

Every key ‘Westminster model’ country now has a hung Parliament, following Australia’s ‘dead heat’ election

The Australian general election held under the Alternative Vote has produced an evenly divided Parliament where a handful of independent MPs from the outback now hold the balance. As a result there are now no large ‘Westminster model’ countries left in the world with single party majority governments. [Patrick Dunleavy](#) reviews the lessons for the UK and for the UK’s May 2011 referendum on changing to AV voting on the Australian pattern.



Thanks largely to the success of the Greens in attracting one in every nine votes, Australians now have a lower house (called the House of Representatives) which is completely hung, for the first time since 1940. Although 5 out of 150 seats have yet to be declared, the table below shows that neither Labor nor the Liberal/National party are able to get to the 76 seats needed to win control outright.

| Party | % votes | Seats | % seats |
|-------------------------|---------|-------|---------|
| Australian Labor Party | 38.5 | 72 | 49.7 |
| Liberal/ National party | 43.2 | 72 | 48 |
| The Greens | 11.8 | 1 | 0.7 |
| Country Liberal Party | 0.3 | 1 | 0.7 |
| Independent | 2.5 | 4 | 2.7 |
| Other parties | 4.1 | 0 | 0 |
| Totals | 100% | 150 | 100% |

Note: Now updated to reflect final election results.

The Liberal/National party beat Labour on the first preference votes, largely because of the Greens’ rise and some Labor infighting. But the Labor government still got a narrow majority of the votes including second preferences, 50.7 per cent to the opposition’s 49.3 per cent. Both the top two parties are negotiating with independent MPs, mostly from outback seats, to try and secure their support.

Australia’s [Alternative Vote system](#) operated as ever to strongly advantage the top two parties. Despite piling up 1.2 million out of 11 million votes, the Greens gained only one seat. The proportion of MPs sitting in the lower house who are not entitled to be there in terms of the first preference votes (the index of disproportionality) was nearly 16 per cent. This is a very high level cross-nationally, although it is less than the disproportionality score for Great Britain, which was 23 per cent in June 2010. In all, some 23 parties contested the Australian election, and the turnout (thanks to compulsory voting) was 75 per cent.

Australia’s relatively powerful upper house is the Senate, which is elected using the Single Transferable Vote. Here the Greens have so far won 6 seats on 13 per cent of the votes, with just over half the counts finished. The Greens should hold the balance in the Senate, completing a picture of a doubly hung Parliament.

Is this the death of the ‘Westminster model’?

For the first time in history, the Australian outcome means that every key ‘Westminster model’ country in the world now has a hung Parliament. These are the former British empire countries that according to decades of political science orthodoxy are supposed to produce strong, single party government. Following

Duverger's Law their allegedly 'majoritarian' electoral systems (first past the post and AV) will typically produce reinforced majorities for one of the top two parties.

But now the table below shows that four of the five key countries have coalition governments in balanced parliaments where no party has a majority. The one exception is Canada, where the Parliament has been hung since 2004, across three general elections. But somehow Canadian politicians have still not got [the knack of constructing a coalition government](#).

| Country (and population) | Current Parliamentary and government situation | Electoral reform position |
|--|--|---|
| India (1,187 million people) | -Hung parliament including a large number of parties (perhaps 45, depending how you count them). -The government is an 18 party coalition, headed by Congress; the rival BJP bloc also includes many parties. | -Political movements for the Dalit people ("untouchables") are campaigning for proportional representation, and reform is backed by the Indian Communist Party. However, electoral reform debates are still at an early stage. |
| United Kingdom (62 million people) | -Hung Parliament -A Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government is in power. | -A referendum on adopting the Alternative Vote electoral system will be held in May 2011. -The coalition government will announce plans for a wholly or mainly elected upper house, reforming the House of Lords, in January 2011. -PR elections are already in place for Scotland, Wales, London and electing Euro MEPs. |
| Canada (34 million people) | -Hung Parliament across three general elections -A Conservative minority government is in power. | -There have been significant efforts to change from FPTP elections to PR elections in several provinces, so far unsuccessful |
| Australia (22 million people) | -Hung Parliament and two top parties neck and neck - whoever forms the government will depend on the votes of Independent MPs | -The Alternative Vote is used for the lower house, and STV for upper house elections. |
| New Zealand (4.4 million people) | -A coalition government is in power, and no party has had a majority in balanced Parliaments since the voting system reform in 1996. | -New Zealand adopted an Additional Member system of PR in 1996, following two referendums for reform. |

These developments do not mean that the whole of the 'Westminster model' concept should be ditched quite yet though. Although [Duverger's Law is clearly dead](#), and the idea of using a voting system to artificially create Parliamentary majorities is on its deathbed. But in all five these countries, the executive is still in a powerful position relative to the legislature. This is especially true on budgeting issues, as a [new book](#) from [Joachim Wehner](#) clearly demonstrates.

Yet although 'Westminster model' countries continue to share a powerful institutional heritage, it seems doubtful that the electoral aspects of the model can ever be the same again. For the UK's forthcoming referendum on adopting the Alternative Vote, this recognition that the world as a whole is changing towards more complex and multi-party politics may sway some more voters and politicians towards backing reform.

Then again, since the Australian system, like 'first past the post' elections, has now failed to produce a clear electoral outcome, those who hanker after artificial majorities may take it as further reason for opposing change.

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