

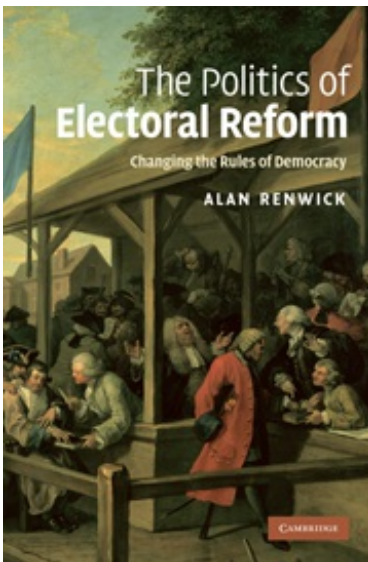
Book Review: Ready for the referendum? An essential guide to electoral reform | British Politics and Policy at LSE

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/03/06/book-review-the-politics-of-electoral-reform/?pfstyle=w p>

March 9, 2011

Patrick Dunleavy finds essential reading for academics in the run up to the AV referendum in Alan Renwick's recent book.

The Politics of Electoral Reform: Changing the rules of democracy. By Alan Renwick. Cambridge University Press. February 2010.



Many liberal democracies change their electoral systems rarely, but a few do it all the time. Why is there this divergence? And what kinds of electoral reforms succeed, while others fail to ever get implemented, or loiter in the long grass for decades before finally being enacted? There could be no more relevant questions for the UK, first, because we have implemented a lot of incubated electoral reforms already since 1997 – think of the proportional representation systems now used for the [Scottish Parliament](#), [Welsh National Assembly](#), the [Greater London Assembly](#), electing Britain's [MEPs](#), and Scottish and [Northern Ireland local government](#), plus the [Supplementary Vote](#) for electing London's mayor. But second, of course, we have our first national referendum since 1975 on introducing the [Alternative Vote](#) in May this year, and sometime this year should find out how the coalition government proposes that we elect some of most members of a reformed House of Lords or Senate.

[Alan Renwick's](#) approach is to look at six overseas changes of electoral systems, three of them being detailed cases of what he calls 'majority elite imposition', where the ruling party or coalition bloc forces basically partisan changes on the majority of voters (with some constraints). The cases are the repeated changes of the parliamentary system in France, notably under Mitterand; the 2005 change of the electoral system in Italy by Berlusconi, to a kind of majoritarian top-up for a PR election (along with much tweaking of the post-war PR system from the 1940s to the 1980s); and in Japan the long post-war persistence of a unique system that sustained the dominance of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). (The system is called 'Single Non-transferable vote' for real enthusiasts).

He matches these with three detailed case studies of what he calls 'elite-mass interaction', where essentially changes were forced on all ruling politicians as a group, either in an acute or an incubated way, by citizens voting for different parties and vocally pressing for reforming change. Here he covers the 1991 and 1993 referendums where voters changed Italy's corrupt post-war PR system into a modified mixed system (with mostly majoritarian elections plus some top up seats); the 1994 adoption of a mixed system in Japan, following some LDP weakness and voter disenchantment; and the 1992 and 1993 referendums that changed New Zealand to what is called an 'Additional Member System' in the UK, (and is called 'Mixed Member Proportional' everywhere else).

Renwick concludes that the majority elite imposition way of doing things has *perhaps* been getting harder to do over time in mature liberal democracies – because public interest discourses and considerations are increasingly better understood by voters; political deference to major parties has declined; and voting patterns have tended towards more multi-party results. The ability of the public to pressure for change, and for reform movements to achieve change via referenda, seems by contrast to be growing.

This is a book that many politicians (as well as academics) should study in detail, whatever the outcome of Britain's upcoming referendum, for it draws out many continuities with the UK case and

shows the subtleties of the currents that make reform happen or not. For example, it is instructive to ask if the AV referendum is a case of majority elite imposition – with the Tories still able to restrict the choice to just sticking with the status quo or the modest change that the Alternative Vote represents, and Labour spiralling in Machiavellian confusions in the wings? Or is the AV vote (as I believe) just a landmark in a longer-run transition by the UK from the old-style limited democracy (needed when the UK ran a huge external empire) to a standard, modern European polity, where the ineluctable pressure for change has been the growth of a multi-party system, which alone has forced this latest 'elite-mass interaction' to take place.

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