Full disclosure of data

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The objection to full disclosure made by Otten [1] is valid, but seems to me to be of only minor importance. Considering the huge advantages of disclosure, in giving transparency and allowing anyone who wishes to check the result of the counting, it would be a great pity if Otten's point were allowed to prevail over it.

Disclosure does not in itself give complete transparency of the electoral process, because it takes as given the list of votes and their preferences, but in dealing fully with the second part of the process, the counting of the votes, it is nevertheless of great merit.

Otten's "preferred solution" — to suppress later preferences until there are at least three votes of every published pattern — would undoubtedly be better than not publishing the data at all, but it is a very poor thing compared with full disclosure and would, in many instances, lead to the suppression of the very information that would be of importance.

Taking as an example the election reported on in the preceding paper (Hill [2]), the original votes, which had 531 different preference patterns from the 539 votes, would have been reduced to only 96 different patterns, and these would not have shown the vital information that led to the allocation of the final seat. Indeed the 16 votes that put candidate M first would have been shown as just 13 M ... and 3 M R ... The voter whose 15th preference was vital would not have had even a second preference shown.

In an election where political parties were important, it would seem likely that the loss of information would be less severe. Even in the given case, the fact that there were 7 votes starting Q P O S E F H A D J M C B R, and another 3 also starting Q P O S E F, still comes through, indicating obvious collusion between voters (which is not illegal, or even immoral, if that is what they wish to do).

Implementing the Otten procedure is not straightforward, as it is not sufficiently defined. For example, there were 2 votes starting W U A I D, 1 starting W U A I O, 1 starting W U A E. Should these be shown as 4 of W U A ..., or as 3 W U A I ... leaving the other 1 to go in with W ...? It is not self-evident.

There are many things in life that could be so much simpler if only we could trust everybody, and did not need to bother about fraudsters, but we always need to consider whether a particular fraud is likely, and whether procedures to stop it are doing more harm than good. My personal view is that Otten's suggestion would be doing so.

1 References

[1] Otten J. Fuller disclosure than intended. *Voting matters*, Issue 17, p8. 2003.

[2] Hill I.D. An odd feature in a real STV election. *Voting matters*, Issue 18, p9. 2004.