government to work, politicians have to abide by conventions, not rules" (Grant, 1997, pp. 15-16). Thus the AV was chosen as a system which would ensure broad representation of the various political opinions in society, without pandering to minority groups by giving them direct representation or over-representing them in parliament. Rather, through the AV, minority groups and parties can influence outcomes and have their presence sustained, but in the end it is those who obtain seat share which make decisions on behalf of all the voters at large. They take into account not just their own constituents or those who gave them their first preference vote, but also those whose preferences gave them their 'majority'. And often, under an AV system, coalitions are formed which further broaden the range of views represented by one party grouping. Thus, the AV is a voting system which reflects the purposes and outcomes of representation which are a part of our political heritage.

It became clear through the focus group research that many West Australian voters are no longer comfortable (if they ever were) with this concept of representation. In this day and age, politicians are not always trusted to make decisions on behalf of voters. A large proportion of voters feel that representatives should be just that - representatives in the strictest sense of the word. Many suggested that representatives elected by the AV represent more narrowly the wishes of their particular electorate, and that the 'people' should have more of a direct influence on policy outcomes. All those studied felt that their MP's were simply delegates sent to express the voters' views in parliament, in the American tradition of representation. In this way, Australian ideas regarding representation have progressed far from their British inception.

This has become evident in the recent rise of populist politics such as those evidenced by Pauline Hanson's One Nation. David Wells draws some interesting parallels between the populist politics of the political far-right in America and the appeal of Australian style populism evidenced by One Nation (1997, pp. 18-28). The calls for the views of 'ordinary' Australians to be heard is growing louder. A delegate

approach to representation usually characterises those who believe in a more populist or participatory system of government. It is interesting to note that in Australia, activists representing Aboriginals and women as political minorities have been shown to favour a delegate approach to representation over and above the more traditional Burkean role of the representative as an independent decision maker (Rowse, 2001, p. 108; Sawyer, 2001c, pp. 39-40).

The issue of minority representation under the AV leads into another direction in which representation in Australia is moving. This study found that the system of the AV could be viewed as a compromise between majority and the minority representation. The attitudes of those studied in this research were almost paradoxical when it came to representing minority groups, especially in a mirroring, or actual, sense. It must be stated here that those respondents studied were drawn from what can be termed 'mainstream' Australia (i.e. there were no respondents from Aboriginal or Non English Speaking backgrounds). Their views on political minority groups were interesting. All appeared to believe in the rule of the majority and majoritarian principles, which are viewed as synonymous with democracy. But, at the same time, many felt that a failing of the AV was that minor parties rarely (or never, in the case of Western Australia) won any seats. Their views on minority groups varied depending on which groups these were. Minorities are generally viewed as a very small proportion of the population who have no right to impose their views on 'ordinary' people. This is, of course, unless a voter identifies with one of these groups, and then the voting system is viewed as unrepresentative and unfair if it does not adequately represent this particular group!

This research identified a tendency for 'mainstream' Australians to view themselves as culturally and ideologically homogenous: i.e. the belief that 'everyone thinks like I do'. Over and again during the focus group discussions, participants, when discussing their *own* perceptions, used statements phrased in the third person, such as: 'most people think', 'everyone thinks' and so on. However, the falsity of a purely homogenous mainstream political society was evident even in this small, and quite mainstream, sample of the West Australian population. Notwithstanding, if voters feel that their views or even their physical person, *which to them is what the majority consists of*, are not being represented correctly, then the voting system will be viewed accordingly.

Today, mirror (actual or physical) representation of society is becoming more accepted as a legitimate form of representation, as opposed to simply representation of ideas or opinions in legislative assemblies. For more on this argument see Anne Phillips' interesting dissertation on the 'politics of ideas' versus a 'politics of presence' (1995). The electoral system of PR is seen as more effective in bringing this about. This was borne out by the focus group research which pointed to the fact that many voters view politicians, especially those from major parties, as removed from 'ordinary' people. These politicians are not 'Joe down the road', to use the words of one participant; in fact, they are seen as an elite group who have no idea how 'normal' people think and feel. This fact certainly detracts from the perceived

representativeness, and therefore legitimacy, of government formed under an electoral system such as the AV which promotes the election of politicians from major parties. Once again, we can look to the Pauline Hanson phenomenon as an example, and see a minor party which appealed due to its perceived distance from other politicians and major political parties.

It becomes evident then, that there are many complex, and at times conflicting, considerations when it comes to assessing electoral systems like the AV. Ultimately, the most important thing is education of the electorate. If there was to be one over-riding recommendation for further action arising from this study, it would have to be education of the electorate regarding voting systems, particularly the AV. This would have to include not just the mechanics of the system, although this is paramount in importance, but also the purposes and outcomes with regards to representation. As in the case of the ancient Greeks, it is important to reflect upon, and theorise about, where we have come from and where we are going with our political system. Otherwise we are in danger of throwing away what is in essence an effective voting system simply because there exist too many misconceptions about this system. Furthermore, Australian voters need to determine exactly what it is they expect from this system. For example, they should decide how much stability and majority rule they are willing to sacrifice for diversity and representativeness in the lower house of Parliament. And, if these issues can't be decided satisfactorily, then the last word would have to be in favour of the AV, since this not only manufactures the majority but, in an even more important way, determines exactly what that majority consists of by moulding, through minority preferences, the very process by which this majority is formed.

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APPENDIX 1

A Typology of preferential electoral systems

Type of election	Single transferable vote (STV)	Contingent vote (CV)	Alternative vote (optional preferences)	Alternative vote (compulsory preferences)	Alternative vote (Multi-member districts)
National legislative elections (lower house)	Ireland 1922- Malta 1921- Estonia 1990 Northern Ireland 1973-		Papua New Guinea 1964-1975 Zimbabwe 1979 (white seats only)	Australia 1918- Fiji 1997-	Nauru 1968-
National legislative elections (upper house)	Australia (Senate) 1949- Ireland 1922-				Australia (Senate) 1919-1948
National presidential elections		Sri Lanka 1978-	Ireland 1937-		
State and provincial elections	Tasmania 1907- ACT 1993- New South Wales 1918-1926 New South Wales (upper house) 1978- South Australia (upper house) 1982- Western Australia (upper house) 1989-	Queensland 1892-1942 New South Wales 1926-1928	Queensland 1992- New South Wales 1981- Northern Territory 1980 Victoria 1911-1915 Western Australia 1907-1911 Alberta 1926-1955 British Columbia 1952-1954 Manitoba 1927-1936	Victoria 1916- Queensland 1962-1992 Western Australia 1912- South Australia 1936- New South Wales 1929-1980 Victoria (upper house) 1916- Tasmania (upper house) 1909-	South Australia 1929-1935 British Columbia 1952-1954

Source: Reilly, 2001, p 93

APPENDIX 2
Candidates at the Federal House of Representatives
General Elections 1919 - 2001

Election year	Number of electoral districts	Seats which required preference distribution to determine winning candidate		Seats in which the candidate with a plurality of first preferences votes was defeated	
		n	%	n	%
1919	75	15	20.0	5	6.6
1922	75	28	37.2	11	14.6
1925	75	3	4.0	2	2.7
1928	75	6	8.0	2	2.7
1929	75	6	8.0	2	2.7
1931	75	32	42.6	4	5.3
1934	74	26	35.1	7	9.4
1937	74	14	18.9	5	6.8
1940	74	28	37.8	7	9.4
1943	74	32	43.2	10	13.5
1946	74	13	17.6	5	6.8
1949	121	22	18.3	9	7.5
1951	121	6	4.8	2	1.6
1954	121	6	4.8	2	1.6
1955	122	17	13.9	1	0.8
1958	122	31	25.4	8	6.6
1961	122	37	30.3	7	5.7
1963	122	24	19.7	8	6.6
1966	124	31	24.8	5	4.0
1969	125	38	30.4	13	10.4
1972	125	49	39.2	14	11.2
1974	127	33	26.0	10	7.9
1975	127	24	19.0	7	5.5
1977	124	46	36.8	4	3.2
1980	125	40	32.0	6	4.8
1983	125	31	24.8	2	1.6
1984	148	44	29.9	12	8.2
1987	148	54	36.7	4	2.7
1990	148	92	62.6	8	5.4
1993	147	63	42.8	12	8.2
1996	148	65	44.2	7	4.8
1998	148	98	66.6	7	4.8
2001	150	87	57.4	6	4.0

Sources: *Parliamentary handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia (1st ed - 20th ed)*
Government and Politics database (Rydon, 1968a, p. 190)

APPENDIX 3
Candidates at the Western Australian State Legislative Assembly
General Elections 1908-2001

Election year	Number of electoral districts	Seats which required preference distribution to determine winning candidate		Seats in which the candidate with a plurality of first preference votes was defeated	
		n	%	n	%
1908	50	8	16.0	0	0.0
1911	50	8	16.0	3	6.0
1914	50	8	16.0	3	6.0
1917	50	12	24.0	9	18.0
1921	50	18	36.0	4	8.0
1924	50	16	32.0	5	10.0
1927	50	4	8.0	1	2.0
1930	50	13	26.0	6	12.0
1933	50	11	22.0	4	8.0
1936	50	8	16.0	4	8.0
1939	50	11	22.0	2	4.0
1943	50	6	12.0	3	6.0
1947	50	9	18.0	3	6.0
1950	50	7	14.0	3	6.0
1953	50	3	6.0	1	2.0
1956	50	6	12.0	2	4.0
1959	50	9	18.0	2	4.0
1962	50	6	12.0	3	6.0
1965	50	4	8.0	1	2.0
1968	51	8	15.7	1	2.0
1971	51	18	35.3	5	9.8
1974	51	11	21.6	5	9.8
1977	55	5	9.1	0	0.0
1980	55	7	12.7	0	0.0
1983	57	6	10.5	4	7.0
1986	57	7	12.3	2	3.5
1989	57	25	43.9	4	7.0
1993	57	26	55.6	3	5.3
1996	57	29	50.9	2	3.5
2001	57	43	75.4	6	10.5

*Sources: Western Australian Electoral Commission
Government and Politics database*

APPENDIX 4

FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE

This is an anonymous questionnaire. Please ensure that you do not write your name, or any other comments that will make you identifiable, on the following. By completing the questionnaire you are consenting to take part in this research. As such you should first read the enclosed Disclosure Statement carefully as it explains fully the intention of this project.

Please circle your answer for the following questions:

1. Have you ever visited the State Parliament in person?

Yes
No
Don't know

2. Purpose of last visit

View debate
Educational tour
Visit an MP
Participate in protest
Other

3. What aspect of Parliament would you like to know more about?

It's law making role
It's Members
It's Educational Services
It's procedures
It's voting systems

4. What is your understanding of the *preference voting system* used to elect members to the Legislative Assembly in State Parliament?

Very good
Good
Fair
Poor
Very poor

5. How much consideration do you give your distribution of secondary preferences (ie. those after your first preference is allocated)?

A great deal of consideration
Some consideration
A little consideration
No consideration at all
Don't know

6. Does the preferential voting system for the Legislative Assembly seem to you to be:

- Extremely democratic
- Democratic
- Neutral opinion
- Undemocratic
- Extremely undemocratic

7. Does the preferential voting system for the Legislative Assembly appear to you to be:

- Extremely effective
- Effective
- Neutral opinion
- Ineffective
- Extremely ineffective

8. In your opinion, what are the best features of the preference voting system as used for Legislative Assembly elections?

9. In your opinion, what are the shortcomings of the preference voting system as used for Legislative Assembly elections?

APPENDIX 5

Table 6.1

Question 4.

What is your understanding of the preference voting system used to elect members to the Legislative Assembly in State Parliament?

Scaled response	Focus Group Number				Totals		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very good							0
Good					1	1	2
Fair	1	4	3	2		1	11
Poor		1	2	2	4	3	12
Very poor	5	1	1	2			9
Total number of respondents	6	6	6	6	5	5	34

Note: Although there were eight respondents in Group Three, only six completed questionnaires.

Table 6.2

Question 5.

How much consideration do you give your distribution of secondary preferences (ie those after your first preference is allocated?)

Scaled response	Focus Group Number				Totals		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
A great deal . . .	1		1	2		4	
Some . . .	2	4	3	3	1	3	16
A little . . .	1	1	1		2	2	7
No consideration . . .	2		1	1			4
Don't know	1		1	1			3
Total number of respondents	6	6	6	6	5	5	34

Table 6.3**Question 6***Does the preferential voting system for the Legislative Assembly seem to you to be:*

Scaled response	Focus Group Number				Totals		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Extremely democratic							0
Democratic	1	2			3	2	8
Neutral opinion	5	4	4	5	2	2	22
Undemocratic			2	1		1	4
Extremely undemocratic						0	
Total number of respondents	6	6	6	6	5	5	34

Table 6.4**Question 7.***Does the preferential voting system for the Legislative Assembly appear to you to be:*

Scaled response	Focus Group Number				Totals		
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
Extremely effective					1		1
Effective	1	2	1		2	2	8
Neutral opinion	5	4	3	5	2	3	22
Ineffective			2	1			3
Extremely ineffective							0
Total number of respondents	6	6	6	6	5	5	34