

Rank, rank, rank votes in the bank

New Plymouth voters – don't panic when local government ballot papers arrive in your letterbox soon.

It will be "Simple To Vote" for the next district council, according to the government's STV website, which surely can't be lying - how hard can it be to use numbers instead of ticks?

Single transferable voting will be easy. The difficult bit is understanding how they count what you do, how your ranking of candidates will end up with a mayor and 14 councillors.

That part's a nightmare. Unless you're the type who delves into complexities like taxation or Netflix film and TV genres, knowing what a big computer somewhere does with our hand-scrawled numerals to arrive at a "more democratic" election outcome is beyond most of us.

NPDC's website holds a clue to the significance of this change to how we vote. It uses 17 sentences (244 words) to try to explain STV (long used for Taranaki's health board) compared to just four (62 words) for the past council system, first-past-the-post (FPP).

Seventeen aren't enough, but probably wise. Go to STV.govt.nz for full chapter and verse and be daunted by STV's complexity.

I've read that and academic papers, government reports, election result spreadsheets, commentary, news reports and letters-to-the-editor in an effort to crack it for you, but some aspects are beyond me.

I'm not alone. After a South Island health board election a decade ago, a *Stuff* commentator wrote sarcastically that after he studied a copy of the full results, he couldn't see what caused 1311 voters to screw up and another 925 to think it was so complicated they didn't bother voting.

He quoted this from the results: "Smith, Karen, excluded at iteration 12, reason: candidate received the lowest vote count 1524.028067315, less than the second lowest by more than total surplus (89.845089479), second lowest received 1655.434875952 votes'."

Exactly.

My prediction is that one in four or five of us - as many as a quarter of the 40-odd percent who vote - will botch it, going by what happened when Palmerston North changed to STV and a single ward in 2013.

Some won't write their numbers clearly. Some won't write down more than a single number, thus virtually disenfranchising themselves. Some will leave the form blank because they won't know what it means or what will become of their vote or whether to trust the process.

We've been using STV for the Taranaki District Health Board since 2004, but its election works more or less acceptably because it has a single big "ward" and lots of candidates. District council elections are different, especially those with small wards.

JT column for August 31 2019 - simple to vote

New Plymouth city's 10-councillor ward with 30 candidates may function "more democratically", depending on how voters use STV. The two smaller wards with fewer candidates are less well-suited, because STV is best with three or more vacancies and plenty of candidates.

Some people may now ignore both the NPDC election and that for the health board - which has low turnout and invalid or blank voting papers from about 12 percent of voters (compared with .3 percent for councils on FPP) - and vote only for the regional council because it will still be using familiar FPP.

STV theory is actually straightforward in parts. Well-known councillors will be re-elected much the same as under FPP. The supposed democratic benefits come when filling the remaining vacancies.

Computer manipulation brings into play the lower ranked choices of a broader group of voters, lifting the chances of new and diverse candidates.

Crucially, there is a better chance of that happening if voters rank as many candidates as they're allowed, thus enhancing the computer process as it moves beyond its first iterations that confirm top candidates and eliminate bottom dwellers.

As it continues to transfer voter preferences, less well-known candidates who didn't feature in the first rounds may then find their rankings boosted enough to grab a seat.

And that's what we want, isn't it – new faces, better gender balance, Māori representation at least matching population proportion?

Declining to fill out the ballot because you're suspicious of the system doesn't make sense, even though early claims of STV's incorruptibility are now questioned after a Labour-orientated group of candidates at one council encouraged supporters to rank preferred candidates in a way that ensured some succeeded.

One other aspect intrigues me - if there's a tie it must be decided by "a random (or pseudo-random) process". How does a computer toss a coin?