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Call to reform ‘flawed’ NT Local Govt Electoral System

The Local Government electoral system used in the Northern Territory has a fundamental flaw and repeats a historic mistake, a leading political scientist has claimed.

“By combining preferential voting, multi-member electorates and repeated 50%-plus-one, majoritarian vote-counting, the system leads to large voting groups repeatedly winning seats and small voting groups repeatedly missing out, says Dr Will Sanders of the Desert Knowledge CRC and Australian National University.

“Multi-member electorates are generally used in electoral systems to spread representation to smaller voting groups. However, in this system, large voting groups repeatedly dominate in exactly the same way as they do in single-member elections,” says Dr Sanders. “There is no representational gain, or spread, achieved in this system by moving to multi-member electorates.”

Dr Sanders notes that this electoral system repeats a mistake first made in Australian Senate elections from 1919 to 1946, and also repeated a number of times since. “Victoria made the same mistake when it reformed local government in the 1990s. The large group dominance of the electoral system soon became evident and it was changed in 2003.”

In a new research paper published by DKCRC, Dr Sanders proposes three alternatives for reform of the Local Government electoral system in the NT.

The first is that local councils make much greater use of smaller, single-member electorates. This requires work in dividing up electorates, but would lead to a geographic spread of representatives and also possibly to some greater social spread, he says.

The second and third reform alternatives retain multi-member electorates and preferential voting, but change the vote counting method.

“The simplest alternative here is to adopt preferential first-past-the-post vote counting with a single vote. Basically, preferences are distributed until there are the same number of candidates remaining as positions available. If there are four positions available members will be elected with an average of slightly over one-fifth of the votes, but with some variation above and below this level,” Dr Sanders says.

“The more complex reform alternative is to actually set a quota, which when there are four vacancies in an area would be 1/5 of the votes plus one. This is the system which has been used in Senate elections since 1949 and in Victorian local government since 2003, as well as in many other local government and state- and territory-level electoral systems around Australia.

“This system of vote counting, called Single Transferable Vote Proportional Representation, is mathematically complex, but conceptually quite simple. Basically, if particular candidates win more than the required minority quota for election, preferential vote marking is then used to direct their surplus votes to candidates who their supporters prefer.”

Dr Sanders argues that any of these three reform alternatives would be better than the existing ‘exhaustive preferential’ vote counting method in multi-member electorates, which simply leads to large voting groups repeatedly winning seats – and to small voting groups having no greater chance of being elected to subsequent vacancies in multi-member electorates than to the first vacancy.

“Electoral systems need to be used to achieve representational spread among voting groups. If they are not used in this way, political institutions will be seen as illegitimately dominated by particular interests.

“We don't want that to be the fate of Northern Territory local government,” says Dr Sanders.

Dr Sanders’ full paper, entitled *Fueling large group dominance and repeating past mistakes: A critique of the Northern Territory local government electoral system*, is available at <http://www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au/publications/research.html>

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