

# The SEP and preferences in the 2007 election

The Socialist Equality Party  
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The Socialist Equality Party is opposed to the compulsory preferential voting system set down in Australian electoral laws. In our election statement, we explain that the position of those who advocate a preference for Labor is “aimed at obscuring the central issue of this election. The two-party system cannot be pressured to meet the needs of the working class, nor will Labor be a ‘lesser evil’. That is why the Socialist Equality Party will not be advocating any preferences, or making ‘preference deals’ with other parties.”

The method of voting being advanced by the SEP in the course of the 2007 federal election, in both the House of the Representatives and the Senate, is based on this principle.

In the House of the Representatives the SEP will call on voters to give Socialist Equality Party candidates their Number 1 vote, and to then number the other candidates according to their own choice. The Australian Electoral Act requires that voters number every square on the ballot paper in order to cast a valid vote. This requirement is, in itself, anti-democratic, because it means people have to indicate preferences for parties or individuals, even if they do not wish to do so.

In the Senate, however, the situation is even more complicated and anti-democratic, with two alternative ways to vote. In the vastly more popular and simpler method, voters place a 1 in the square allocated to the party of their choice. This process, known as voting “above the line,” completes their vote.

The second, and rarely chosen, option is to vote “below the line.” This requires that the voter places a number, in order of preference, in the square opposite every listed candidate. To cast a valid vote, electors must number every square in order. If every square is not completed, or a mistake is made (such as repeating or missing out a number) then the vote is ruled invalid. This means that, in every election, most of the tiny

number of votes cast “below the line” end up being ruled out.

If a party wants voters to be able to vote for it “above the line”—the method used by more than 90 percent of the electorate—it is required to distribute preferences well before the election. This is what lies behind the burst of pre-election horse-trading, in which different parties compete to stitch up preference deals with as many of their opponents as possible. As in every election, the SEP has been contacted by several other parties to “swap preferences” but has rejected all such approaches.

In past elections, the SEP has advocated a “below the line” vote, in line with its approach in the House of Representatives. In other words, we have called on electors to vote for our ticket and then vote for all other candidates in order of their own preference. However, having scrutineered our upper house votes carefully in recent state and federal elections, it has become clear that with this method, most of the votes cast for our candidates have been invalidated.

The problem lies not with the large number of candidates running for the Senate—in this election there will be 79 in NSW and 68 in Victoria—but with the fact that casting a valid vote “below the line” requires electors to allocate a preference to every party, even though they may be completely unfamiliar with, or even openly oppose, the policies of some or many of the listed parties.

In view of the problems associated with “below the line” voting, the SEP has decided to call for a vote “above the line” for our candidates for the Senate in NSW and Victoria. We were therefore required, last Friday, to submit a preference list to the Australian Electoral Commission.

Under the provisions of the Electoral Act, a party can submit up to three separate tickets, each one containing a different allocation of preferences. The SEP therefore

decided to submit three separate tickets, with our second preference allocated alternately to Labor, the Greens and the Liberals.

Under the preferential voting system, when parties are eliminated from the count, their votes flow, according to their preference list, to the next party still in the contest. This process continues until the six vacancies for the Senate in each state have been filled. Given that the most likely outcome will be two seats to the Liberal-National Party coalition and two for Labor, this will leave the final seats to be decided in a three-way contest between the Liberals, Labor and the Greens.

The SEP allocated the rest of the preferences according to the order that candidates and parties were listed on the ballot paper.

In this way, by splitting its voting ticket three ways, the SEP has effectively preferenced no party: neither Labor, nor the Liberals, nor the Greens.

Within the legal constrictions of the electoral system, this is the best way for the SEP to make clear to all voters that none of the parties of the present political establishment represents a way forward for the working class, or constitutes a “lesser evil”.

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