SUBMISSION TO MMP REVIEW: BACKUP PARTY VOTES

By Edward Hitchcock

1. INTRODUCTION

This submission focuses on the thresholds, their negative effects, and a proposed alteration to the MMP system to largely eliminate the issues.

This submission is based on independent views, but proposes changes very similar to those proposed by Tom Hallett-Hook in his submission dated 30 March 2012. I support Tom's submission. My proposal is not materially different from his one.

2. PARTICULAR PROBLEMS WITH THRESHOLDS

The use of the percentage vote threshold means that a significant proportion of votes are 'lost'. They do not contribute to the allocation of seats amongst parties. In recent elections the percentage of votes lost has varied up to about 15%. It is undesirable that some votes be lost in this way.

The use of an arbitrary threshold like the present 5% one means that a single vote can significantly change the makeup of parliament. It can make the difference of 6 seats with the present 5% threshold, and a bigger difference with a bigger threshold. Such a situation could easily happen and lead to considerable voter resentment.

The use of arbitrary thresholds can also have the effect of discouraging voters from considering smaller parties. Voters can be reluctant to risk having their vote 'lost' in the event that it does not cross the threshold.

3. PROPOSED CHANGE TO VOTING SYSTEM

The following change is proposed:

- Every voter is offered the opportunity to make a back-up party vote.
- All votes for parties that fail to meet the threshold are redistributed according to any backup vote. Backup votes are redistributed one party at a time, starting with the party having fewest main party votes.
- In all other respects the voting system may be unchanged.

3.1. Ballot paper changes

The ballot papers would require an additional column and some additional explanatory text.

3.2. Voter understanding issues

The change would require some explanation and publicity for voters.

The message is 'there's another column on the ballot paper for a backup choice. Use it if you want to.'

But voters can be reassured that their vote is much less likely to be 'lost'.

3.3. Voting strategies

The proposed change means that a voter can place his/her main vote for any party without fear of the vote being lost in the event the chosen party does not cross any threshold for being allocated party seats.

Some voter behaviour might include:

- Increased readiness to cast main party votes for smaller parties.
- Backup party votes are likely to go to larger parties.
- More engagement from younger people wanting to show interest in less traditional parties but not wanting to risk a 'wasted' vote.

3.4. Risk of informal votes

The proposed change is extremely robust in the way it can handle voter error. Some specific points:

- A voter need not place a backup party vote.
- A voter can vote for any party for their backup party vote, including the party to which they gave their main party vote.
- If a voter gives only a backup vote, then that vote can be given to the chosen party.

In summary, the proposed change does not increase the risk of informal votes.

3.5. Computational issues

Once voting was complete a table would be prepared showing for each party:

- The percentage of the main party vote gained.
- Whether the party had one electorate seat(s) and hence qualified on that basis.
- How the backup party votes were distributed amongst other parties.

The list would be in decreasing order of main party votes.

Then the backup votes from the non-qualifying parties would be redistributed according to the backup votes. This would be done one party at a time, starting with the party having fewest main party votes.

It is possible that this distribution of backup votes may push one or two parties over the threshold.

The only potential computational obstacle is the possibility of ties in the number of main party votes. This is a very unlikely possibility, but one that could be resolved with the toss of a coin. It only affects the order in which backup votes are distributed.

3.6. Effect on proportionality of parliament

It is likely therefore that the percentage of ineffective votes could be reduced from about 10% to perhaps 1%. Proportionality is improved.

3.7. Effect on other proposed changes

The proposed change affects other changes mentioned in the review as follows:

- It makes a raised threshold more practicable, as the risk of lost votes is reduced. (I do not support the use of a higher threshold).

4. CONCLUSION

The use of backup party votes as described offers the possibility of improving the proportionality of parliament, reducing the risks of voter resentment through a party just missing the threshold, and encouraging more voter participation.

It achieves this with a simple robust change to the ballot papers and vote counting methods.

5. SPEAKING TO MY SUBMISSION

I would like to appear before the commission to present my submission if that is possible. Unfortunately I will be out of New Zealand from 12 April 2012 to 4 June 2012 inclusive.