

Government agrees to change its Senate voting reforms as Shorten replaces Gary Gray

Written by The Conversation USA

The government is making a major change to its legislation to reform the Senate voting system after a recommendation from a brief parliamentary inquiry.

Optional preferential voting will be brought in for below-the-line voting, to match the original plan in the bill for it to apply above the line.

Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Special Minister of State Mathias Cormann immediately announced the Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters' recommendation had been accepted and said the bill would be amended as it proceeds through parliament.

The committee's original 2014 report had said there should be optional preferential voting both above and below the line. But the government's bill provided that below the line, voters would still have to fill out all their preferences, although they would be allowed to make five mistakes instead of the current three.

In its report, which was tabled on Wednesday, the committee said it maintained that a system of partial optional preferential voting below the line was the best way to complement the bill's proposal of optional preferential voting above the line.

“Crucially, voters would be able to choose the same candidates in the same sequence both above and below the line. Further, compared to current arrangements, a partial system below the line would encourage the selection of candidates below the line.”

A number of submissions and witnesses in the inquiry highlighted the issue of below the line voting.

Under the amendment – which follows some earlier technical ones from the government – voters will be instructed to number at least 12 boxes in order of their preferences when voting below the line. There will be a “savings” provision that any vote with at least six boxes numbered one to six below the line would be considered formal.

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The Coalition is passing the bill with the support of the Greens. Labor opposes the changes. The bill's passage is expected to be in the last week of this parliamentary sitting, in mid-March.

The start of the new system, under an agreement between government and Greens, will be July 1. That is one day before a possible double-dissolution election.

The Greens have rejected pressure to push the start into August to cut off the option of a double dissolution. Their leader Richard Di Natale said the party wanted the next election, whenever that might be, to be conducted under the new rules. They were "rock solid" on this, he said, pointing out that they had fought for many years for a fairer Senate voting system.

Meanwhile, Opposition Leader Bill Shorten has replaced Gary Gray as shadow special minister of state. Gray agrees with the government's changes to the voting system but was rolled in the Labor Party. He criticised Labor's position when the bill was debated in the House of Representatives. Brendan O'Connor, who is employment and workplace relations spokesman, will take on the special minister of state area as well.

Michelle Grattan does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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