

A Potential Political Revolution

Academic analysis of the Alternative Vote

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Executive Summary

This paper builds upon earlier work by Policy Exchange in *The Alternative Vote – the system no-one wants* which found that the Alternative Vote failed to deliver on many of the claims made for it. This new research note surveys existing work on the subject to show that AV will create far more problems than it has a hope of solving.

AV would mean more hung parliaments, and “throwing the rascals out” would become rarer

Under the existing UK electoral system, only two out of the last 17 British general elections have failed to produce an overall majority for a single political party. This would change considerably under AV – with the number of hung parliaments increasing to seven. Elections in which no party won a majority of seats in the House of Commons would be at least three times as likely.

The Conservatives would need to win an extra 26 seats to make up for their losses resulting from AV. Only three times since the Second World War has the party won a majority of a size that would withstand the likely loss of seats resulting from the introduction of AV.

What effect would AV have on the different parties, when combined with boundary changes?

The Political Studies Association has published a study by Alan Renwick (2011) on the probable results of the last seven general elections under the proposed system of AV. The Liberal Democrats would have won an average of 26 more seats. Labour on average would have neither won nor lost any seats, while the Conservatives would have lost an average of 25 to 26 seats.

Conservative losses from AV would be mitigated only to a small extent by the boundary changes due to be introduced by the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act, 2011. According to a study by Borisyuk et al (2010), eliminating the inequality in constituency electorates would have left the Liberal Democrats unaffected in the 2005 general election but would have led to a gain of nine or ten seats to the Conservatives from Labour.

The system proposed for the UK is not used by any other country. And nearly half of MPs would still not have 50% of the vote – even though this is a key argument for AV

Neither Australia nor Papua New Guinea elects members of the lower house of the legislature by the method proposed for the UK. Fiji is in the process of abandoning the Alternative Vote. Thus, even the three countries which have been cited as examples of the proposed UK system are not models. Unlike the Australian system, the “Optional Preference Vote” proposed for the UK does not require the ranking of all candidates. For this reason academic research by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (2010) suggests that more than four out of ten MPs would be elected without the votes of 50% of their constituents – even though passing this threshold this is one of the key arguments for AV.

The proposed voting method: a system without parallel in national parliamentary elections anywhere in the world

The question posed in the forthcoming AV referendum will be:

"At present, the UK uses the ‘first past the post’ system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the ‘alternative vote’ system be used instead?"

This question assumes that there is a single system called "AV". But this is not the case. There are a whole series of different voting methods which fall broadly under the category of the "alternative vote" or the "preferential vote".

It is widely reported that AV currently is used for elections to the lower house of the national legislature in three countries: Australia, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. On closer examination, none of these countries provides a model for the system proposed in the forthcoming UK referendum. If the UK approves the form of AV being proposed, it will be adopting a system that is unique for selecting members of a House of Commons.

AV systems around the world

The AV system proposed in the UK referendum

Electors will be entitled to list parliamentary candidates by order of preference (1, 2, 3, and so on). But they will not be obliged to do so. The technical name for the variety of AV being proposed for the United Kingdom is OPV (Optional Preference Vote).

The Australian system

Electors must list every candidate by order of preference. If they fail to do this, the ballot is declared invalid. In a constituency where candidates from the extreme right and extreme left are standing, electors are obliged to express a preference for one or other of them and that preference may prove

decisive in determining the ultimate result.

The crucial difference between the compulsory listing of all candidates in order of preference in Australia and the optional listing of some or all candidates in the system proposed for the United Kingdom means that Australian national elections are not necessarily a model for the UK. The technical name for the Australian variant of AV is FPV (Full Preferential Voting).

The Papua New Guinean system

The voting rules repeatedly have been altered. Currently, electors are obliged to list by preference (1, 2 and 3) any three candidates standing for election in a constituency even if there are more candidates on the ballot. The technical name for this system is LPV (Limited Preference Vote).

The Fijian system

Fiji is currently in the process of abandoning the Alternative Vote in view of its failure to promote inter-ethnic moderation.

The Nauru system

Nauru is a tiny Pacific island with an estimated population of 9,000. Under its system of AV, votes of defeated candidates are redistributed but are given only a half of the value of first preferences when they are redistributed.

Systems of AV are generally used not for parliamentary elections but for elections to office in private clubs or other small groups. In these club or club-like settings it is considered more important to avoid electing persons against whom a minority of members may have an objection than to choose the most popular person.

Advantages, complexities and myths about the Alternative Vote

AV is a member of a large family of voting systems called "preferential voting" systems. They are designed to allow electors to have an input into the election result even if their most favoured candidate loses. However, there are mathematical complexities about some of these systems which mean that they do not have all the characteristics claimed for them.

The most important claim for AV is that it ensures that a winning candidate has the support of at least 50% of the voters in a constituency. However, there are three different objections to this claim.

First, it may be questioned whether a voter has "supported" a candidate to whom he or she has given a low order of preference. If a voter gives a fourth or fifth place ranking, say, to a Communist candidate in preference to a Fascist one (as would be necessary under the Australian "Full Preferential Voting"

system in constituencies where both were standing), that could hardly be regarded as a form of positive "support".

Second, there is the curious and deeply-esoteric issue of "monotonicity". As Alan Renwick (2011) puts it:

"An electoral system is non-monotonic if a candidate's chances of election can be harmed by their winning more votes. FPTP does not have this feature, but AV can. Say that candidate A could win a runoff against B but not against C. A transfer of votes from B to A could eliminate B from the race, allowing C to win. Non-monotonic outcomes are undesirable, but research employing mathematical models suggests they should occur very rarely."

Third, under the system of AV proposed for Britain (Optional Preference Voting), a high proportion of electors may be expected to cast only a first preference vote. Thus, the winning candidate may not gain at least 50% of the votes cast after lower preferences are counted. This is shown from the experience of Optional Preference Voting at state level in New South Wales and Queensland, Australia. As shown by Richard Mabey (2011), "up to 65% of voters might cast only one preference in a future [British] general election."

Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (2010) make the same point. The proposed UK system of AV – Optional Preference Voting – does not guarantee that winning candidates must win the "support" (even counting second, third, fourth and lower preference votes) of a majority of electors. They write:

"Proponents of AV often claim that the need for successful candidates to be able to show local majority support is one of the system's main attractions. Yet [on realistic assumptions set out in a Table] more than 4 out of every 10 MPs would still be elected with the endorsement of less than 50 per cent of the voters in their constituency.

The claims that AV will guarantee local majority support can only be validated if every voter is compelled or chooses to cast a full range of preferences. There seems little prospect of that happening in a general election conducted under AV in the UK."

Why are we having a referendum on the Alternative Vote?

National referendums are rare events in Britain. The last one was held in 1975 on the issue of British membership of the European Economic Community (which was to become the European Union). According to polls carried out by Ipsos MORI, constitutional reform was regarded as the key issue by a bare 1% of the electorate at the time of the general election of 2010. Public demand for a change of the voting system to the Alternative Vote was too small to be measured at all by the pollsters.

Curiously, the UK electors are being asked to vote in a referendum on a matter concerning which there is virtually no public demand for change.

Public attitudes to AV

The vast majority of the public neither know nor care anything about electoral systems. (It even bores the most of the election “anoraks”.)

Roger Mortimore, Director of Political Analysis, Ipsos MORI (Mortimore 2011)

Which parties would benefit and which would be damaged by the introduction of AV?

The Political Studies Association has published a study by Alan Renwick on the probable results of the last seven general elections under the proposed system of AV.

- The Liberal Democrats would have won an average of 26 more seats.
- Labour on average would have neither won nor lost any seats
- The Conservatives would have lost an average of 25 to 26 seats.

Liberal Democrats would have gained extra seats in every one of these seven general elections since 1983 and as many as 69 more in the general election of 1997.

Why would AV benefit the Liberal Democrats?

AV is most likely to affect the result in constituencies in which no candidate wins 50% of the votes and the Liberal Democrat candidate comes second. The Liberal Democrat probably would gain the second preferences of voters for the party coming third.

In a Labour-held constituency in which the Liberal Democrats are runners up, voters supporting the third-placed Conservative are likely to prefer the Liberal Democrat to Labour. The process applies in reverse in seats where a Conservative is in first place.

Conservatives are especially vulnerable since the constituencies where Liberal Democrats are the main challengers usually are Conservative held seats.

In the general election of 2010,

- Liberal Democrats were second to the Conservatives in 167 seats
- Liberal Democrats were second to Labour in 76 seats

See Appendix 1 for seats where Liberal Democrats were second to the Conservatives or Labour in the 2010 general election

What would the result of the British general election of 2010 have been under the proposed system of AV?

The British Election Survey conducted by the University of Essex asked a large internet sample of over 16,000 persons how they actually voted and how they would have voted under AV. (Sanders et al. 2010). The net results would have been one currently Labour seat switching to Conservative, 19 Liberal Democrat seats switching to Labour, ten Conservative seats switching to Labour and 13 currently Conservative seats switching to the Lib Dems.

See Appendix 2 for constituencies which would change hands as a result of an AV system.

Coalition governments as the result of the proposed system of AV

Looking back at British general elections since 1950 held under the existing electoral system, only two out of 17 failed to produce an overall majority for either of the two main political parties (February 1974 and 2010). Under the existing electoral system, elections have continued to produce overall majorities in eight out of the last nine general elections.

Under AV, the Conservatives would need (on average) to win an extra 26 seats to secure an overall majority. This finding derives from academic survey research in which respondents were asked how they actually voted and how they would have voted under AV.

It is impossible to tell what might have happened had past elections been held under AV. Rule changes such as the lowering of the election deposit (which deterred Liberals from fielding candidates in the 1950s and 1960s) and the defection of the Ulster Unionists from the Conservatives add to the problem of meaningful historical comparison.

However, one approximate method of estimating the likely frequency of hung elections under AV is to look at the number of general elections since 1950 which produced Conservative majorities of under 52. This is arguably the best guide to future elections in the event of the adoption of AV.

According to this method of calculation, seven general elections out of the last 17 would have produced no overall majority. The Tories would have won an overall majority in only three (if Ulster Unionist seats are excluded from the Tory total in 1955). The Liberal Democrats or another “centre party” would thus be likely to hold the balance of power in a significant proportion of future general elections. They would be the beneficiaries of AV.

Reducing the number of MPs and changing constituency boundaries: what will be the political effects?

Under the terms of the Coalition Agreement and Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act of 2011, the introduction of voting reform will not come into effect, even if there is a "Yes" vote in the AV referendum until the number of MPs is reduced from 650 to 600 and new constituency boundaries are introduced late in 2013.

The boundary changes are designed to eliminate the large disparities between electorates of different constituencies as well as the disadvantages to the Conservatives under the existing boundaries. In political terms, the Conservatives stand to recoup from changes in constituency boundaries some of their losses in the event of the adoption of AV.

This raises two questions: (1) will the potential Conservative gains from boundary changes match their losses from AV? (2) Is the method of altering constituency boundaries set out in the 2011 Act fair – does it discriminate against Labour?

The answer to the first question is that the Conservatives stand to gain some seats from Labour as a consequence of the proposed new boundaries. But their gain will be considerably smaller than their average loss of 26 seats to the Liberal Democrats from the introduction of AV.

The answer to the second question is that the method of redrawing constituency boundaries may be seen as damaging Labour but to a much smaller extent than has been suggested.

As Galina Borisyuk et al. have pointed out, "the result of the 2005 United Kingdom general election was a clear exemplar of the disproportionality that characterises first-past-the-post electoral systems. The two leading parties—Labour and Conservative—were separated by only three percentage points in their share of the votes cast in Great Britain (36.1 and 33.2 per cent, respectively), but whereas Labour obtained 56.5 per cent of the House of Commons seats, the Conservatives got only 31.5 per cent. The Liberal Democrats were similarly disadvantaged— as they have been at all post-war general elections: with 22.6 per cent of the votes nationally they were allocated only 9.9 per cent of the seats."

Moreover, "there was also clear evidence of bias, suggesting that Labour was much better treated than the Conservatives." The analysis by Ron Johnston et al. "indicated that if they had each won 34.7 per cent of the votes cast, Labour would have won 111 more seats than the Conservatives."

However, Borisyuk and her colleagues found that the Labour advantage derived only to a minor extent from the way in which constituency boundary were drawn. Hence, the equalisation of the size of constituency electorates would have a relatively minor effect on party fortunes. Labour gained because turnout in Labour-held seats was smaller than in seats held by the other main parties. The number of

Conservatives voting in safe Conservative seats was greater than the number of Labour voters in safe Labour seats. This merely reflected the geographical distribution of Conservative votes.

Admittedly, Conservative-held seats had electorates that on average were a little larger than Labour-held or Liberal Democrat-held seats. But this accounted for only a little of the bias in the way British elections operated. In the general election of 2010, the average electorate of constituencies won by the Conservatives was 73,031 compared with 69,145 for Labour and 69,610 for the Liberal Democrats.

Eliminating the inequality in constituency electorates would have left the Liberal Democrats unaffected in the 2005 general election but would have led to a gain of nine or ten seats to the Conservatives from Labour. (Borisyuk et al, 2010).

Is the basis of calculating constituency electorates set out in the 2011 Act unfair?

The Labour Party has objected to the use of the electoral register for 2010-11 as the basis for assessing the populations of each ward and constituency.

Ron Johnston has summarised the objections as follows:

"Electoral registration is poor in the UK – especially some parts of it, and particularly since the 1990 Poll Tax debacle. The Electoral Commission estimates that at least 3.5 million people eligible to be on the electoral rolls are not. The young, students, private renters, ethnic minorities, and recent movers dominate that total. A majority of them live in urban areas – Labour strongholds; in some parts of London 30-50% of those 18 and over are estimated not to be on the electoral roll.

Hence Labour argues strongly that defining new constituencies based on old-style December 2010 electoral data will greatly disadvantage it. If all those 3.5 million missing electors were enrolled (assuming they would all qualify as UK electors), there would be a very different distribution of constituencies. More MPs would represent the big urban areas, hence giving less advantage to the Conservatives from the new constituency map." (Johnston 2011)

There certainly is evidence that under-registration is a particular problem in urban areas with unsettled populations. Most of these areas are held by Labour. However, the low quality of electoral registration in these cities and districts of cities results also in the retention on the electoral registers of names of persons who have moved or died or who are not entitled to vote for other reasons. In order to assess the accuracy of the electoral register as a source of information about population, we need to take account of names wrongly included on electoral registers as well as names wrongly omitted.

A series of pilot studies conducted for the Electoral Commission (published in 2010) showed that districts where there were the largest percentages of missing names were also those with the largest percentages of incorrectly included ones. Thus, electoral registers – though by no means ideal – are

considerably more accurate as sources of information about population than was suggested during recent parliamentary debates.

In the two pilot areas with the highest percentages of missing names (Lambeth and Glasgow City), for every six missing names on the registers there were five incorrectly included names.

The overestimation of population stemming from missing and redundant names is 4.5% (3% for Lambeth and 6% for Glasgow City). Given the statistical sampling error of the surveys, these figures are hardly significant.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: list of seats where Liberal Democrats were second to the Conservatives and Labour in the 2010 general election

Seats where the Liberal Democrats were second to the Conservatives in the 2010 general election		
Aldershot	Altrincham and Sale West	Arundel and South Downs
Ashford	Aylesbury	Banbury
Basingstoke	Beaconsfield	Beckenham
Beverley and Holderness	Bexhill and Battle	Bognor Regis and Littlehampton
Bosworth	Bournemouth East	Bournemouth West
Bracknell	Brentwood and Ongar	Bridgwater and West Somerset
Bristol North West	Broadland	Bromley and Chislehurst
Bury St Edmunds	Camborne and Redruth	Canterbury
Central Devon	Central Suffolk and North Ipswich	Charnwood
Chelmsford	Chesham and Amersham	Chichester
Christchurch	Colne Valley	Congleton
Croydon South	Daventry	Derbyshire Dales
Devizes	East Devon	East Hampshire
East Surrey	East Worthing and Shoreham	East Yorkshire
Eddisbury	Epping Forest	Epsom and Ewell
Esher and Walton	Fareham	Faversham and Mid Kent
Folkestone and Hythe	Fylde	Gainsborough
Gosport	Grantham and Stamford	Guildford
Haltemprice and Howden	Harborough	Harrogate and Knaresborough
Harwich and North Essex	Havant	Hemel Hempstead
Henley	Hereford and South Herefordshire	Hertford and Stortford
Hexham	Hitchin and Harpenden	Horsham
Huntingdon	Isle of Wight	Kenilworth and Southam
Lichfield	Louth and Horncastle	Ludlow
Macclesfield	Maidenhead	Maidstone and The Weald
Maldon	Meon Valley	Mid Bedfordshire
Mid Norfolk	Mid Sussex	Mid Worcestershire
Mole Valley	Montgomeryshire	New Forest East
New Forest West	Newbury	Newton Abbot
North Dorset	North East Bedfordshire	North East Cambridgeshire
North East Hampshire	North East Hertfordshire	North Herefordshire
North Shropshire	North Somerset	North West Cambridgeshire
North West Hampshire	North West Norfolk	North Wiltshire
Orpington	Oxford West and Abingdon	Penrith and The Border
Poole	Rayleigh and Wickford	Reading East
Reigate	Richmond (Yorks)	Richmond Park
Romsey and Southampton North	Runnymede and Weybridge	Rushcliffe
Rutland and Melton	Saffron Walden	Salisbury
Sevenoaks	Shrewsbury and Atcham	Skipton and Ripon

Sleaford and North Hykeham	South Cambridgeshire	South East Cambridgeshire
South East Cornwall	South Holland and The Deepings	South Leicestershire
South Norfolk	South Northamptonshire	South Suffolk
South West Bedfordshire	South West Devon	South West Hertfordshire
South West Norfolk	South West Surrey	South West Wiltshire
Southend West	Spelthorne	St Albans
Stone	Stratford-on-Avon	Suffolk Coastal
Surrey Heath	Tatton	Tewkesbury
The Cotswolds	Thirsk and Malton	Tiverton and Honiton
Tonbridge and Malling	Torridge and West Devon	Totnes
Truro and Falmouth	Tunbridge Wells	Wantage
Watford	Wealden	West Dorset
West Suffolk	West Worcestershire	Weston-super-Mare
Wimbledon	Winchester	Windsor
Witham	Witney	Woking
Wokingham	Worthing West	Wycombe
Wyre and Preston North	York Outer	

Seats where the Liberal Democrats were second to Labour in the 2010 general election		
Aberavon	Aberdeen South	Ashfield
Barnsley Central	Barnsley East	Bethnal Green and Bow
Birmingham, Hodge Hill	Birmingham, Ladywood	Birmingham, Perry Barr
Blaydon	Blyth Valley	Bootle
Bristol South	Camberwell and Peckham	Chesterfield
City of Durham	Dulwich and West Norwood	Dunfermline and West Fife
Easington	Edinburgh North and Leith	Edinburgh South
Garston and Halewood	Gateshead	Glasgow North
Glasgow North West	Hackney North and Stoke Newington	Hackney South and Shoreditch
Holborn and St Pancras	Islington North	Islington South and Finsbury
Kingston upon Hull East	Kingston upon Hull North	Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle
Knowsley	Leeds Central	Leeds West
Leicester South	Lewisham East	Lewisham West and Penge
Lewisham, Deptford	Leyton and Wanstead	Liverpool, Riverside
Liverpool, Walton	Liverpool, Wavertree	Liverpool, West Derby
Manchester Central	Manchester, Gorton	Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney
Middlesbrough	Newcastle upon Tyne Central	Newcastle upon Tyne East
Newcastle upon Tyne North	Newport East	North Tyneside
North West Durham	Nottingham East	Oldham East and Saddleworth
Oxford East	Pontypridd	Preston
Rochdale	Salford and Eccles	Sheffield Central
Sheffield South East	Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough	Sheffield, Heeley

St Helens South and Whiston	Stoke-on-Trent Central	Streatham
Swansea East	Swansea West	Tottenham
Vauxhall	Walthamstow	Wansbeck
Wrexham		

Appendix 2: List of constituencies that would change hands as a result of AV Ballot

Labour to Conservative, 1 seat:		
Dudley North		
Labour to Liberal Democrat, 19 seats:		
Aberdeen South	Edinburgh North and Leith	Edinburgh South
Newport East	Swansea West	Ashfield
Birmingham Hall Green	Bristol South	Chesterfield
Durham City	Hull North	Islington South and Finsbury
Lewisham West and Penge	Newcastle upon Tyne North	Oldham East and Saddleworth
Oxford East	Rochdale	Sheffield Central
Streatham		
Conservative to Labour, 10 seats:		
Aberconwy	Cardiff North	Brentford and Isleworth
Broxtowe	Hendon	Hove
Lancaster and Fleetwood	Sherwood	Stockton South
Warrington South		
Conservative to Liberal Democrat, 13 seats:		
Bristol North West	Camborne and Redruth	Colne Valley
Harrogate and Knaresborough	Montgomeryshire	Newton Abbot
Oxford West and Abingdon	Reading East	St Albans
Truro and Falmouth	Watford	Weston-Super-Mare
York Outer		

About the Author

Dr Michael Pinto-Duschinsky is a director of the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. In 1995, he was an adviser to the United Nations and the Constitutional Review Commission of Fiji (a country which adopted and is now abandoning the Alternative Vote). He gave evidence on the Alternative Vote and on the proposed changes of constituency boundaries to the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee of the House of Commons. He is the author of one of the most widely cited defences of first-past-the-post: "Send the rascals packing: Defects of proportional representation and the virtues of the Westminster model." *Representation* (36) 2, Summer 1999. He is also author of two Policy Exchange publications. Following the appearance this year of *Bringing Rights Back Home*, he was appointed to the recently formed Commission on a Bill of Rights.

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