

The Alternative Vote is not the answer to the problems of our current electoral system: it is confusing, does not increase proportionality and promotes centrist politics

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/03/16/av-not-the-answer/?pfstyle=w p>

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Our current First Past the Post voting system is inadequate for our current needs – it is unrepresentative and leads to the dominance of a small number of parties. However, [Monica Threlfall](#) writes that we should not rush to adopt the Alternative Vote system. It is complicated and confusing, does not promote competition between parties (and thus reinforces centrist politics) and does not increase proportionality. In general, it offers little real change.

In eight weeks, the public will have an opportunity to change our electoral system to the Alternative Vote (AV) or to keep the current First Past the Post (FPTP) system. Until now, only a threadbare picture of what AV entails has emerged. As always, the devil lies in the detail, which shows that AV is not what it purports to be. It will spoil too much of what we have, while adding too little of value.

The referendum is certainly timely; the [faults of the current system](#) have become all too apparent. The problems with FPTP include:

- it gives many more seats in relation to votes to leading parties and squeezes out third-placed and smaller ones;
- it offers constituents only one Member of Parliament to represent them, despite the residents' diversity; and women are less likely to get selected for single-seat than for multi-seat constituencies.
- some winners can get their seat with only a handful of votes more than the next candidate, while others can hold on to theirs for decades due to an in-built social majority of their constituency's residents;
- it can give the leading party overwhelming dominance of parliament and government - such defects undermine confidence in the parliamentary system.

Does this mean that critics of FPTP should embrace a change to the Alternative Vote?

Unfortunately not. Alone in the world, Fiji, Papua New Guinea and Australia use it for their national parliaments. It has worked well in Papua New Guinea because in politics that are highly fragmented along ethnic and tribal lines, AV prevents candidates from behaving in an overly partisan way, making them seek support beyond their own communal base in order to gain the 2nd preference votes and get elected with an overall majority. But this is *the very opposite* of Britain's situation, where three nationwide parties stand accused of becoming increasingly similar, and a worrying number of potential voters abstain from deciding between them. AV is said by specialists to be the best system for *promoting centrist politics*, just what reformers in Britain wish to avoid.

In most cases, our second and subsequent preferences will not be counted towards the outcome. Labour and Conservative voters will not be able to transfer their second choice to the Liberal Democrats (to prevent each other's rivals from winning) unless the Liberal Democrat has already beaten the Conservative or the Labour candidate by coming top or runner-up. In sum, a majority of voters will never have their second choices counted.

If the reason for reform is to increase competition between the old parties and help new ones, AV does the opposite. Whichever party comes third-place in a constituency is the only mainstream option whose ballots will have their second and subsequent preferences counted along with those of the small and fringe parties. The Liberal Democrats may be hoping that, as their candidates

frequently end up in third position, their voters will have the casting vote using their second preferences to determine the winner, with this pattern repeating itself in many constituencies.

However, if third-placed Liberal Democrats become kingmakers with their 2nd preferences, both Labour and Conservatives will want to develop alliances with them, whether voiced or whispered, and policy differences will blur even further. Instead of going all out to persuade voters to back them on the grounds of their *difference* from other parties, candidates would have to make broadly-based appeals to attract more 2nd preferences, rather than focusing on narrower issues, as explained by the online [Electoral Knowledge Network](#).

In fact, choosing between so many poorly defined candidates confuses people so much that Australian parties issue voter guides telling their supporters who to vote for in their 2nd and subsequent preferences – this shows how AV pushes parties into constituency alliances that may actually be undesirable at national level. Imagine the British scenario in which the candidate from Party A has to convey the message, endorsed by the party, “Vote for me, but if you must vote for Party B first, remember I’m not that different, so you can put me down as your 2nd preference”, while the same Party A’s sitting MP in the next constituency might have to suggest the opposite to Party C voters if their candidate is likely to come third: “I’m not so different from Party C, so give me your 2nd preference”. A level of political incoherence likely to increase the electorate’s disdain for politics, making for an uncomfortable situation for MPs.

As to opening up parliament to more parties, AV does the opposite: it concentrates the vote on the two main parties, since the winner needs a bigger majority than under FPTP. In Australia, the two leading parties got 82 per cent of the votes on first preferences alone, while the Green’s second preferences were transferred mainly to Labor, leaving the Greens with only one MP.

UK Green Party take note: with 1 per cent of the national vote, you got one MP under FPTP. The Australian Greens got nearly 12 per cent of the national vote, but only one MP. Under AV, Green parties cannot obtain a seat with a simple plurality; and getting a majority is far more difficult, even if they were twelve times more popular than now, because a party must come top or runner-up on first preferences in a constituency before benefiting from any second choices.

As to electoral reformers’ desire to increase proportionality, AV does not offer this, as it remains a Majoritarian single-winner system. It does not offer strong majorities either. In the recent Australian election, Labor got 37 per cent and the Liberal Coalition got 44 per cent of the vote on first preferences but ended up with the same number of seats each. Adding in the extra preferences, they came neck-and-neck, but with no change of seats and Labor had to reach for independents to form a government with a razor-thin majority. This means AV neither gives a significant increase in seats to the leading party (desirable for government stability), nor produces a more proportional outcome (as under PR). Instead, it entrenches the two-party system.

Advocates of a greater representation of women in parliament should give up any illusion that AV *per se* will help. Though Australia with nearly 25 per cent of women is ranked 41st in the world, above the UK (22 per cent and in 53rd place), Papua New Guinea has only one female MP (0.9 per cent). By comparison, New Zealand with a Mixed Member Proportional system ranks 17th in the world with nearly 34 per cent of MPs being women. Research has already shown that PR with Party Lists is most helpful to parties wanting to implement their commitment to gender-balanced representation, as selection committees can add budding female politicians more easily to a longer list of candidates.

*For more information, please see Monica Threlfall’s article, [The Purpose of Electoral Reform for Westminster](#). *The Political Quarterly*, 81: 522–536.*