Southern Grampians Electoral Representation Review
Submission

Chris Curtis

16 April, 2019

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

Option A scores 137.55 on the Democracy Index.
Option B scores 79.98 on the Democracy Index.

Option A gives the greatest number of voters a vote that actually counts (87.56 per cent, compared with Option B’s 66.81 per cent). It is the only one that does not allow a minority group to have a majority of positions (50.03 per cent, compared with Option B’s very low 26.43 per cent). It is the only one that does not discriminate against voters in some parts of the shire by devaluing their votes.

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 Southern Grampians Council of seven councillors with 13,151 voters would have a quota of 1,645 votes. Seven quotas would equal 11,515 votes, leaving 1,636 votes wasted, votes that did not contribute to the election of anyone. This is a wastage rate of 12.44 per cent and an effective vote rate of 87.56 per cent.

To win a majority of four seats on the council, a group would have to win four quotas, 6,580 votes. That is 50.03 per cent. Ideally, 50.01 per cent should be sufficient, but 50.03 per cent
is pretty close. 50.03 is the same distance from the ideal of 50.01 as 49.99, so its score drops to 49.99.

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**

In Option B, the four-councillor ward has 7,344 voters, and the one-councillor wards have 1,998, 1,849 and 1,960 voters each. The quota in four-councillor ward would be 1,470 votes (20.02 per cent), meaning that four quotas totalling 5,880 votes would elect four councillors and 1,464 votes would be wasted. The quota in each of the one-councillor wards would be 1,000 (50.05 per cent), 925 (50.03 per cent) and 981 (50.05 per cent) respectively, meaning three quotas totalling 2,906 votes would elect three councillors and 2,901 votes would be wasted. Under Option B, 4,365 votes (1,464 in the four-councillor ward and 2,901 in the three one-councillor wards) would be wasted. This is a wastage rate of 33.19 per cent and effective vote rate of 66.81 per cent.

To win a majority of seats in Option B, a group would need to win one seat in each of the one-councillor wards (quotas of 1,000, 925 and 981 votes respectively) and one seat in the four-councillor ward (one quota of 1,470 votes). That is a total 3,476 votes, only 26.43 per cent of all the voters in the shire.

Adding the percentage of effective votes and the percentage of votes required to win a majority together gives Option B a score of 93.24 on the Democracy Index, 44.31 behind Option A.

But it gets worse. By having wards of different numbers of councillors, Option B discriminates against voters in the one-councillor wards. Voters need to reach 50.05 per cent of the vote to elect someone in East, 50.03 per cent in South and 50.05 per cent in West, whereas those in the four-councillor ward can do so by reaching only 20.02 per cent of the vote. This is a discrimination factor of 30.03 per cent in East (600 voters), 30.01 per cent in South (555 voters) and 30.3 per cent in West (589 voters). Across all three one-councillor wards, 1,744 voters would be discriminated against. This is 13.26 per cent of the voters of the shire, so Option B’s Democracy Index score drops to 79.98, 57.57 behind Option A.

**The Obsession with Geographic Communities of Interest**

The preliminary report says, “The VEC recognises that communities can have a strong sense of identity and connection with their local area, and that geographic communities of interest are more likely to be represented in subdivided electoral structures.” Any geographic community with a strong sense of identity is empowered to choose a councillor from that community under an unsubdivided structure.

Providing three wards outside of Hamilton does no more to “allow local representation of each of the rural areas” than providing an unsubdivided council, as voters in a rural area in an unsubdivided structure can elect a local person if they so choose. The structure provides not the slightest obstacle to their doing so. The preliminary report seems to recognise this: “The structure would mean that rural voters in the Shire would have no say over electing urban councillors, and vice versa.”
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 Southern Grampians Shire, or any other seven-councillor council in the state.

Chris Curtis

I do not wish to speak at the public hearing.

Emailed to southerngrampians.review@vec.vic.gov.au