

Glenelg Electoral Representation Review Submission

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Summary

The Victorian Electoral Commission is charged with producing an electoral structure that is “fair and equitable”. The preferred option (A) is. The other two options (B and C) are not.

Option A scores 137.55 on the Democracy Index.

Option B scores 119.08 on the Democracy Index.

Option C scores 103.38 on the Democracy Index.

The best electoral structure will represent voters in proportion to the ways they have voted, have the greatest number of votes that help elect someone and require 50 per cent plus one – no more and no less – for a group to win the majority of positions. Both winning a majority from less than 50 per cent plus one and requiring a vote greater than 50 per cent plus one to win a majority are undemocratic. In the first case, a minority can gain control, while in the second, a group can win the majority of the vote and still not gain a majority of positions.

Even if a structure meets both these requirements, it should not do so by devaluing the votes of a minority of voters.

There are arguments for having less democratic and representative councils; e.g., the claim that each area needs its own local representative. If this were true, the voters in an unsubdivided council or a multi-councillor ward would elect a candidate from their area, which is perfectly possible under a proportional system. If they do not, they obviously do not think it is so important after all. This and other arguments against representative councils are dealt with in submissions to the Victorian Electoral Commission’s Nillumbik Shire Council electoral representation review, available under “View preliminary submissions” at <https://www.vec.vic.gov.au/reviews/Nillumbikrr.html> – see in particular [CURTIS, Chris - written submission](#).

Option A

An unsubdivided Glenelg Council of seven councillors with 17,570 voters would have a quota of 2,198 votes. Seven quotas would equal 15,386 votes, leaving 2,184 votes wasted, votes that did not contribute to the election of anyone. This is a wastage rate of 12.43 per cent and an effective vote rate of 87.57 per cent.

To win a majority of four seats on the council, a group would have to win four quotas, 8,792 votes. That is 50.04 per cent. Ideally, 50.01 per cent should be sufficient, but 50.04 per cent is pretty close. The more the percentage of votes required to win a majority 50.04 is the same distance from the ideal of 50.01 as 49.98, so its score drops to 49.98.

Adding the percentage of effective votes and the adjusted percentage of votes required to win a majority together gives Option A a score of 137.55 on the Democracy Index.

Option B

If the wards in Option B had exactly the same number of voters per councillor, the five-councillor ward would have 12,550 voters, and the two-councillor ward would have 5,020 voters. The quota in the five-councillor ward would be 2,092 (16.67 per cent), meaning that five quotas totalling 10,460 votes would elect five councillors, and 2,090 votes would be wasted. The quota in the two-councillor ward would be 1,675 (33.37 per cent), meaning two quotas totalling 3,350 votes would elect two councillors and 1,670 votes would be wasted. Under Option B, 3,760 votes would be wasted (2,090 in the five-councillor ward and 1,670 in each of the two two-councillor wards). This is a wastage rate of 21.40 per cent and effective vote rate of 78.60 per cent.

To win a majority of seats in Option B, a group would need to win three seats in the five-councillor ward (three quotas of 2,092 votes) and one seat in the two-councillor ward (one quota of 1,675 votes). That is a total of 7951 votes, only 45.25 per cent.

Adding the percentage of effective votes and the percentage of votes required to win a majority together gives Option B a score of 123.85 on the Democracy Index, 13.70 behind Option A.

But it gets worse. By having wards of different numbers of councillors, Option B discriminates against voters in the two-councillor ward. Voters need to reach 33.37 per cent of the vote to elect someone, whereas those in the five-councillor ward can do so by reaching only 16.67 per cent of the vote. This is a discrimination factor of 16.70 per cent, or 838 voters, in that ward. This is 4.77 per cent of the voters of the shire, so Option B's Democracy Index score drops to 119.08, 18.47 behind Option A.

Option C

Option C has the same faults as Option B. The four-councillor ward would have 10,040 voters each, the two-councillor ward would have 5,020 voters, and the one-councillor ward would have 2,510 voters. The quota in the four-councillor ward would be 2,009 votes (20.01 per cent), meaning that four quotas totalling 8,036 votes would elect four councillors and 2,004 votes would be wasted. The quota in the two-councillor ward would be 1,675 (33.37 per cent), meaning two quotas totalling 3,350 votes would elect two councillors and 1,670 votes would be wasted. The quota in the one-councillor ward would be 1,256 (50.04 per cent), meaning one quota of 1,256 votes would elect one councillor and 1,254 votes would be wasted. Under Option C, 4,924 votes would be wasted (2,004 in the four-councillor ward, 1,670 in the two-councillor ward and 1,254 in the one-councillor ward). This is a wastage rate of 28.05 per cent and effective vote rate of 71.95 per cent.

To win a majority of seats in Option C, a group would need to win two seats in the four-councillor ward (two quotas of 2,009 votes), one seat in the two-councillor ward (one quota of 1,675 votes) and one seat the one-councillor ward (1,254 votes). That is a total of 6,947 votes, only 39.54 per cent.

Adding the percentage of effective votes and the percentage of votes required to win a majority together gives Option C a score of 111.49 on the Democracy Index, 26.06 behind Option A.

But it gets worse. By having wards of different numbers of councillors, Option C discriminates against voters in the two-councillor ward and the one-councillor ward. Voters

in the two-councillor ward need to reach 33.37 per cent of the vote to elect someone, whereas those in the four-councillor wards can do so by reaching only 20.01 per cent of the vote. This is a discrimination factor of 13.36 per cent, or 671 voters in the two-councillor ward. Voters in the one-councillor ward need to reach 50.04 per cent of the vote to elect someone, whereas those in the four-councillor wards can do so by reaching only 20.01 per cent of the vote. This is a discrimination factor of 30.03 per cent, or 754 voters in the two-councillor ward. In total, 1,425 voters across the shire are discriminated against by being required to reach a higher quota to elect anyone than the voters in the four-councillor ward.

This is 8.11 per cent of the voters across the shire, so Option C's Democracy Index score drops to 103.38, 32.17 behind Option A.

The Obsession with Geographic Communities of Interest

The arguments quoted in favour of wards are illogical.

The preliminary report says, "councillors should live in and be members of the communities they represent (submissions indicate that many of the current councillors are unknown to people in rural areas)". That is up to the voters of the shire. If they want such local councillors, they can just as easily elect them under an unsubdivided structure as under any other. If they have not done so, they obviously do not regard the councillor's place of residence as important. There is no guarantee under any structure that councillors will live in the ward that they are elected for.

The preliminary report says, "it is harder for rural candidates to be elected (due to a smaller population dispersed across a large area) and easier for Portland-based candidates." This suggests that candidates who live in Portland find it easier to campaign in rural areas than candidates who live in those areas. It is hard to imagine why.

The preliminary report says, "dividing the council would reduce travel time for councillors". It would if voters elected candidates who live in the wards they represented, but there is no requirement for them to do so. Nor can this argument apply more strongly to a shire of 6,212 square kilometres when it has not been applied to the Rural City of Mildura, with its 22,330 square kilometres or the Shire of East Gippsland with its 20,931 square kilometres.

The argument for wards in any council rests on an obsession with geographic communities of interest. Yet, an unsubdivided council gives geographic communities of interest the same chance of being represented as any subdivided council does. The people of the geographic community of interest simply have to vote for someone from that geographic community. That they do not do so simply tells us the geographic community of interest is not as important to them as other issues. An unsubdivided council does not force voters to vote as a geographic community of interest. It gives them the freedom to vote in any way that they wish.

Principles

Every council in the state should have an uneven number of councillors so there is little likelihood of the mayor's exercising a second vote to break ties. No council should have wards in it with different numbers of councillors as this discriminates against voters in the ward with the smaller number by requiring a higher percentage of them to elect a councillor. No council should be structured to allow a minority group to win a majority of positions on it. It follows that every five-, seven-, nine- and eleven-councillor council in the state should

be unsubdivided. Under the second of these criteria, a council of nine councillors could be subdivided into three wards of three councillors each, but such a council would still allow a minority group to win a majority of positions, have a higher rate of wasted votes and be less open to minority representation than an unsubdivided council of nine councillors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Option A is the only one that can be justified as “fair and equitable” for Glenelg Shire, or any other seven-councillor council in the state.

Chris Curtis



I do not wish to speak at the public hearing.

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