

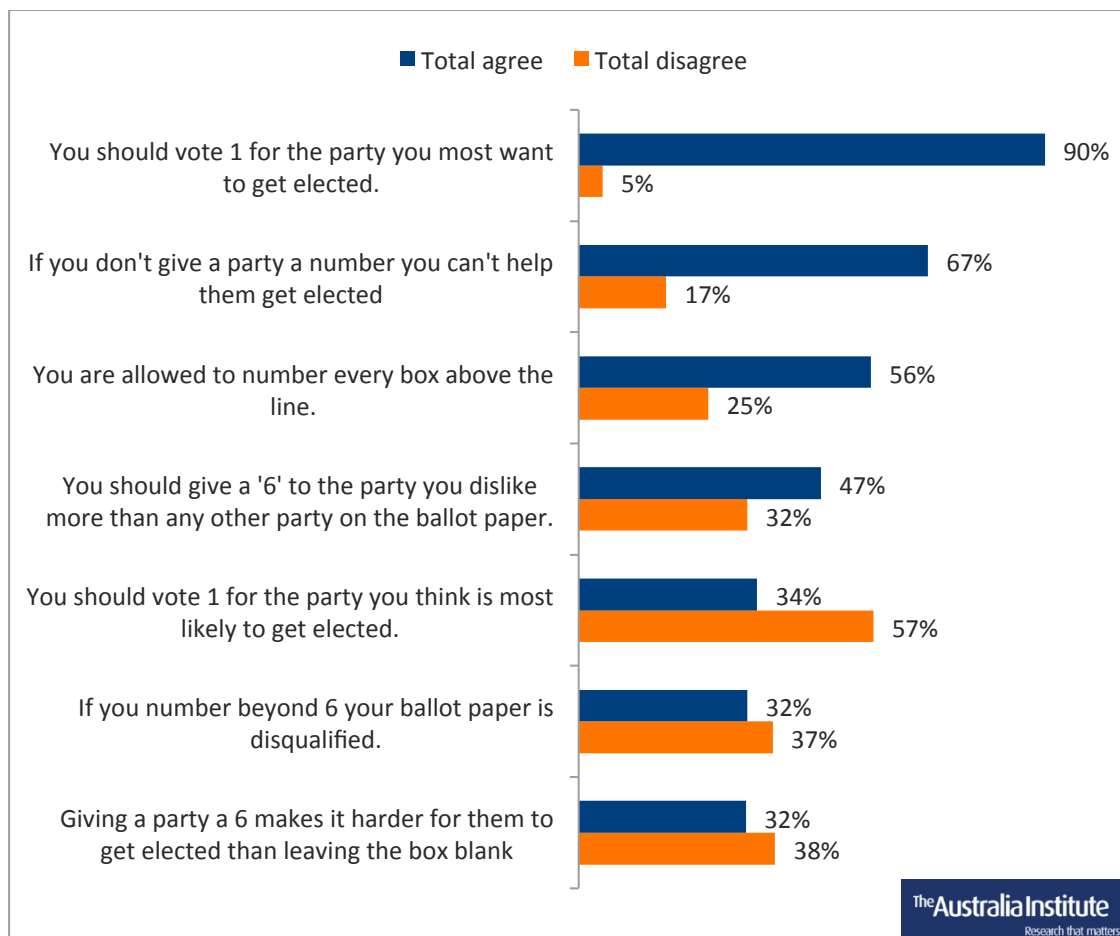
Polling - Optional preferential voting in the Senate

August 2018

Summary

The Australia Institute surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,449 Australians to test their understanding of voting in the Senate's new 'optional preferential voting' (OPV) system. On the Senate ballot paper, voters are directed to vote at least 1 to 6 for parties if they vote above the line. Respondents were given these directions from the Senate ballot paper and asked about above the line voting. Results are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 - Senate above the line voting – total agree / disagree



The results show high levels of confusion about how Senate OPV works.

- Nearly all respondents (90%) understood preferential voting means you vote first who you most want elected, but far fewer understood you do not need to vote first for who you think will win (only 57%).
- Just over half (56%) of respondents understood you are allowed to number every box. But when asked about numbering beyond 6, only a minority (37%) said the ballot paper would still qualify.
- Only around a third disagreed () that you should vote '6' for the party you dislike more than any other, while nearly half agreed.
- Around a third agreed giving a party a 6 makes it harder for them to get elected than leaving the box blank.

These results raise concerns voters may express their intentions in ways that backfire. For example, giving a 6 to your least liked party is in fact putting them above all parties you do not number, not putting them last, as nearly half appear to think. But there is also confusion about whether voters are even allowed to go beyond 6.

This is also concerning in the context of increased role of ballot exhaustion under the OPV system. Voters may limit their preferences because they think they cannot number further, or because they do not understand the risk of ballot exhaustion.

Context

In 2016 the Senate voting system was changed to 'optional preferential voting' (OPV). Previously voters could vote 1 'above the line' for their preferred party. That party would then allocate preferences for that voter. In the new Senate OPV system, the voting above the line involves, according to the ballot paper, "numbering at least 6 of the boxes in the order of your choice (with number 1 as your first choice)".

Under OPV, if preferences on a ballot paper run out, the ballot paper 'exhausts', resulting in all or some of the remaining value of vote exhausting and being removed from the count.

As a result of the move to OPV, in the 2016 election:

- 90% of voters voted above the line;
- 87% of above the line votes numbered one to six; 6.5% numbered fewer.¹
- 49% of ballot papers exhausted some portion of their vote.

¹ AEC (2016) *Numbers of preferences* https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/files/sbps-numbers-of-preferences.pdf

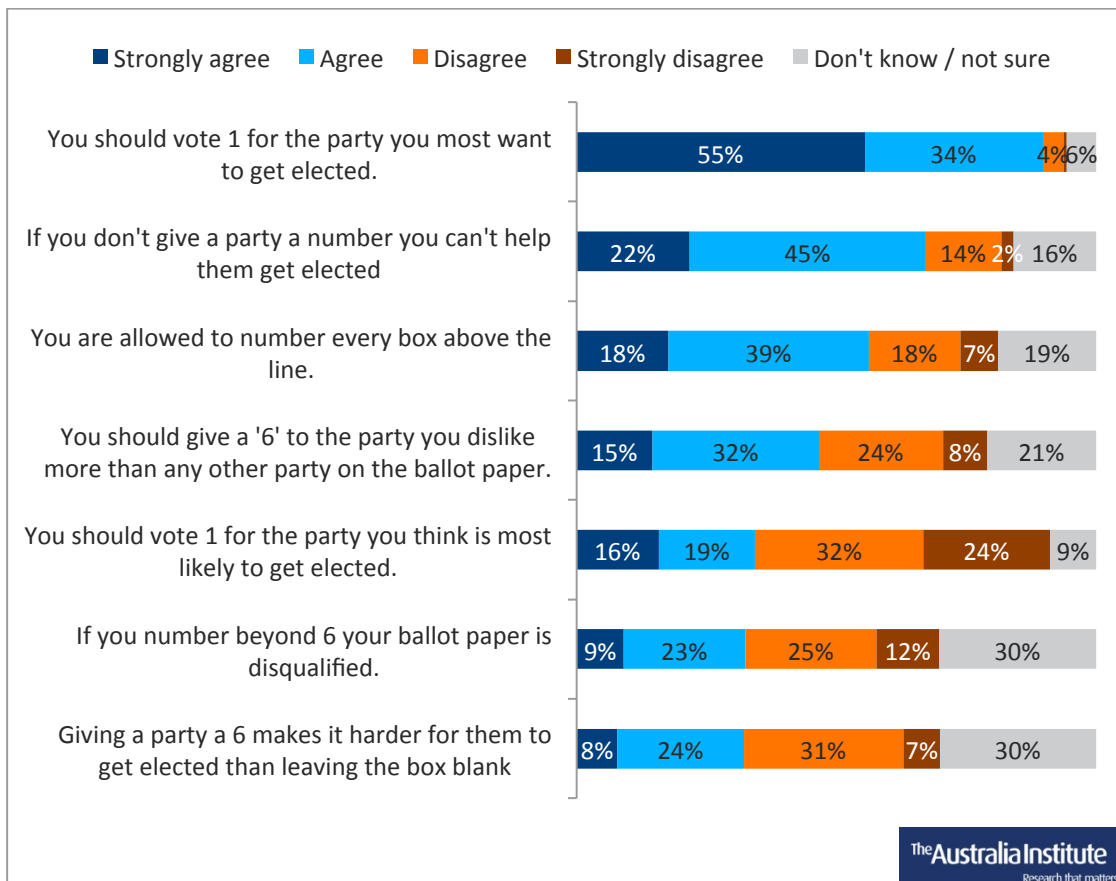
- Most ballot papers exhausted only a small fraction of their vote.
- 7.5% votes exhausted in total.
- In other words, half of voters had on average 15% of their vote not count because they didn't provide further preferences.
- 7% of formal ballots exhausted without contributing to electing any candidate.²

Key survey results

The Australia Institute surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,449 Australians to test their understanding of voting in the Senate's new 'optional preferential voting' system.

Respondents were presented the instruction text from the Senate ballot paper, and then asked if they agreed or disagreed with various statements. Results are shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

Figure 2 - Senate above the line voting - agree / disagree



² AEC (2016) *Exhaustion* https://www.aec.gov.au/About_AEC/research/files/sbps-exhaustion.pdf Table 5

Nearly all respondents understood the purpose of *preferential* voting is to let you vote for who you most want elected, although much fewer understood you do not need to vote for who you think will win.

- Nearly all respondents (90%) agreed that you should vote 1 for the party you most want to get elected – most (55%) strongly agreed.
- Most respondents disagreed (57%) that you should vote for the party you think is most likely to get elected – a quarter (24%) strongly disagreed. However, a third (34%) agreed.

Optional preferential voting was understood by just over half of respondents, when framed in terms of numbering every box. But when asked about numbering beyond 6, fewer were sure the ballot paper would still qualify.

- Most respondents (56%) agreed you are allowed to number every box above the line. Only 17% disagreed.
- It follows that if you number beyond 6 your ballot paper is not disqualified. But a third (32%) agreed, incorrectly, and a third (30%) did not know.

Most respondents did not correctly identify the significance of voting '6'. Giving a party a 6 puts them ahead of all parties that remain unnumbered. But only around a third identified that voting '6' is not putting them last. Nearly half thought the party you dislike most of all should be numbered 6.

- 32% disagreed that you should vote 6 for the party you dislike more than any other on the ballot paper. 47% agreed.
- Just over a third (38%) disagreed that giving a party a 6 makes it harder for them to get elected than leaving the box blank. Here only a third (32%) agreed.
- There was also broad agreement (67%) with the idea that you cannot help someone get elected if you do not number their box.

The idea is intuitively plausible. So is the converse that that leaving a box blank helps stop them from being elected. But both of these ideas are potentially misleading. Leaving a box blank is remaining indifferent to them relative to all other parties you do not preference; this could help a party get elected relative to putting them after other parties.

Survey method

The Australia Institute conducted a national survey of 1,449 people 3 August and 15 August 2018, online through Research Now, with nationally representative samples by gender, age and state and territory.

Results are shown only for larger states.

Voting crosstabs show voting intentions for the lower house. Those who were undecided were asked which way they were leaning; these leanings are included in voting intention crosstabs, but results are also shown separately for undecideds. “LNP” includes separate responses for Liberal and National. “Other” includes Centre Alliance, United Australia Party and Independent/Other.

Detailed results

On the Senate election ballot paper, you can vote 'above the line' by numbering at least 6 of the boxes in the order of your choice (with number 1 as your first choice).

Thinking about voting 'above the line', to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following?

Giving a party a 6 makes it harder for them to get elected than leaving the box blank

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	Qld	Vic	WA
Total agree	32%	36%	28%	30%	34%	33%	31%
Total disagree	38%	39%	36%	43%	38%	34%	38%
Strongly agree	8%	10%	6%	7%	10%	7%	7%
Agree	24%	26%	23%	24%	24%	26%	23%
Disagree	31%	31%	31%	34%	31%	26%	32%
Strongly disagree	7%	9%	6%	9%	7%	8%	6%
Don't know / not sure	30%	24%	35%	27%	28%	33%	31%

	LNP	ALP	GRN	PHON	Other	Undec
Total agree	36%	32%	31%	28%	24%	23%
Total disagree	36%	39%	36%	39%	39%	35%
Strongly agree	10%	7%	5%	7%	8%	4%
Agree	26%	26%	25%	20%	17%	19%
Disagree	30%	32%	30%	28%	30%	28%
Strongly disagree	6%	7%	6%	10%	10%	7%
Don't know / not sure	28%	29%	33%	34%	36%	42%

If you don't give a party a number you can't help them get elected

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	Qld	Vic	WA
Total agree	67%	68%	66%	66%	71%	67%	65%
Total disagree	17%	19%	15%	17%	15%	18%	15%
Strongly agree	22%	23%	20%	21%	24%	24%	13%
Agree	45%	45%	46%	45%	47%	44%	52%
Disagree	14%	16%	13%	15%	14%	15%	12%
Strongly disagree	2%	3%	2%	2%	1%	3%	3%
Don't know / not sure	16%	13%	18%	17%	14%	15%	20%

	LNP	ALP	GRN	PHON	Other	Undec
Total agree	68%	70%	68%	60%	63%	54%
Total disagree	17%	16%	17%	18%	17%	15%
Strongly agree	22%	21%	22%	22%	24%	13%
Agree	46%	49%	46%	38%	39%	41%
Disagree	15%	14%	13%	17%	13%	13%
Strongly disagree	2%	2%	4%	2%	4%	2%
Don't know / not sure	15%	15%	15%	22%	20%	31%

You should give a '6' to the party you dislike more than any other party on the ballot paper.

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	Qld	Vic	WA
Total agree	47%	48%	45%	41%	49%	50%	42%
Total disagree	32%	35%	30%	37%	31%	30%	33%
Strongly agree	15%	15%	14%	10%	19%	15%	14%
Agree	32%	33%	31%	31%	30%	34%	28%
Disagree	24%	26%	22%	27%	21%	22%	27%
Strongly disagree	8%	9%	8%	9%	10%	8%	7%
Don't know / not sure	21%	17%	25%	22%	20%	20%	24%

	LNP	ALP	GRN	PHON	Other	Undec
Total agree	49%	47%	39%	47%	43%	36%
Total disagree	31%	34%	35%	22%	37%	33%
Strongly agree	15%	14%	11%	15%	17%	9%
Agree	35%	33%	28%	32%	25%	27%
Disagree	24%	25%	28%	17%	20%	23%
Strongly disagree	7%	8%	7%	6%	17%	10%
Don't know / not sure	19%	19%	25%	31%	20%	31%

You should vote 1 for the party you think is most likely to get elected.

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	Qld	Vic	WA
Total agree	34%	37%	32%	35%	37%	34%	34%
Total disagree	57%	57%	57%	57%	53%	57%	59%
Strongly agree	16%	17%	15%	17%	18%	16%	14%
Agree	19%	20%	18%	18%	19%	18%	20%
Disagree	32%	32%	33%	32%	29%	31%	37%
Strongly disagree	24%	25%	24%	25%	24%	26%	22%
Don't know / not sure	9%	6%	11%	8%	10%	9%	7%

	LNP	ALP	GRN	PHON	Other	Undec
Total agree	39%	35%	20%	35%	31%	28%
Total disagree	53%	58%	66%	50%	58%	53%
Strongly agree	18%	16%	10%	21%	11%	10%
Agree	21%	19%	11%	14%	19%	19%
Disagree	36%	33%	32%	28%	22%	32%
Strongly disagree	17%	25%	34%	21%	36%	21%
Don't know / not sure	7%	7%	13%	16%	11%	19%

You should vote 1 for the party you most want to get elected.

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	Qld	Vic	WA
Total agree	90%	89%	90%	91%	91%	89%	88%
Total disagree	5%	6%	3%	4%	4%	4%	7%
Strongly agree	55%	58%	53%	54%	58%	57%	50%
Agree	34%	32%	37%	36%	32%	32%	37%
Disagree	4%	5%	3%	4%	3%	4%	7%
Strongly disagree	1%	1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	1%
Don't know / not sure	6%	5%	7%	5%	5%	7%	5%

	LNP	ALP	GRN	PHON	Other	Undec
Total agree	91%	91%	87%	86%	85%	82%
Total disagree	5%	4%	4%	2%	8%	4%
Strongly agree	57%	56%	53%	51%	57%	40%
Agree	35%	35%	34%	35%	28%	42%
Disagree	4%	4%	3%	2%	4%	3%
Strongly disagree	0%	0%	1%	0%	4%	0%
Don't know / not sure	4%	4%	9%	12%	8%	15%

If you number beyond 6 your ballot paper is disqualified.

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	Qld	Vic	WA
Total agree	32%	31%	34%	32%	35%	34%	31%
Total disagree	37%	42%	33%	39%	35%	35%	38%
Strongly agree	9%	8%	10%	10%	10%	9%	5%
Agree	23%	23%	23%	22%	25%	25%	26%
Disagree	25%	27%	24%	28%	24%	21%	25%
Strongly disagree	12%	15%	9%	10%	10%	13%	13%
Don't know / not sure	30%	27%	33%	29%	31%	31%	31%

	LNP	ALP	GRN	PHON	Other	Undec
Total agree	32%	34%	31%	32%	29%	30%
Total disagree	38%	37%	38%	37%	38%	28%
Strongly agree	8%	10%	10%	10%	7%	6%
Agree	24%	24%	21%	22%	22%	24%
Disagree	27%	25%	24%	21%	25%	21%
Strongly disagree	11%	12%	13%	16%	13%	7%
Don't know / not sure	30%	29%	31%	31%	33%	42%

You are allowed to number every box above the line.

	Total	Male	Female	NSW	Qld	Vic	WA
Total agree	56%	60%	53%	52%	59%	58%	56%
Total disagree	25%	24%	26%	29%	22%	22%	22%
Strongly agree	18%	20%	15%	13%	18%	21%	18%
Agree	39%	40%	37%	38%	42%	37%	38%
Disagree	18%	17%	18%	21%	15%	15%	16%
Strongly disagree	7%	7%	7%	8%	6%	7%	5%
Don't know / not sure	19%	16%	22%	19%	19%	20%	22%

	LNP	ALP	GRN	PHON	Other	Undec
Total agree	59%	58%	50%	54%	50%	42%
Total disagree	24%	25%	26%	28%	25%	23%
Strongly agree	17%	19%	16%	19%	16%	9%
Agree	42%	39%	34%	35%	34%	33%
Disagree	17%	19%	17%	19%	15%	17%
Strongly disagree	7%	6%	9%	8%	10%	6%
Don't know / not sure	17%	17%	24%	18%	25%	34%