

Podcast 139 - Preferential Voting in Australian Elections

by Rob McCormack - Friday, June 17, 2022

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Podcast Number 139 – Preferential Voting in Australian Elections

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(This podcast is 16 minutes and 54 seconds long.)

Hi,

We recently had a federal election here in Australia, to decide which political party will govern Australia at the federal level for the next 3 years. I have previously explained our federal government system in Podcast 21 (<https://slowenglish.info/podcast-21-federal-government-in-australia/>). There, I mention that we have preferential voting in Australia and, in addition, we have compulsory voting in both federal, state and some local government elections. I always take a keen interest in our elections as, in my opinion, our democracy is central to our stable way of life here in Australia. Actually, it's amazing how many Australians don't really understand how preferential voting works, even though they vote successfully in every election. I think that such an understanding is important, if we are to have trust in our electoral process. In this podcast, I would like to explain some of the features of preferential voting and how a candidate wins such an election. Note that I don't claim to be an expert on this topic, and for full and detailed information you should refer to the Parliamentary Education Office website (<https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/having-your-say/elections-and-voting/federal-elections/>) or the website of the Australian Electoral Commission (<https://www.aec.gov.au/learn/files/poster-counting-hor-pref-voting.pdf>)

I won't repeat all the details of how our federal government works. You can check out Podcast 21 if you want to. Suffice to say that there are two houses of parliament federally – the lower house (also called the House of Representatives) and the upper house (also called the Senate). I am going to talk mostly about preferential voting in the lower house which currently has 151 seats in total. This is the house where the government is formed.

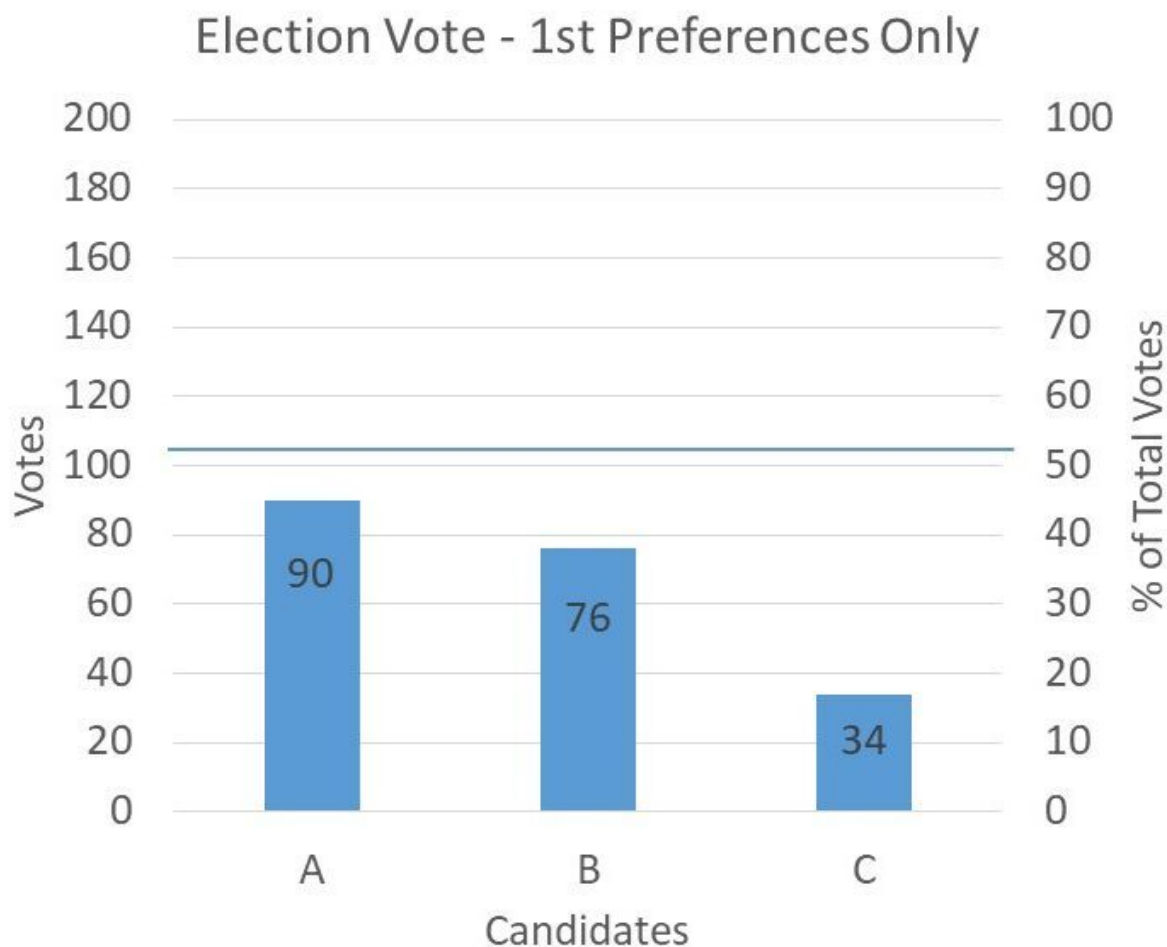
Each seat in the lower house represents an area of Australia called an electorate. The area of land for each electorate varies in size, but importantly each electorate has around 90,000 Australians eligible to vote. They must elect one person to represent them in the lower house of parliament in Canberra. Usually, there are between 3 and 10 candidates who will stand for each seat, hoping they will be elected.

So what does preferential voting mean? In short, it means that you must number, in sequence, all the candidates on the ballot paper, starting from 1. If there are 3 candidates, you must number them 1 to 3. Your first preference is the candidate you want to win, but you then number the others according to who

you would prefer, if your candidate doesn't actually win. The candidate you like least of all will be number 3, in this case.

To help explain how preferential votes are counted, I would first like to explain the more common style of voting used in many countries around the world. It is called 'first past the post' or a 'simple majority'. Put simply, the winner of such an election is the candidate who gets the most votes. To explain, let's use a simplified example, with lower numbers of voters just for convenience of explanation.

For example, let's assume there were 3 candidates in a seat or electorate where there were 200 voters in all. Now assume that candidate A got 90 1st preference votes, candidate B got 76 1st preference votes and candidate C got 34 1st preference votes. That makes 200 votes in all. In a 'first past the post' system, candidate A would win the election, as he/she got the most votes and was indeed 'first past the post'. This is also called a 'simple majority'. It means that the winner had more votes than any other candidate. Seems fair, right?



But what if candidate A had a policy which states that nobody over the age of 40 should pay tax? Let's assume that candidate B and C both said, during the election, that this policy would not work and they would not support it. They said there wouldn't be enough money to run the government. This is quite a powerful argument, as the total taxes collected would be much, much lower under candidate A's policy, or the government would have to put up the taxes of those aged under 40 – by a lot. However, candidate A is 41 years of age and he thinks his policy is great. However, he got only 45% of the available 1st preference votes. That's less than half of all voters. In other words, and this is a key point, he has a simple majority (more than any other candidate) but he does not have an absolute majority of all the voters who voted. In preferential voting, you must have more than 50% of the valid votes (at least) in order to win the election. That's what an absolute majority is – more than 50% of all the valid votes. In our small example with 200 voters, that is 101 votes or more.

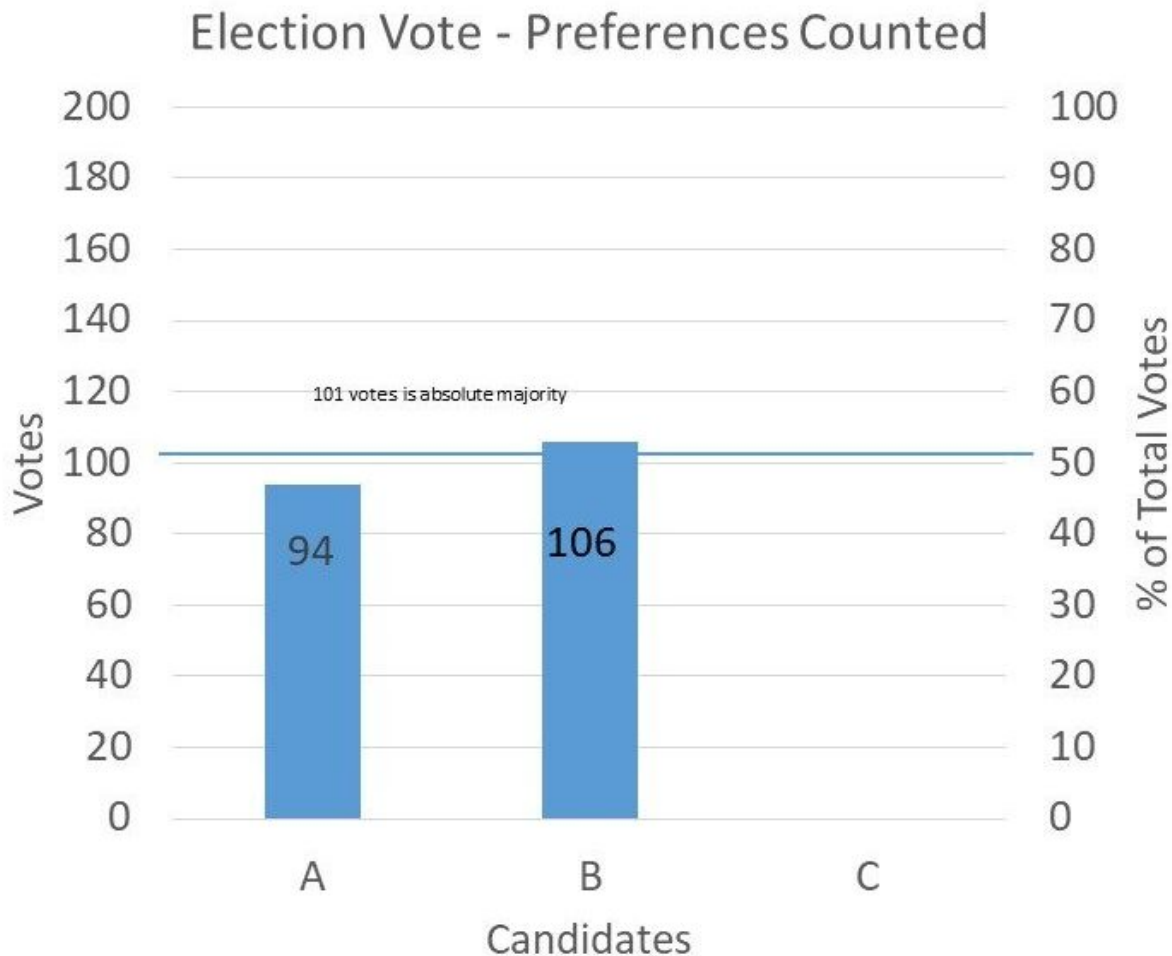
Now suppose that our example uses preferential voting, like in Australia. Candidate A must get to more than 50% of the votes in order to win – that's at least 101 votes. This is where the preferences become

important. When voting, each voter has given their 1st, 2nd and 3rd preferences by numbering the candidates on the ballot paper from 1 to 3.

When counting the votes in a preferential voting system, you first count all the 1st preferences. In our example, candidate A got 90 or 45% of the valid votes, candidate B got 76 or 33% and candidate C got 34 votes or 17%. So, after the counting of the 1st preferences, candidate A is in front at 45% (or 90 votes) of all the valid votes, but has not yet reached an absolute majority of more than 50% (or 101 votes) of all the voters.

In our example, with preferential voting, where no candidate has reached an absolute majority of 1st preference votes, the next step is to look at the preferences of the votes for the candidate with the lowest number of 1st preference votes – in our example that is candidate C – he came last. This candidate is then excluded or removed from the count and his 34 votes are allocated to the other candidates, according to these voters' 2nd preferences. In our example, let's assume that, of these 34 voters, 30 voters gave their 2nd preference to candidate B and 4 voters gave their 2nd preference to candidate A.

So, after distributing candidate C's votes, we can see that candidate A now has 94 votes (90 + 4) and candidate B has 106 votes (76 + 30).



In other words, 106 of the 200 voters did not want candidate A to win. Candidate B has 106 votes which is actually more than 50% of the total of voters. He now has an absolute majority and has won the election. Under a ‘first past the post’ system, candidate A would have won, despite the fact that he was not preferred by an absolute majority of all the voters.

Of course, if a candidate gets more than 50% of the 1st preference votes, then there is no need to look at the preferences of other candidates. Clearly, an absolute majority of the voters want this candidate to win, so he/she is the winner based on the count of 1st preference votes alone. That’s what preferential voting is all about – finding out which candidate is preferred by an absolute majority of all voters.

Of course, many seats have more than 3 candidates in an election. However the principle remains the same. If no candidate has reached an absolute majority of valid votes, then the lowest scoring candidate's votes are distributed to the other candidates, according to their next preference. This is repeated as required, until one candidate gets an absolute majority.

You can see, in our small example, how preferential voting would have stopped candidate A putting his policy in place whereby people over the age of 40 pay no tax. In fact, an absolute majority of the 200 voters were against this policy and did not want this candidate. Because of preferential voting, the wishes of the absolute majority of the voters are followed.

I think this system of vote counting is not well understood in Australia, so if you have found this podcast difficult to understand, then you are not alone, as preferential voting is somewhat complicated. Perhaps that is the reason why in many countries, the 'first past the post' system is preferred. It's easier to understand. However, I think that is not a good reason to use it. Elections are about finding out what the people want and also what they don't want. I think preferential voting does that quite well.

In the Upper House (the Senate), there is also preferential voting, although the counting is more complicated, because of the fact that each state must elect more than one senator. I won't cover that here. You can find out more at the Parliamentary Education Office website, at <https://peo.gov.au/understand-our-parliament/having-your-say/elections-and-voting/federal-elections/>.

Even though our voting system is complicated, I believe that Australians can be confident they will get the government which an absolute majority of voters want. Of course, they can always change their mind at the next election, and they often do.

If you have a question or comment to make, please leave it in the comments box at the bottom of this page. Or, you can send me an email at rob@slowenglish.info. I would love to hear from you. Tell me where you live, a little bit about yourself and what you think of my Slow English podcast. I will write back to you, in English of course. If you would like to take a short quiz to see if you have understood this podcast, you will also find it on my website. Goodbye until next time.

Rob

[WpProQuiz 143]

Additional Written Notes to This Podcast (not included in the audio podcast)

Doing the research for this podcast has helped me think more about our democracy in Australia, in particular about the idea of preferential voting and having to reach an absolute majority in order to be elected. Here are 2 more ideas which you might find of interest, especially if you are discussing this podcast with your teacher in your English class.

- 1. Our voting system helps to elect politicians who have broader appeal across our community. This helps more people in Australia to feel that their government represents their interests. This helps build a more satisfied community in general and a more stable society.*
- 2. Our voting system makes it harder for candidates with extreme views (on either the 'right' or 'left' of politics) to be elected. When those with extreme views are elected to positions of power, this can create more divisions and conflict in society and in our political debates. This can reduce the stability and harmony in our society generally.*

Vocabulary

- = in fact (often when you are surprised)
- = you imagine something
- = (here) all the votes that you could possibly get
- = the paper which lists the candidates which you must vote for
- = using, following,
- = a person who asks for your vote in an election, stands for election
- = important for
- = change their view or their opinion
- = to look at, to read, to listen to, to investigate, to research
- = (here) when the government gets all the taxes from the people
- = when something has many parts or processes and is hard to understand
- = the rules or laws say that you must do something (you have no choice)
- = to be sure that something will happen
- = to make it easy
- = (here) explain a number of ideas
- = now, at the moment
- = a system of government where the people get to vote for their leaders
- = all the ideas and information about something
- = (here) giving to others, sharing out
- = to choose, to select
- = where the people of a country or region vote for politicians and a new government

- = you are allowed to vote (e.g. over 18 yrs, a citizen, etc)
- = the characteristics, how something looks
- = (here) the highest level of government, covering all the states of Australia
- = (here) made
- = to rule or control a country or region
- = in summary
- = very interested, excited about
- = an important idea
- = the lowest
- = much, a large amount
- = to speak about
- = (here) writing numbers down
- = a building where politicians meet to make and discuss laws.
- = a way of doing something, eg. Governments have policies about taxes
- = a group of people with the same ideas about how to govern a country
- = (here) a strong case, to explain why people should agree with you
- = liked more than others
- = before
- = an idea or concept
- = the steps you do to complete an activity
- = to speak for someone else
- = be in control of the government, to make it work for the people
- = numbers which follow one another, e.g. 2 followed by 3 followed by 4 etc

= not hard to understand

= works well without failing

= the important points are, in summary

= to agree with

= (here) rules and processes which work together to do a certain job

= when you believe something or someone is good and honest

= legal, no-one can say that is wrong or false, without errors

= changes

= such that, so that

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