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In Australia, Ranking Process Is Key in a Tight Race

Voters list candidates by order of preference in a system that's open to minority parties.

By Richard C. Paddock
Times Staff Writer

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ADELAIDE, Australia — When Australians vote Saturday to select members of Parliament and a prime minister, they will be participating in a process that election experts say is one of the most democratic in the world.

With Prime Minister John Howard and Labor Party challenger Mark Latham locked in a tight race for the top job, victory could well hinge on an unusual, long-standing feature of Australia's electoral system: the preferential ballot.

Rather than voting for individual candidates for Parliament, voters rank those running in their district in order of preference. If no candidate wins a majority of first-place votes, the outcome is determined by the preferential rankings. Members of the Parliament then elect the prime minister.

The system, used in few other places in the world, allows Australians to cast their ballots for minor party candidates without necessarily throwing away their votes.

"I think it's the most powerful vote anywhere in the world," said Kevin Evans, an Australian who serves as electoral advisor to the United Nations Development Program in Indonesia. "It actually means you can vote your conscience, without it helping the party you most dislike."

If the United States had a similar system for presidential voting, minor party candidates such as consumer advocate Ralph Nader could be selected as a first choice — with voters knowing that their second-place votes would then go to the next candidate of their choice, Democratic Party nominee John F. Kerry or Republican President Bush.

"Preferences are more democratic," said Rod Tiffen, a political science professor at the University of

Sydney. "You could vote for Ralph Nader and have it not be a wasted vote."

Australia has long been a leader in election innovations. It began using the secret ballot well before other countries; when it was adopted in the United States it was known as the "Australian ballot."

Another feature of the electoral system is compulsory voting. By law, all citizens are required to report to their polling stations on election day and receive a ballot. How — or whether — they mark the ballot is up to them.

Those who don't go to the polls and cannot provide a legitimate excuse face a fine of about \$14.

Many of the nation's parliamentary races are decided by the preferential vote, a system adopted during World War I.

Seeking a fourth three-year term in Saturday's election, Howard, 65, heads a conservative coalition of the Liberal Party and the National Party.

Latham, 43, the Labor Party leader, is attempting to win back power for his party after 8 1/2 years in opposition.

The campaign, limited to just six weeks, has seen a sharp debate on economic issues and a barrage of television ads in which Howard accuses Latham of mismanagement while serving as a small-town mayor and Latham questions Howard's credibility.

Howard is a close ally of Bush and has sent troops to Iraq. Latham has promised to bring most of the 850 soldiers home by Christmas. In recent weeks, the Iraq issue has played a minor role in the campaign.

One effect of the preferential ballot is a flourishing multiparty system that has resulted in the election of minor party candidates to Parliament and prompts the major parties to reach out to smaller voting blocs in their quest for second-place votes.

"I think it works better because it gives small parties a chance," said Sally Giles, 18, a university student who will be voting for the first time.

Polls indicate that the election will probably give a big boost to the steadily growing Green Party, which could win as much as 12% of the national vote.

In the campaign's final days, Latham has been courting the Green vote by offering a plan to save Tasmania's giant old-growth trees, which are being clear-cut and shipped to Japan to make paper products.

Howard offered a proposal Wednesday to preserve trees not now slated for logging and emphasized the need to protect timber industry jobs.

"If you look at the recent polls we may be ahead ... on the primary vote, but we are getting very few

Green preferences," Howard said earlier on Australian radio. "And if the flow of Green preferences is as solid as is forecast in those polls, well, the result could be very tight and it could go against us."

Under the preferential selection rules, voters also have the option of voting for a single party and letting that party allocate their preferences. The Green Party has pledged its preferences to the Labor Party.

Some Australians grumble about the nation's compulsory voting law, and, in protest, a few refuse to go to the polls.

But most Australians accept their duty, and turnout usually is about 95%.

"Everybody should have to vote," said Robert Capponi, 38, the manager of an Adelaide convenience store.

"Everybody should have an opinion and should voice their opinion."

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