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**“Yes, the census”: The 2011 UK Referendum Campaign on the  
Alternative Vote.**

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**Abstract** For the Liberal Democrats, the debacle that was the AV Referendum campaign engendered demands from within the party for an official investigation into what was termed a ‘living nightmare’. However, utilising LeDuc’s conceptual map of the elements involved in a referendum campaign, in particular the role of the official groups, political parties, their leaders and the media, this article examines the AV Referendum campaign of 2011 and demonstrates that it was always likely that such a campaign would mirror the partisan bias found at that time. Thus, with a concomitant conservative bias towards the status quo for such plebiscitary questions, it shows that it should also have been obvious, not least to the Liberal Democrat party, that the goal of electoral reform, as refracted through such a referendum campaign, was doomed from the outset.

**Keywords:** Alternative Vote; referendum campaigns; coalition government; David Cameron; Nick Clegg; Ed Miliband

## Introduction

With just five full days of campaigning left before the actual Referendum on the Alternative Vote (AV), Evan Davis, the BBC Radio 4 Today presenter, asked a young group present at a 'Yes to Fairer Votes' campaign event if they knew what the 'Yes' stickers they had been given stood for and was given the reply: 'Yes, the census' (BBC Radio 4, 30 April 2011). In fact, there was a similarity with the colour scheme used by the group advocating a Yes vote in the AV referendum and for the Governmental census of that spring. However, this amusing exchange merely emphasised the lack of traction of such an issue for the British voting public and neatly encapsulated the less than compelling impact of the referendum campaign. On the day of the vote itself The Times considered the campaign 'dismal, disappointing and dishonest' and went on to say: 'The referendum of 1975 was an important argument about the future of the nation. The referendum of 2011 has been a local dispute among political obsessives with precious little purchase on the public' (5 May 2011).

Thus, on that Thursday, 5 May 2011, we had the second UK nationwide referendum campaign in British history. The first concerned the geo-political and economic future of the UK with its question of remaining within the European Community/Common Market (Butler and Kitzen, 1975). The second, the referendum on 'the parliamentary voting system (PVS) for the UK Parliament' but more commonly referred to as the AV referendum, would not have such momentous constitutional implications and the turnout of 42.2 per cent, compared to that of 64.5 per cent in 1975, was an indication of the level of concern shown with a question of whether the 'alternative vote' should replace the 'first past the post (FPTP)' system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. However, both referendums were promulgated for party political reasons and both were to be 'government inspired'. The first was proposed by the Labour government of the day as a remedy against the disintegration of the Cabinet and with it the possibility of the Labour party following suit. In contrast, the second was to allow for the formation of a government and one which would see a coalition of the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats. The coalition programme of May 2010 included the commitment to seek the opinion of the people on

such electoral reform and the necessary Act of Parliament received royal assent on the 16 February 2011. Unlike 1975, this Referendum would not be ‘consultative’ but ‘post legislative’ and would be binding upon Parliament; no doubt indicative of the level of trust to be found between the coalition parties on the subject, which would indeed become a prominent aspect of the campaign. Royal assent also triggered Electoral Commission oversight of the campaign under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA) and the on the 18 March the Commission duly designated ‘Yes to Fairer Votes’ and ‘No to AV’ as the two ‘lead campaign groups’ (HM Government, 2011; Electoral Commission, 2011a).

This article examines both these official campaign groups as major actors in the 2011 Referendum campaign but of course not in isolation from the other key actors, particularly those of the political parties, their leaders and the media. The first section utilises the conceptual map, as developed by LeDuc (for example, see LeDuc, 2002; 2007), to place such political elements of a referendum campaign in theoretical context. In short, this conceptual approach allows us to discern the extent to which the referendum topic will be judged on its merits or simply reflect the political battles inherent within an extant party divide. With this conceptual map in mind we see in section two the overly partisan bias of the official groups and their political affinity, in terms of personnel and approach, to the relevant Liberal Democrat and Conservative party positions. With coalition battle wounds so sensitive, open and raw on the AV question the position of the Labour party and the labour movement would be pivotal, and section three examines this position or more accurately the lack of it. Section four analyses the crucial role of the media in what became a campaign of the disaffected and disengaged; with its negative and cynical dynamic contributing to two thirds of the voters (67.9 per cent) rejecting the proposal to change the electoral system. But, first we begin by placing the campaign in ‘theoretical context’.

## **Political Elements in Theoretical Context**

One would expect a referendum campaign to differ markedly from that of a general election as the broad theme of the referendum campaign is defined a priori in the question put to the electorate; in this instance whether to adopt the Alternative Vote or to stick with the Single Member Plurality System (commonly known as First Past The Post). However, despite the apparent simplistic nature of the referendum vote (Yes or No), the campaign can often be as multi-faceted as a general election campaign with emerging sub-issues and tussles over issue ownership; to the extent that the question becomes entangled with other political factors, such as government popularity or the state of the economy, and as such takes on the characteristics of a ‘second order’ election (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004, pp. 174 and 3; LeDuc, 2007, p. 38). A fundamental question therefore arises of the extent of that entanglement. Is the campaign merely reflecting predisposed positions found in societal cleavages, party ideology and party policy or does the issue entail such a level of cross cutting properties that can make cues from the political parties either seem ambiguous or even redundant? If the latter, then one may expect a greater degree of volatility and uncertainty in a referendum campaign, with the campaign itself critical to the determination of the outcome. To address such questions LeDuc (2002, pp. 145-162) developed a conceptual map on which the familiar variables of an election campaign were rearranged to fit the more widely varying context of referendum voting and these elements have been adapted here, as set out in Figure 1, to reflect the major elements of the AV referendum.

### **Figure 1 about here**

In short, LeDuc argues that the closer a particular referendum campaign involves the elements moving towards the left hand side of Figure 1, the more foreseeable the outcome should be and the more limited (or reinforcing) the effects of the campaign. In contrast the more one moves along the continuum towards its right hand side, the greater the potential for volatility and the more unpredictable the outcome (ibid, p. 147). We shall see that ‘the elements’ in the AV Referendum strongly suggested ‘reinforcement not change’ and the more the campaign

progressed the further the movement was towards the left hand side of the continuum, with the debate increasingly being seen to reflect the concerns of the political parties. Indeed, as we shall see, by the ‘hot phase’ of the campaign, that is by its final month (de Vreese and Semetko, 2004, pp. 99 and 129), the media amplified the increasing political cynicism and negativity of the campaign groups and political parties and there is a substantial body of research to show that if the direction of movement in a campaign is negative then this benefits the No side who do not so much have to make a coherent positive case as to raise doubts and suspicions about the arguments being put forward by the Yes side in order to succeed (LeDuc, 2007, p. 32). Concomitantly, allied to such an advantage for the No side is the critique that referendums are instruments of ‘conservatism’ and thus will more often than not favour the status quo (Butler and Ranney, 1978, p. 219; 1994, p. 259). In the sections below, we see that these theoretical concerns underpin the examination of the crucial elements in the AV Referendum campaign, namely those in bold in Figure 1; the official campaign groups, the political parties; their leaders and the media, or more accurately the role of the press in the campaign.

However, before examining these crucial elements, we should note here the relevance of the ideological and core belief systems in Figure 1. The Labour party had flirted with changes to the electoral system since its inception in the early part of the twentieth century with the most recent being a proposal put forward for AV in the last weeks of Gordon Brown’s administration. Seen as a cynical electoral ploy, the Liberal Democrat leader Nick Clegg wanted no part in accepting these ‘crumbs from the Labour table’ and although he viewed AV as a ‘baby step in the right direction’ he stated that: ‘I am not going to settle for a miserable little compromise thrashed out by the Labour party’ (Helm, 2011). The refrain of ‘a miserable little compromise’ would subsequently permeate every aspect of the campaign. Liberal Democrats did indeed have an ideological core belief in electoral reform but this was for proportional representation. The Conservatives held a similar core belief in the status quo and often utilised the 1931 Churchill quote to claim that under AV, elections would be decided by the ‘most worthless votes given for the most worthless candidates’ (Warsi, 2011). Thus, the AV referendum that was to ‘seal the deal’ for a coalition government was between a party who did not believe in it but would take a ‘baby step in the right direction’ and a party that was overwhelmingly against but in return would

advantageously obtain a reduction in the number of MPs in the House of Commons (to 600) through the creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies; with both sides of the coalition being free to campaign for their respective positions (HM Govt, 2010, p. 27). This then was the backdrop as the different ‘elements’ engaged in the 2011 referendum campaign and the following section examines the official campaign groups in relation to the role of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties.

### **Designated Malevolence: the Coalition at War**

The quid pro quo of the coalition deal on AV then was as much a cynical political ploy as Gordon Brown’s eleventh hour conversion to the virtues of that electoral system. There are vices as well as virtues to be found in all electoral systems (for example, see Farrell, 2011) but a perception of cynical political intrigue would be exacerbated by the amount of negativity emanating from both the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns on their opponents’ vices; or what more accurately may be termed the stress placed upon ‘vices by proxy’. As we shall see in this section, the designated official campaign groups, ‘Yes to Fairer Votes’ and ‘No to AV’, appeared less interested in enlightening the public on the technical details of the competing electoral systems than emphasising the vices associated with individual politicians. This is important, if indeed not crucial, as the official groups who were ostensibly cross party entities, were in reality more the extended weapons of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties. Firstly, no leading Conservatives<sup>1</sup> campaigned for the Yes side and there were no Liberal Democrats advocating a No vote in the referendum. There were prominent Labour party people connected to both of the official campaign groups but in the main these were to be found acting in a deputy role to the main players. For example, a vice chair of the Yes group was the comedian/actor Eddie Izzard, who had ‘fronted’ some of the Labour party’s election broadcasts of 2010. And, Joan Ryan, an erstwhile vice chair of the Labour party, was a deputy campaign director for the No side. But, essentially the foremost spokespersons of these campaign groups would be strongly associated with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats and importantly, the funding for both groups would similarly be overly dependent on such connections.

From early in the campaign the No group placed great emphasis upon the Lib Dem connections to the Yes side, claiming that five out of six members of the Yes steering committee had worked for or supported the Liberal Democrat party in the recent past (Wintour and Watt, 2011). The Chair of the Yes campaign group, Katie Ghose, was the chief executive of the Electoral Reform Society (ERS), which of course shared many of the Liberal Democrat aims for electoral reform. And, along with one of the leading contributors of funds for the Lib Dems, the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust (JRRT), the ERS contributed £909,517 to the designated Yes campaign group, which was just short of the largest donation of £951,000 by the JRRT itself. To put this in perspective, these two donations would amount to 87 per cent of the Yes group's total expenditure (Electoral Commission, 2012, p. 35). Moreover, the lead advertising agency employed by the Yes side was the Iris agency, with the Independent newspaper reporting that Iris had landed the Yes contract after winning plaudits for its work for the Liberal Democrats at the last election, particularly with its mocking of the similarities of the two major parties as the 'Labservatives' (30 March 2011). Conversely, that newspaper also reported that the No campaign group had hired the Edinburgh ad agency, 'Family', which previously had contracts with the Scottish Tories (ibid). And, whether it was the Tory master tactician, Stephen Gilbert, taking effective control of the No campaign, while the party's co-chair Lord Feldman mobilised the party donors (Coates and Asthana, 2011), or it was the Media Intelligence Partners agency, with its strong links to the Conservative party and its representation on behalf of right wing groups that had turned the campaign around to the benefit of the No side (Scotland on Sunday 1 May 2011), there was no doubting the strong connections between the Conservative party and the official No campaign group. The Guardian revealed the extent of 'Tory money' that was funding the No to AV campaign (3 May 2011) and we should note that Matthew Elliot, its Campaign Director, who was the founder of the neo-liberal pressure group, 'Taxpayers' Alliance', was also a contributor to the Conservative Home website. Interestingly, after the success of the No campaign there was a strong rumour in Westminster that Elliott would be appointed as David Cameron's director of strategy on the departure of Steve Hilton (see the Guardian and Telegraph 19 April 2012). Little wonder then that the Liberal Democrat Minister Chris Huhne, a month before the actual vote, could accuse the No campaign of being a front for the Conservative party (The Observer 3 April 2011).



Of course, the AV referendum campaign was held in a period of austerity, with a rather impaired state of the economy. However, one full year into coalition government and Labour was still perceived as being mostly to blame for the economic malaise (for example, see the *New Statesman* 26 May 2011). In addition, the referendum was part of a package of political reform that was deemed necessary by the coalition to address the issue of parliamentarians being held in such low regard by the public (for example, see Hay, 2007 and Stoker, 2006 for an examination of such trends); with trust in politicians at depressed levels in light of the expenses scandals and other assorted stories of sleaze. The aim of such government actions was to enhance the transparency of government and parliament and to establish greater accountability of parliamentarians (HM Government, 2010, pp. 26-28). In this instance though, the state of the economy and government actions would not be facilitators of ‘volatility’ by moving the campaign towards the right hand side of Figure 1 and thus aiding an open and thorough examination of the issue of the UK voting system but would in effect, be subsumed in what became campaign warfare between the groups, parties and leaders of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. If anything the state of the economy, or who was to blame for it, helped the Conservatives and the issue of trust was to be quickly utilised as a weapon against the Liberal Democrats and by association against a ‘yes vote’. Thus, the campaign itself highlighted predisposed party positions and would resemble the negativity of an election campaign.

Yet it all began ever so brightly for the Yes campaign with polls indicating a considerable lead over the No side; by an average of ten percentage points in February 2011 (Qvortrup, 2012, p. 114). The major theme of the Yes campaign was predicated upon resentment towards the expenses scandals<sup>2</sup>. It made the claim that AV ‘would make your MP work harder’ as it would put an end to safe seats and that it would lessen the occurrence of such scandals as MPs would be less likely to abuse their expenses if they had to get half of the people in their area to support them. As we will see below, current and former MPs bitterly resented this approach and such tenuous causation was to be an easy target for the opponents of AV, with *The Times* viewing the delicious irony of a campaign that promised fresh air and sunlight and more honesty in politics by deploying such dishonest arguments (19 April 2011). There was a similar irony to be had in

the Liberal Democrats accusing Labour of ‘student politics’, with Ed Miliband refusing to share a platform with Nick Clegg (more of which in the following section), while the first Yes to AV campaign broadcast seemed the epitome of the worst kind of puerile student politics. In this bizarre campaign broadcast a series of younger looking voters abuse a number of MPs, who are presented as lazy, duplicitous and corrupt, by shouting at them via a loudhailer; the most eccentric of which has the woman MP being abused in this way by a young man from a passing car (see BBC News, 12 April, 2011). Early in the campaign the Yes side basked in the celebrity endorsement of two of the stars of the hit movie, *The King’s Speech*. These actors, Helena Bonham-Carter and Colin Firth, were viewed as prominent Liberal Democrats but Firth qualified his support by saying ‘that the coalition’s spending cuts meant he could no longer give the party his backing’ (BBC News, 15 February 2011).

We will see that the No campaign would exploit ruthlessly this unpopularity of the Liberal Democrat party, particularly by playing the ‘Clegg Card’ but it also effectively utilised issue ownership of the argument for economic rectitude in the ‘climate of austerity’. Mindful of the state of the economy, there was an extremely effective alarmist theme of the ‘£250 million real cost of AV’, with the deployment also of a sub set of ‘opportunity cost’ posters that pictured a variety of cases, one was of an old age pensioner with the caption ‘she needs home help not an alternative voting system’ or the ill baby in an incubator that needed ‘a new cardiac facility’ not AV or indeed the soldier who would benefit more by satisfying his need for ‘bulletproof vests’. Instructive, in terms of reinforcing that movement towards the left hand side of our conceptual map in Figure 1, David Blunkett, the former Labour Home Secretary, on the day of the referendum admitted that the £250 million claim was an example of an exaggeration that was common to all elections but that undoubtedly AV would cost more, he believed that this would be in the region of £90 million (The Times 5 May 2011). The No side had calculated the £250 million cost of an alternative electoral system on the need for sophisticated electronic counting machines due to the complexities of multiple-choice voting slips; and not for the first time Chris Huhne, the then Energy and Climate Change Minister, intervened with an extraordinary threat to sue his fellow Cabinet members over what he termed these ‘untruths’ (Sunday Telegraph 1 May 2011). Such coalition ruptures were exacerbated by Chancellor George Osborne echoing the No

side allegation that of course the providers of these electronic machines would benefit, namely the Electoral Reform Society. He voiced the opinion that the link between the ERS and the Yes campaign ‘really stinks’ and that it was just such behind the scenes dodgy shenanigans that undermined the trust in politics and politicians (see *The Independent* 14 April 2011). However, when that issue of trust was unambiguously directed at the Liberal Democrats, the rising level of rancour and enmity between the coalition partners was clear for all to see; particularly in relation to the character assassination of Nick Clegg.

Of course, at the 2010 general election Clegg’s popularity had soared in line with his performances in the television debates. Adding further weight to the candidate centric personalisation of politics thesis for the UK (Mughan, 2000; Poguntke and Webb, 2005), ‘Cleggmania’ had seen his approval rating reach an almost unprecedented post war level of 72 per cent, with only Churchill being more popular on 83 per cent. In the TV debates Clegg portrayed himself as the representative of a new politics of trust and exploited the national mood of anger over the parliamentary expenses scandal with references to the culpability of the ‘old parties’ (Seawright, 2012). But, just one year on and we see just how fickle such popularity based on the personalisation approach to politics can be, the Liberal Democrats had lost nigh on ten per cent of its vote, while the net approval rating for Clegg was now at rock bottom levels on minus 18 per cent (*The Guardian* 20 June 2011). This precipitous fall in the level of ‘trust’ for Clegg and the Lib Dems was due to the putative volt face on policy when forming the coalition; inter alia, accepting an increase in VAT and the reduction of public spending levels but most damaging of all was the increase in university tuition fees with so many Lib Dems previously photographed with a ‘pledge to vote against any increase in fees’. Early in the campaign, the person who ran the successful No to the North East Assembly campaign believed that the No side should be all over Clegg if they wanted to win as he was ‘associated with everything that people currently distrust about politicians. It may be unfair but that is reality’ (BBC News, 15 February, 2011). And, the No to AV campaign was to resolutely prosecute such a ‘reality’.

The No side made sure that the issue of the Alternative Vote would inextricably be linked to those perceived failings of Nick Clegg, indeed a huge part of the No to AV publicity was by way of the ‘unwitting proxy’ of Nick Clegg. He appeared on much of the literature and leaflets. For example, there was the almost ubiquitous picture of Clegg holding the pledge for ‘Funding Our Future’ which of course was not to raise tuition fees and usually an attendant claim was one of ‘AV leads to broken promises’. And, there was the claim that ‘AV would lead to more hung parliaments and backroom deals, this time the picture was of Clegg patting Cameron on the back as they entered Number 10 Downing Street but as he does so Clegg looks back to the camera with what appears to be a knowing, guileful expression. Another humorous presentation in poster and leaflet form was the use of the newspaper front page headline - one uncannily similar to the Guardian – that declared: ‘new voting system saves President Clegg: Lib Dem poll collapse offset by AV gains’; a question over the future under AV is then answered with ‘don’t let the Lib Dems off the hook’. Moreover, in contrast to the rather amateurish first campaign broadcast from the Yes side, the No campaign’s was far more professional, utilising Rik Mayall’s Alan B’Stard creation. This Thatcherite but subsequently New Labour character, who acknowledges no boundaries to the pursuit of power, is filmed on the stump making a series of outrageous election promises, one of which of course ‘is no more tuition fees’, before later being seen to throw the manifesto in a fire, with the quip that ‘with AV even if they don’t vote for me, I’ll probably get in’. Such a scenario is then reinforced by the No side’s oft-repeated imagery of the puzzlement engendered by the person finishing third in a race actually being declared the winner (see BBC News, 12 April, 2011). In the candidate centric, personalised campaigns of the United States the reasons for the dominance of such negative campaigning are fully understood (Jameison, 1992). Negative advertisements are more effective as they are more memorable in the sense that people process negative information more deeply and as they are usually more creative, with an added spice, people want to see them again. But importantly, they are usually also humorous as laughter is not only disarming making negative messages more powerful but it helps to avoid a backlash from the electorate for such negativity in the first place (Devlin, 1995, pp. 198-199). It seems apparent that the No campaign team were well aware of the utility of their negative approach.

However, the Liberal Democrats were less than amused, with some even incandescent with rage. When the Conservative Chairman, Baroness Warsi, claimed that AV would lead to mainstream parties pandering to extremists like the British National Party (BNP), Chris Huhne accused his fellow Cabinet member of descending into Goebbels like propaganda. But, in an even more astonishing break with Cabinet etiquette he took the No to AV ‘Nick Clegg leaflets’ to Cabinet and demanded that the Prime Minister and Chancellor disassociate themselves from them. The Chancellor, George Osborne, reminded him that it was a Cabinet meeting and thus the subject was not appropriate for it, that Cabinet was not a forum for ‘some sub-Jeremy Paxman interview’ (The Times 4 May 2011). As is the way of British party politics, Huhne’s publicly reported exasperation was interpreted as a bid for the Lib Dem leadership but there is no doubting the enthusiasm, if rather effusive, with which he previously approached the subject at the time of the coalition negotiations. ‘Chris Huhne, however, argued that the AV prize was worth taking a risk for: “Remember if we secure AV, this will be a dramatic breakthrough in the history of the party”’ (Laws, 2010, p. 121). Leading Liberal Democrats were also furious with David Cameron for reneging on a deal that would have seen both him and Nick Clegg keeping a very low profile in the campaign. But, Cameron had to face the fury of his own backbenchers and after a meeting of the 1922 Committee he was left in no doubt that his own position as leader could be in doubt if the vote went the other way. “Short term marriages of convenience with the Lib Dems were not considered important enough to allow changes to the constitution to go through”, one of those present recalls’ (Coates and Asthana, 2011). Undoubtedly, Cameron acknowledged this level of 1922 concern, with there being little coincidence that he would later become a very effective campaigner on behalf of the No vote and that he did turn a blind eye to the personal attacks on Clegg. Reassurance may have been given to Huhne, at the Cabinet table, that Cameron only had responsibility for the ‘Conservative no campaign’ and not for the actions of the official campaign group (The Times 4 May 2011) but publicity material bearing the Conservative tree logo was just as ruthless in exploiting the ‘issue of Clegg’. To choose just one instance from many, there was the ‘alternative comedy’ poster that hilariously caricatured Clegg as Tommy Cooper garbed in the obligatory fez with the rhetorical caption of ‘What a joke’, one that would have AV ‘encourage a future of weak governments’ (see The Independent 14 April 2011). The irony was not lost on leading Lib Dems in the Cabinet with Vince Cable, in light of the actual

vote, calling the Conservatives ‘ruthless, calculating and thoroughly tribal’ (Sunday Telegraph 8 May 2011).

Lib Dem naivety is manifestly encapsulated in such a statement, as Conservative strategists in gauging the effectiveness of their own electoral machine would most likely accept such remarks as complimentary. But, the evidential account as delineated above leaves no doubt to the extent of acrimony and bitterness held between the coalition partners in the AV campaign; between the parties, their leaders and the campaign groups with their close bonds to each party. Such predisposed party positions left less scope for uncertainty in the campaign itself and clearly demonstrated ‘these elements’ moving inexorably towards the left hand side of our conceptual map. However, with the positions of the Conservative and Liberal Democrat elements clearly demarcated, that of the Labour party would be pivotal and this is examined in the following section.

### **Pivotal Party**

Of the three main parties the Labour party was the only one who, in their 2010 general election manifesto, had actually advocated the introduction of AV: however exiguous the references to it may have been (Labour Party, 2010). Crucially though, the Party and the labour movement were unquestionably split on the issue with a majority firmly ensconced in the NO camp. The month prior to the actual vote The Times ran with the front page headline ‘Labour split as MPs revolt over voting reform’, with David Blunkett claiming that the ‘No campaign had the support of four out of five Labour councillors, thousands of party activists and 131 MPs, a majority of Mr Miliband’s 258 strong parliamentary party’ (27 April 2011). And, importantly, the Labour MPs who had bothered to declare their allegiance to the Yes side did so with a less than enthusiastic display of support; with even the Labour leader Ed Miliband listing his priorities as ‘elections to English councils, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh assembly and then – and only then – AV’ (ibid). It was also reported that most trade union leaders would campaign to keep the first past

the post system (BBC News, 11 March, 2011). The effect and extent of this split is reflected in the fact that the Labour party did not register as a permitted participant (Electoral Commission, 2011b, p. 99), and as a party did not spend anything on the campaign; compare this to the expenditure of £660,785 by the Conservatives and £62,782 for the Lib Dems (Electoral Commission, 2012, P. 33: footnote 44 for ‘campaigner spending’). However, the organisations ‘Labour No to AV’ and ‘Labour Yes’ registered as permitted participants. The ‘Labour No to AV’ expenditure was £192,084 but remarkably, like the Labour party itself, ‘Labour Yes’ did not spend anything which is rather indicative of the level of commitment to the cause; indeed, again in comparison the near invisible ‘Conservative Yes’ campaign group could manage to spend £6576 (ibid). But more problematic for the Yes campaign, than the level of Labour expenditure or the half-hearted commitment of some of its MPs, was the refusal of the Labour leader to share a platform with Nick Clegg.

As leader of one of the two largest parties, Ed Miliband would be a key element of the Yes campaign. However, by declaring that Clegg could not help win the referendum and that consequently he would not share a platform with him merely affirmed the No campaign theme of duplicity. On 15 March, Miliband withdrew from a Yes to Fairer Votes event when Clegg insisted on taking part; with Miliband stating: ‘What is the problem with Nick Clegg? Where do you start? He was the person who promised new politics. And the brief bout of Cleggmania there was, was supposed to be about new politics. I’m afraid he has become the exemplar of old politics; of breaking your promises’ (The Independent 15 March 2011). The counter claim by a Lib Dem source that this was ‘student politics’ (ibid) undoubtedly highlighted the divisions in the Yes camp and of course at subsequent events, whichever leading Liberal Democrat was present on the platform with Miliband, be it Vince Cable, Charles Kennedy, Tim Farron or Chris Huhne, the story would inevitably be focused on the one who was missing. Indeed, the No side had some great fun with this, sending along to such events a group with Nick Clegg facemasks to hold aloft placards with the plea ‘Let me in – it’s my referendum’. Rachel Sylvester criticised Miliband’s behaviour for ‘not rising above the traditional party tribes’; which adds weight to the claim that the campaign resolutely reflected more the partisan politics at the left hand side of our spectrum in Figure1 than the actual question of changing the electoral system. She also reported

that Miliband had reneged on a promise to stand alongside Clegg to promote the cause of voting reform (Sylvester, 2011). To paraphrase Wilde, it may have been regarded as a misfortune for Clegg to have one of the other leaders renege on a promise but to have them both looks more like carelessness. If the 'Labour Yes' campaign was to have this sense of ambivalence, the 'Labour No to AV' evinced no such ambiguity, mercilessly associating AV with the pledges Nick Clegg failed to keep.

The Labour No campaign adopted all the 'pictorial narratives' of Clegg that were utilised by the official No campaign group, stressing that AV would lead to more hung parliaments and backroom deals and with them more broken promises, so the message was clear 'tell Nick Clegg No'. But, there was also the luxury of a full frontal assault on the coalition per se and in this approach the leading Lib Dems were presented alongside Cameron and Osborne. The line taken was that Clegg, Cable and Huhne were responsible for propping up a Tory led government and thus were responsible for the increase in VAT to 20 per cent and for the increase in tuition fees to £9,000, along with the scrapping of the educational maintenance allowance; which for the Labour No campaign unequivocally rubbished any claim by the Lib Dems to be 'progressive'. Conversely, the Labour politicians on the No side showed no reluctance to share a platform with leading Conservatives in defence of the first past the post system. One of the most prominent of these events was on the 18 April when David Cameron and the erstwhile Labour Cabinet minister, John Reid, displayed a very effective double act which reached right across the class divide. Reid, as the Labour working class street fighter was a perfect foil for Cameron and in his speech he effectively undermined much of the specious argument for AV; inter alia humorously pointing out that he was yet to see any of those MPs advocating AV step forward to say they're the one who is not working hard enough (Sky News, 18 April 2011). In stark contrast, at 'a parallel event in Westminster by the pro-AV campaign, Mr Miliband conceded that other issues mattered more than AV. He was standing alongside Vince Cable, the Lib Dem Business Secretary, who watched as Mr Miliband attacked Nick Clegg as a "vote loser" for the campaign' (The Times 19 April 2011).



With the Liberal Democrat and Conservative parties, and their leaders, firmly entrenched on each side of the debate, Ed Miliband's and the Labour party's position would be pivotal to the outcome of the referendum. Typical levels of electoral support for the parties would mean the Yes side needed a considerable share of the Labour support to be successful. But, in an academic survey it was clear that: 'being a Conservative identifier reduced the likelihood of a Yes vote, whereas identifying with the Liberal Democrats increased it. Also, and perhaps indicative of the divisions within the party, Labour identifiers were less likely than non-identifiers to vote yes' (Whiteley et al, 2012, p. 314). Undoubtedly, for Labour as well as for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, the campaign reflected partisan cues in terms of movement towards the left hand side of the continuum in Figure 1; indeed, a post referendum analysis by the Liberal Democrats was in no doubt that the campaign allowed Labour 'to kick the party twice' (Liberal Democrats, 2011, p. 7). To this end this article has demonstrated the inherent partisan nature of the campaign debate in each of the elements: the official campaign groups, the parties and their leaders. With the remaining campaign element of the media in mind, the next section gauges by how much it was a forum within which balanced judgements could be developed on the actual issue of electoral reform or the extent to which it would merely mirror those partisan positions.

### **Crystallising Agendas: The Media**

In studies of campaign news a theoretical distinction between a sacerdotal and pragmatic approach is often applied (see de Vreese and Semetko, 2004, pp. 67-69). The sacerdotal approach is one of viewing the campaign as fundamental to the democratic polity and thus the coverage is considered newsworthy per se with a respectful attitude taken towards the political participants, whereas in a pragmatic approach the coverage has to be evaluated against conventional news selection and the campaign is not automatically given special attention (ibid, p. 68). The media approach in the AV referendum campaign was one of pragmatism, with other news stories considered more newsworthy than politicians squabbling over an issue of little public interest. Whiteley et al show that only small numbers of people monitored the campaign closely, with only 8 per cent paying a great deal of attention to the campaign in newspapers and

10 per cent on television or radio (2012, p. 311). And, what is not in doubt is the level of negativity associated with the campaign; 60 per cent agreed that there was a ‘lot of mud-slinging’ with only 10 per cent disagreeing (ibid, p. 317). Of course, in the UK the broadcast media are expected to abide by their charters in implementing a policy of impartiality and political balance but there is no such requirement of the printed press. It is therefore possible, in examining the editorial approach of the newspapers, to gauge the extent to which we can confirm or refute the idea that the referendum campaign was indeed more a reflection of the existing political divide than any process of educating and informing the public on the actual merits of competing electoral systems. And, in Table 1 the partisan basis of the campaign is demonstrated by a comparison of the newspaper’s declared stance on the referendum with its partisanship at the previous general election.

### **Table 1 about here**

From Table 1 it is immediately apparent that there is a very strong correlation with a national newspaper’s endorsement of the Liberal Democrats or Conservatives at the 2010 general election and its respective declared support for a Yes or No vote in the referendum campaign. The left-liberal press who endorsed the Liberal Democrat party in 2010 unanimously encouraged its readers to vote for a change to the electoral system in 2011. Conversely, there is near unanimous support for a No vote from the Conservative supporting newspapers of 2010. The only deviation is that of the Financial Times but this pro-European newspaper was certainly not typical of the Tory press and it had supported the Labour party at the previous four general elections prior to 2010. The Trinity Mirror Group newspapers’ commitment to Labour at election time is long standing and although both papers declared for a ‘yes vote’ they also exhibited the ambivalent approach of a divided Labour party. For example, on the day before the actual referendum the Daily Mirror opined that if it had its way there would be no referendum as there were more important issues to be addressed; before proceeding to attack Nick Clegg for broken promises but the real target appeared to be Cameron who wanted a ‘No’ because he knows a ‘Yes’ would brand him a double-loser after failing to win the General Election outright’ (4 May 2011). By no

stretch of the imagination then could this be accepted as a fulsome endorsement of a Yes vote. And of the newspapers on the Yes side The Mirror and Sunday Mirror had the most impressive circulation and readership figures but even with them they were still dwarfed by those Tory supporting papers that were resolutely committed to a No vote. De Vreese makes the point that a referendum campaign is potentially more unpredictable if the journalists involved, in respect to party positioning, may not be clear on the parameters of the two camps (2007, p. 13). But the evidence from Table 1 clearly shows once again, this time in relation to the newspaper element, that the ‘campaign movement’ is away from unpredictability and volatility towards the left hand side of DeLuc’s conceptual map; as the journalists were indeed fully cognizant of the parameters of the two camps in the AV referendum campaign.

The reporting of the campaign by the broadcast media may well have been impartial but if the negative stories are the ones that catch the eye then those are the ones that will be prioritised by the broadcast news; in effect crystallising partisan agendas. For example, it would be almost impossible for any news outlet to ignore such stories suggestive of a ‘Nazi slur’; particular when Cabinet members aim them at each other. There was the ‘benefit to the BNP’/‘Goebbels like behaviour’ row between Warsi and Huhne and later Nick Clegg would compare the Tories to the BNP while criticising ‘the very nastiest reactionary politics’ of the No campaign (The Times 25 April 2011). But, it would be the ‘Yes to Fairer Votes’ side who would utilise a poster of the BNP leader with the caption ‘Say No to the BNP, vote Yes on May 5<sup>th</sup>’. And, even the Liberal Democrats acknowledged the shortcomings of the Yes campaign: ‘the “people vs. politicians” approach alienated politicians and activists and failed to resonate with the broadcasters’ (Liberal Democrats, 2011, p. 7). The BBC reported the backlash from a number of Labour MPs who felt insulted and angry at the way MPs were portrayed as lazy and corrupt (BBC News, 14 April, 2011). The comments from Jim Dowd, a former Labour whip, are indicative of how such an approach backfired when he stated that ‘he was going to back AV but now would not after a “Yes” campaign leaflet suggested that AV was required to end Westminster corruption’ (The Times 27 April 2011). Moreover, there was just so much more conventional news selection that would be considered more newsworthy and thus in a ‘pragmatic approach’ would displace the AV campaign from the headlines and undermine any claim on its behalf for special attention.

The Liberal Democrats or the Yes campaign could not legislate for the Christchurch and then Japan earthquakes and the effects of the tsunami on the nuclear reactors which received the greater share of media attention through February and April nor indeed for the killing of Osama Bin Laden by the Americans which would be the prime news item for the days leading up to the referendum vote. But, one could be aware of the Royal Wedding of ‘William and Kate’ the weekend before the vote, as this was confirmed the previous November and yet the Liberal Democrats pushed for a date for the referendum which would clash with one of the most newsworthy and traditionalist of constitutional ceremonies and which was in reality a gift for the side advocating ‘No to change’. Thus, like many other aspects of the referendum campaign as outlined above, the Lib Dems misjudged its ‘pragmatic nature’ and the extent to which the media would crystallise partisan agendas.

## **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of a lamentable campaign, the Liberal Democrats launched an official enquiry and moved to distance themselves from what was described as a ‘living nightmare’. The Party’s president, Tim Farron, said: ‘Clearly we were not in total control of the Yes campaign, but it is clear lessons have to be learnt’ (The Guardian 28 June 2011). But, the evidence presented in this article strongly suggests lessons could have been learnt beforehand from the elements in Le Duc’s conceptual map and with the necessary foresight many of the pitfalls that ensnared the Liberal Democrats and the Yes campaign, particularly in relation to timing of the campaign and the predictability of the media’s pragmatic approach, could have been avoided. There appeared the unnecessary rush to hold the referendum as quickly as possible with one leading Conservative dismissing Lib Dem complaints of the campaign with the statement: ‘We gave them the referendum, we gave them the date they asked for’ (The Guardian 6 May 2011). Such haste could be discerned in the coalition negotiations: ‘But the issue for us was what our bottom-line negotiating position should be. And the majority of us believed that voting reform had to be key to any coalition agreement’ (Laws, 2011, p. 19). It was thought that holding the referendum on the same day as the local and ‘devolved’ elections would boost turnout but as with events like

the Royal Wedding, this merely added to the pragmatic nature of a campaign which lost the special attention needed for an issue which did not rank high in voters' priorities. And crucially, we saw that the media merely crystallised what was in effect existing partisan agendas.

De Vreese emphasised that in the planning of national referendum campaigns the political parties faced internal strategic choices about who would be visible in the campaign as such personalities 'mostly come with their own connotations, be they positive or negative' (2007, p. 10). By the time the Referendum Bill passed through the House of Commons it must have been apparent even to the Liberal Democrats that their party's and particularly Nick Clegg's levels of unpopularity would be 'a negative' for the Yes side and yet still they pushed for an early vote. Undoubtedly the No to AV side ran a more efficient and effective campaign which may be discerned in the amount of literature that was mailed 'free of charge' by the Royal Mail for both campaigns. The total expenditure by the lead No campaign group was £2.6m compared to the Yes group expenditure of £2.1m but remarkably the cost of free mailings as billed by the Royal Mail was £6.7m for the No campaign compared to just £1.5m for the Yes campaign (Electoral Commission, 2012, pp. 35 and 37). And, although it was highly unlikely that many voters would be ignorant of where Nick Clegg stood in the campaign, the Guardian reported that in a poll a day before the actual vote only 25 per cent of voters knew which way Eddie Izzard, the Yes campaign's most high-profile celebrity backer, intended to vote (4 May 2011). Of course, the No side's more effective message benefited from the partisan nature of the campaign divide. We have seen how the elements of the AV referendum campaign, the official groups, the parties, their leaders and the media, all suggested a reinforcement of a campaign located at the left hand side of the continuum of Figure 1, with the referendum debate increasingly being seen to reflect the concerns of the political parties and not an enlightenment of the merits of competing electoral systems. Indeed, the Liberal Democrats could have been aware of LeDuc's earlier analyses and his prognosis that the most volatile referendum campaigns are likely to be those in which there is little partisan basis, where voters from the other side can be won over but if a campaign turns into a partisan fight it was usually the larger party that had the better chance of prevailing (2007, p. 41). In this sense the Labour party was pivotal to the referendum outcome but again, as outlined above, the Liberal Democrats could have foreseen the hostility towards Nick Clegg by

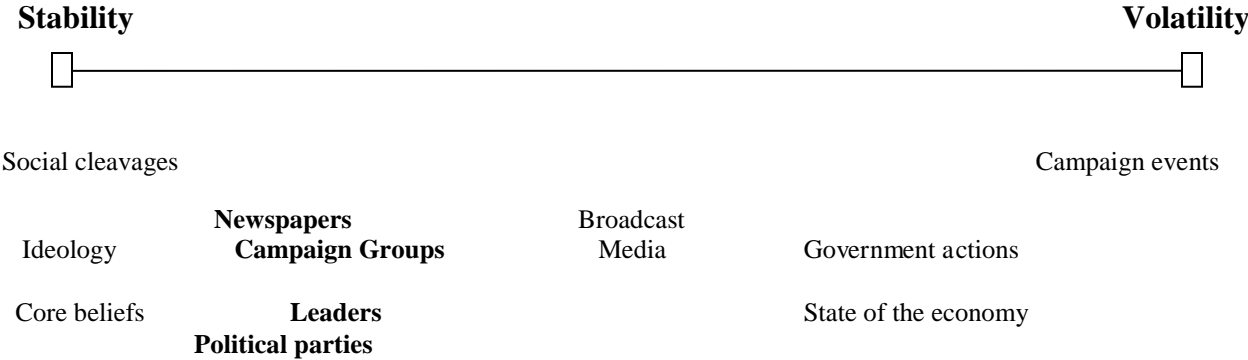
both the Labour Yes group as well as the Labour No campaign. And, with the bias towards the status quo in such plebiscites, before embarking upon an early referendum campaign the Liberal Democrats should have made themselves acquainted with the related prognostication, that:

The political advantage in referendum campaigns too often seems to rest with the No side. Those opposed to a proposal do not necessarily have to make a coherent case against it. It is often enough simply to raise doubts about it in the minds of voters, question the motives of the proposers, play upon known fears, or attempt to link a proposal to other less popular issues or personalities (LeDuc, 2007, p. 42).

Little wonder then that the Liberal Democrats have resolutely eschewed any notion of a referendum for the constitutional proposal to change the structure and composition of the House of Lords and there are also lessons to be learnt here for Conservative euro-sceptics with an eye to an ‘in-out’ referendum on the European Union.

**Figure and Table**

**Figure 1. Elements of the 2011 AV Referendum campaign leading towards stability or volatility.**



Source: adapted from Le Duc, 2002, p. 147.

**Table 1 Declaration in Referendum, partisanship at 2010 general election and the circulation/readership of the national Daily and Sunday Newspapers.**

	Preferred winner		Circulation (000s)	Readership (000s)
	2011	2010		
Sun	No	Con	2,780	7,722
News of the World	No	Con	2,617	7,455
Mail	No	Con	1,938	4,775
Mail on Sunday	No	Con	1,729	4,844
Express	No	Con	613	1,488
Sunday Express	No	Con	518	1,470
Telegraph	No	Con	685	1,693
Sunday Telegraph	No	Con	474	1,422
Times	No	Con	445	1,504
Sunday Times	No	Con	908	2,872
Financial Times	Yes	Con	110	367
Mirror	Yes	Lab	1,096	3,163
Sunday Mirror	Yes	Lab	1,036	3,642
Guardian	Yes	Lib Dem	253	1,154
Observer	Yes	Lib Dem	289	1,081
Independent	Yes	Lib Dem	158	562
Independent on Sunday	Yes	Lib Dem	127	518

Source: Figures for Circulation are from Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) May 2011 and readership figures are for the 12 months to March 2011 from the National Readership Survey, Press Gazette, 7 June 2011 and see Scammell and Becket (2010, pp. 281-282).

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> There was a 'Conservative Yes' campaign group but it was extremely small with mainly the support of a few local councillors. It was registered as an unincorporated association with the Electoral Commission and it spent £6,576 in the campaign, see Electoral Commission, 2012, p. 33, footnote 44, for the campaigner spending at the referendum on the AV system.

<sup>2</sup> See BBC News, for a full explanation of the 2009 expenses scandals which had an adverse political impact well into 2010 and beyond, at: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in\\_depth/uk\\_politics/2009/mps'\\_expenses/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/in_depth/uk_politics/2009/mps'_expenses/default.stm).