

Large numbers of people may just number one box for the Senate, which would mean the last seats in a state could be won with low primary votes, according to an analysis by the Australia Institute.

Polling done for the Institute, a progressive think tank, found one third of voters (33%) believed the minimum number of boxes a voter had to number when voting above the line was one. Only 29% said people had to number at least six boxes. Some 9% said every box had to be numbered; 5% said at least 12. Nearly a quarter (24%) did not know.

Voters are supposed to number at least six boxes in order of preference for parties or teams above the line, although a vote for just one box will still be counted. Under the old system only one box had to be marked.

Under half (48%) said they intended to vote above the line. This is much lower than the overwhelming proportion normally voting above the line. Only 14% said they would vote below the line, where individual candidates are listed, and a large 34% did not know.

The poll of 1,437 voters was done from May 23 to June 3 through Research Now, asking people about their Senate voting as well as their House of Representatives vote.

The Institute's director, Ben Oquist, said that while Senate polling was unreliable, reading these results in conjunction with published House of Representatives polls suggested the Coalition would struggle to hold some of its Senate seats.

The results indicate very many people do not yet understand the new Senate voting rules, which were passed shortly before the Parliament rose. The Australian Electoral Commission is promoting information to tell people about the new system but there is little time to do so, especially with pre-polling starting next week.

If a large number of people just voted 1 above the line it would mean there would be a

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Written by Michelle Grattan, Professorial Fellow, University of Canberra

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substantial exhaustion of votes. But the unknown is to what degree the instruction on the ballot to number one to six will limit the premature exhaustion of votes. A vote is exhausted when a voter's choice is eliminated in the count and there is not an expressed preference for the vote to then go on to.

Oquist said while the votes of those who just marked 1 above the line would be counted, "it may well be effectively a 'wasted' vote" because it would not flow on to preferences.

"The low level of understanding of the new system means last seats could be won with a fraction of a quota", he said.

The poll had the Coalition on a primary vote of 38% for the House of Representatives, with Labor on 35%, the Greens 11% and independent/other on 16%. Asked who they would vote for in the Senate, the results were Liberals 34%, Labor 33%, Greens 12%, Nationals 2%, Palmer United Party 0%, Jacqui Lambie Network 1%, Glenn Lazarus Team 0%, Nick Xenophon Team 4%, Pauline Hanson's One Nation 5%, Independent/other 8%.

Oquist said Pauline Hanson "looks set to win in Queensland" and Nick Xenophon could pick up seats outside South Australia. Independent Jacqui Lambie was likely to be returned. "There are other wildcards like Lazarus and even the chance of a second Greens (Andrew Bartlett) winning in Queensland," he said.

His estimates of the new Senate numbers were 30-35 Coalition senators, 25-28 from Labor, 9-10 Greens, 3-6 Nick Xenophon Team, plus others.

"All up, this could mean a Senate where a returned Coalition government couldn't pass legislation without either Hanson's vote or the Greens - when Labor oppose bills," Oquist said.

*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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