

## The Majority-Preferential Vote

(single transferable voting to fill mayoral and other single-seat vacancies)

### 1. Brief Description

1.1 The majority-preferential vote (PV) is an electoral system that ensures candidates contesting single-seat vacancies are elected with a majority of the votes (remaining in the election). Voters each have a single vote, which they use by numbering the candidates on the voting document in order of preference. The first preference is given for the candidate for whom they vote. Voters may also indicate second, third and subsequent preferences for such other candidates they may wish to support. These optional second and subsequent preferences are alternative, contingency choices. The number of candidates that must be ranked for the vote to be valid may vary from one version of the system to another. In New Zealand, voters may rank-order as many, or as few, candidates as they wish.

1.2 A candidate who obtains half or more of valid first-preferences is declared elected—

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>First preferences</i>	
A	50	Elected
B	30	
C	20	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	

1.3 If no candidate has that number of votes, the candidate with the fewest votes is excluded from the election and the votes cast for that candidate are transferred to the continuing candidates in accordance with the voters' second preferences. A candidate who now has a majority is elected—

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>First preferences</i>		<i>Second stage</i>	
A	40	+ 20	60	Elected
B	35	+ 5	40	
C	25	– 25	–	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>		<b>100</b>	

1.4 If again no candidate is elected, the candidate now with fewest votes is excluded, and that candidate's votes are transferred in accordance with next available preferences, passing over earlier preferences for any candidate already excluded.

1.5 Candidates with fewest votes are successively excluded until a candidate obtains an absolute majority of votes and is elected—

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>First preferences</i>	<i>Second stage</i>	<i>Third stage</i>	<i>Fourth stage</i>	
A	30	30	30 + 15	45	
B	25	25	25 - 25	-	
C	20 + 5	25 + 20	45 + 10	55	Elected
D	15 + 5	20 - 20	-	-	
E	10 - 10	-	-	-	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

- 1.6 If there is a tie on exclusion, the candidate is excluded who had fewest votes at the earliest stage at which the tied candidates had unequal numbers of votes. If there is a tie on election, the candidate is elected who had the greater number of votes at the earliest stage at which the tied candidates had unequal numbers of votes—

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>First preferences</i>	<i>Second stage</i>	<i>Third stage</i>	
A	40	40 + 10	50	Elected
B	30	30 + 20	50	
C	20 + 10	30 - 30	-	
D	10 - 10	-	-	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

- 1.7 If voting documents become non-transferable through lack of further preferences being indicated for continuing candidates, a candidate is elected who attains an absolute majority of the votes remaining in the election—

<i>Candidate</i>	<i>First preferences</i>	<i>Second stage</i>	
A	40 + 5	45	Elected
B	25	25	
C	20	20	
D	15 - 15	-	
Non-transferable	+ 10	10	
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	

- 1.8 In this regard, it should be noted that the number to be divided by 2, to determine the “absolute majority of votes” required to be elected, is the total of valid votes, not the total number eligible to vote. If some people decide to abstain from voting, they do not count when the “absolute majority” is first determined.

- 1.9 Similarly, some voters may partially abstain, indicating a preference for only one candidate, or for only a few candidates. If such a vote is due to be transferred to the next preference indicated, there may not be a preference there. In such a case, the voter has, in effect, exercised a “delayed” abstention. The vote will then become non-transferable and the “absolute majority” will be reduced during the count to a new, lower, value to allow for that delayed abstention.

- 1.10 There is nothing to be gained, therefore, by voters being required to indicate preferences for most or all of the candidates. Such a requirement is likely only to lead to a higher rate of informal votes, and may force voters to indicate preferences for candidates they do not support.

## 2. Rationale behind the majority-preferential vote

- 2.1 As alluded to at the outset, the beauty of using PV to fill single-member vacancies is that the winning candidate will be the preferred choice of an absolute majority of those who vote, given the candidates available. The rationale behind PV is best described in terms of a particular example. The following example is based on an actual electorate result at an Australian general election—

<i>Party</i>	<i>First preferences</i>		<i>Second stage</i>		<i>Third stage</i>		<i>Fourth stage</i>		
Labor	229	45.8%	230	+ 2	232	+ 6	238		
Liberal	121	24.2%	129	+ 4	133	- 133	-		
Country	83	16.6%	103	+ 32	135	+ 127	262		Elected
DLP	36	7.2%	38	- 38	-		-		
Indep't	31	6.2%	-		-		-		
<b>Total</b>	<b>500</b>		<b>500</b>		<b>500</b>		<b>500</b>		

- 2.2 To begin with, candidates from four parties, and one independent candidate, contested this seat. It is quite probable that, at the commencement of the election process, some of those voting might have wished to support candidates other than those standing, but such wishes would have been totally irrelevant, as the desired candidates were not available. The point here is that, once the independent candidate, along with the DLP and Liberal Party candidates had been excluded, any preferences for them were equally irrelevant as they were not available either.
- 2.3 In the final analysis, the only thing that mattered was how many preferred the Labor candidate to the Country Party candidate and how many preferred the Country Party candidate to the Labor candidate. At that stage all voters were entitled to an equal say. To call their votes worthless (as Winston Churchill did in 1931, when preferential voting was being debated in the House of Commons), because they really preferred, say, the DLP candidate, is just as absurd as to bother about whether they really wanted another candidate who did not stand at this election instead.
- 2.4 The logic of PV is that, at each stage, every voter is asked (by means of the voting document preference numbers): “Of those candidates now available, which one do you wish to support?” and all replies should be regarded as of equal weight, nobody being wholly or partially disenfranchised unless they have, of their own free will, chosen to abstain from numbering any of the remaining candidates. (NB. In Australia, voters are required to rank-order all the candidates on the ballot paper.)
- 2.5 In seeking the answer to this question, it is absolutely right and proper that the later choices of those whose first choices have been excluded should be considered. “Do you prefer the Labor candidate or the Country Party candidate?” must be answered by means of a later preference for those whose first choice was the independent

candidate, the DLP candidate or the Liberal Party candidate. For those who put the Labor or Country Party candidate first, their reply to the question can be found from the first preference alone. In the above example, the “two-party preferred vote” favoured the Country Party by 52.40% to 47.60%. (NB. In Australia, the Liberal and Country (now National) parties have an electoral alliance whereby the supporters of each party are encouraged to give their second preferences to the other party.)

- 2.6 It will not have escaped notice that this result saw a candidate with almost 50% of first preferences, defeated by a rival with only just over one-third as many votes. Even after reading the immediately preceding paragraphs, some people may find the possibility of such an outcome troubling. However, freak results such as this one must be kept in perspective.
- 2.7 Under PV, the chance of a candidate gaining election despite low first-preference support is quite small. Until the 1990s, most Australian House of Representatives electorates, except during the heyday of the first minor party, the Democratic Labor Party (DLP) in the 50s and 60s, were won on first preference votes with no distribution of preferences. Even during the 90s, when the number of electorates where preferences needed to be distributed averaged 70 (47.30%, up from about 30% during the previous two decades), the average number of seats in which the result changed after the distribution of preferences was only 9 (6.08%).
- 2.8 Critics of PV often use this to attack the system, arguing that repeated counts and transfers are therefore unnecessary, but such critics overlook two important counter-arguments—
- (a) the purpose of second and later preferences is to correct the distortions that arise from allowing only first preferences to be cast; and
  - (b) the system allows voters to list their true preferences without fear of wasting their votes, and ensures the correct candidate (in the opinion of those voting) is chosen.
- 2.9 Furthermore, under PV (and STV), that scourge of representative democracy under FPP voting systems, the split vote, is completely eliminated.