



What is Wrong with the Alternative Vote?

Electoral Reform Briefing Nr. 1
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See also: Electoral Reform Briefing Nr. 2:
Marrying First-Past-The-Post with Proportional Representation: the Alternative to the Alternative Vote
<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/iset/staff/monica-threlfall.cfm#Publications>

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The public has been told we will have the chance to vote to change our electoral system to the Alternative Vote (AV) or to keep Single Member Plurality (SMP/FPTP). But 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.

Public proponents of AV currently claim it:

1. Produces much greater proportionality between a party's % of seats and % of votes of major parties than the Single Member Plurality/ First Past the Post systems do.
2. Offers voters more 'choice'.
3. Will stop MPs becoming elected with no more than a plurality (less than 50%) of votes.
4. Gives enhanced legitimacy to MPs who have passed the 50% mark (whether of the electorate, the turnout, or the valid vote is unclear).
5. That the Liberal Democrats will gain more seats for their votes - a presumed yet unspoken aim, implicit in references to 'fairness'.

Ongoing and earlier debates on electoral reform have identified further desirable aims:

6. To give the leading parties a larger proportion of seats than their proportion of votes, thereby facilitating a majority (or functioning minority) government. It is desirable to maintain some *disproportionality*.
7. To offer electors more choice of MPs: several instead of just one, i.e. larger multi-member constituencies.
8. To increase the presence of women MPs with the aim of reaching a male/female balance of no less than 40% and no more than 60% of either sex.
9. Better representation of ethnic minorities.
10. To see a wider range of parties in parliament.
11. To maintain a straightforward system with a transparent count.

After extensive consideration of the actual workings of the system, the verdict is:

| | Aims of Electoral Reform | Verdict on AV |
|----|---|--|
| 1 | Much greater proportionality between % seats to % votes | fail |
| 2 | Offer voters more 'choice'. | fail |
| 3 | Stop MPs being elected on a plurality of votes | gain |
| 4 | MPs' new majority will enhance their legitimacy | danger of major fail (+ possible small gain for a few) |
| 5 | More seats for the Liberal Democrats | small gain |
| 6 | Moderate disproportionality to avoid unstable government | possible small gain ⁽¹⁾ |
| 7 | Several MPs for constituents to turn to, to avoid disenfranchisement and wasted votes | fail |
| 8 | Greater gender-balance between men and women. | fail |
| 9 | Better representation of ethnic and other social minorities | fail |
| 10 | Wider range of parties in parliament | fail |
| 11 | Transparent count + simple administration | major fail |

(1) Recent Australian elections using AV failed at this, increasing instead of reducing disproportionality.

AV's performance in relation to the desirable aims identified above: discussion

Aim 1: Greater proportionality. There is no support in the UK for *full* proportionality (only used in Israel). So how much disproportionality should be tolerated? Conservatives want to keep the system as disproportional as SMP/FPTP. Labour agree to some greater proportionality, but not much. Liberal Democrats in the past have demanded sufficient proportionality to give them a 'fair' share of seats in relation to their vote – which means twice as many seats, or about 20% of all seats instead of their current 10%.

- AV's offer in relation to proportionality:

AV is one of the family of 'Preferential', *not* 'Proportional', voting systems. It does not claim to create any proportionality between a party's vote and its seats. The Electoral Reform Society (ERS) says it is 'much like FPTP' and 'It can be less proportional than First-Past-the-Post'.ⁱ

[Verdict: Fail]

Aim 2: Offering Voters a 'Choice': Voters under all electoral systems always have a choice between parties, and the point is to choose one party to legislate and to govern. That is the choice all voters have. Proponents of Preferential systems believe this is not enough and that voters must be able to have multiple votes to multiple parties, ranked in order. In politics, this is of itself contestable.

AV's offer in relation to 'choice':

- *Too many choices?* At first glance, AV looks to offer a comfortable range of choices because the public is only shown mock-ups of a ballot paper with 4 parties on it. In reality, constituencies often have twice or three times as many candidates. How to rank 12 candidates when you only know a bit about one or two? A variant of the typical AV ballot paper allows you to delegate the choice back to your preferred party by not ticking any alternative boxes – so much for 'choice'.
- *Informed choice only for those in the know:* Another practice under AV is for each party to distribute crib-sheets to voters with their preferred rankings both before election day and at the polling station.ⁱⁱ Voters can pick up their party's preferences list, thereby making their voting intention semi-public, or enter the booth armed with a dozen crib-sheets and spend time copying their favourite party's rankings onto their ballot.
- *New form of exclusion:* The need for crib-sheets produces a new form of political exclusion. Voters who don't have one, don't know they have been produced, don't recognise them at the polling station, or have an un-stocked station, are left to their own devices, ranking candidates according to their own knowledge, or in a haphazard way, or completely ignoring the offer to rank candidates. This diversity of responses has political effects that are not well understood.
- *Large proportions of the electorate's 2nd and subsequent preferences are ignored during the count:* Voters who chose one of the two most popular parties as their 1st preference will never have their 2nd preference counted towards the winner, so their choice is not worth making (if it is known who the two leading contenders are, such as Labour and Conservatives). The AV method only redistributes the 2nd preferences of ballots given to the *least popular* parties, working in rounds. And if there is a 3-way split, the 2nd preferences of the ballots for the 3rd leading party will only come into play at the last round.
- *Some voters' 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th etc preferences are counted, while other voters' are not.* After the least popular candidate has been eliminated and his/her 2nd preferences redistributed, the 2nd preferences of the *second* least popular candidate are re-deployed. But if some of these were for the already eliminated candidate, instead of being ignored, the 3rd preferences of these ballots is distributed to other candidates. When it comes to distributing the 2nd preferences of ballots for the *third* least popular candidate to be eliminated, some of these ballots will have expressed 2nd preferences for the two previously eliminated candidates, so instead, their 3th and 4th preferences will be distributed.ⁱⁱⁱ This process repeats itself: if there are 8 eliminated candidates, some voters - only some - will enjoy the privilege of having up to their 9th preference used.

This means all voters to marginal, extremist and least popular parties are being offered a long list of choices, which will be counted to affect the outcome, whereas voters to the three most popular parties can only make choices that have little or no effect.

Paradoxically, if the Liberal Democrats come third as they most often do, all their *lowest*

preferences will be counted as long as they are to Conservative and Labour candidates.^{iv}
Does this represent any sort of gain if they remain the third or even the second option?

[Fail]

Aim 3: To stop MPs being elected on a plurality of votes rather than an absolute majority.

- AV is classified as a 'majority' system where individual candidates need over 50% of the vote to win, as opposed to the British 'plurality' systems where 1 vote more than the next candidate is enough. This is not an important gain with most electoral systems. In more proportional systems sporting several MPs per electoral district, each MP gets a proportion of 100% so the problem of reaching 50%+1 is avoided altogether. But clearly, the way a handful of votes allows one MP to defeat another under Single Member Plurality/FPTP constitutes a democratic deficit, so this improvement counts as a gain for AV.

[Gain]

Aim 4: That each MP's new majority will enhance their legitimacy.

- AV does not ensure legitimacy to winning MPs because they may end up owing their victory to a mixture of lower, low and very low preferences of those who are not really their supporters. Some may face the prospect of winning thanks to parties they abhor, such as the BNP. This is particularly the case with candidates who need only a small amount of extra votes to reach the winning 50%+1, as the count must start by redistributing the 2nd preferences of the *least* popular candidates. In this context, many MPs may want to remind their constituents of the size of their 1st preference votes, and end up arguing that this plurality is just as, or more, legitimate than their majority for judging the real local support they have, and that first votes, not the extra preference votes, gives them the real mandate to speak out on policy and legislation. This potential political boomerang has not been envisaged so far. MPs already strive to be non-party-political in their relations with constituents; AV will make them even less political, or worse, make MPs feel obliged to pay attention to the policies of the marginal candidates who lost.
- AV is used in various institutional elections where all the candidates are already 'pre-selected' in some way by membership rules and operate in closed or controlled environments. But in a general election any member of the public can come forward as a candidate. Indeed AV is said to encourage fringe parties and independents to stand, and their preferences gain prominence in the count. Furthermore, it is possible for the Electoral Commission to keep the public in the dark about this since, with AV in Australia, the full count is only completed long after the winners have been announced, and is published at its discretion.

[Fail]

Aim 5: More seats for the Liberal Democrats:

- Factual descriptions of AV actually make no mention of it systematically helping third nationwide parties. On the contrary, some specialists assert that it does nothing to improve proportionality. Yet, some degree of greater proportionality is the main demand of those discontented with SMP/FPTP. In this sense, AV is a poor choice. One study by Barton (2008)

does express considerable certainty that AV will help the Liberal Democrats, although it does not mention the problems of the count,^v which are considerable.

- It is a myth that where Conservatives and Labour are competing, their supporters can put Liberal Democrats down as their 2nd preference and this will be allocated to the Lib Dems. It cannot - AV does not work that way. Study of the Australian AV count explanations and procedural manuals and the ERS's model shows that the 2nd preferences given to leading Conservative and runner-up Labour candidates (or vice versa) *are not even counted*, so Liberal Democrats cannot gain seats that way. Instead, a Liberal Democrat can only gain if s/he is already the leading or runner-up candidate on 1st preferences. Then, when the other parties' 2nd preferences get to be counted, the Liberal Democrat candidate has a better chance of reaching 50% of the vote with AV than under FPTP. However, if the count starts with the smallest parties (the normal rule) and the contest is Conservative v. Liberal Democrat, then the UKIP, BNP, English Democrats voters' 2nd preferences are more likely to go to the Conservatives.^{vi} And if they do not, the Liberal Democrat winner will be affected by the same hidden political boomerang mentioned under Aim 4 above: being announced the winner with the help of such parties, before the preferences of the *third* party (Labour in this example) even get counted. In addition to this effect, there are further implications for the Liberal Democrats in the unpublicised "short-cut" AV counting method used in Australia to anticipate results because the re-allocation of preferences takes so long, which is explained under Aim 11.
- Nonetheless, if we accept the lone estimate that the Liberal Democrats would have won 12 extra seats in 2005 under AV (74 instead of 62)^{vii} there is a small gain despite the political upheaval.

[Small gain]

Initial Conclusion:

- **AV only ensures TWO of the FIVE public expectations of electoral reform.**

As to other desirable aims of a new system:

Aim 6: Reducing extreme disproportionality to moderate disproportionality.

- The AV system offers no systematic trends in outcomes. It cannot be predicted how or whether a new preferences system will ensure a comfortable majority government or even a strong minority government. One reason is that it cannot be predicted for the UK how many votes will express a preference at all (in Australia it is obligatory to rank every single candidate, even the distasteful or unknown ones). However, as many people support the moderate disproportionality of PR, and one estimate predicts the Liberal Democrats will win a dozen extra seats, this can be seen as a small gain, marginally reducing the current extreme disproportionality of FPTP.

[possible small gain]

Aim 7: Offering citizens several MPs to avoid political disenfranchisement and wasted votes.

- As AV is a single-member system, the problem of having only one MP remains. Thus, voters to the eternal runner-up party in safe seats remain as disenfranchised as ever because they never get the chance of having their preferred party elected, even if it is a mainstream one. Having several MPs to turn to would facilitate political identification and engagement with and by diverse electorates. Multi-member constituencies dramatically reduce the wasted votes of Single Member Plurality/FPTP systems.

[Fail]

Aim 8: Achieving a gender-balance between men and women.

- AV of itself offers no improvement to the current gender imbalance. As a Single-Member/Majoritarian system, AV cannot do anything to help parties get women elected. Everything will depend on *parties* fielding more women and hoping the electorate will agree. As we know, party efforts have only led to very small increases in women MPs, pushing the UK down the world rankings to 50th place as other countries overtake us. However, AV could in theory offer voters the opportunity to rank all the parties according to a gender preference: all female candidates in the top preferences and all men at the bottom - or the other way round.

[Fail]

Aim 9: Better representation of ethnic and other social minorities.

- Barton (2008) finds that for 'including people from all significant social and ethnic groups', AV 'is not significantly different from FPTP'.^{viii} This is echoed by the ERS: 'It does very little to improve the voice of traditionally under-represented groups in parliament, strengthening the dominance of the 'central' viewpoint.'^{ix} The reason is that it is still a single-member system: only one MP is elected at a time. When parties have to present Lists of Candidates in large multi-member electoral districts, then they worry about their image and become more likely to present diverse and appropriately representative lists of candidates.

[Fail]

Aim 10: Facilitating a wider range of Parties in parliament.

This goal, in connection with fairness to a third nationwide party such as the Liberal Democrats, was discussed under Aim 5. The effects for other parties are considered here.

- Barton concludes 'the argument for AV seems based on popular acceptance of a two party choice of government',^x i.e. no change from FPTP. As to a fourth and smaller nationwide parties, the ERS states about AV that 'It more accurately reflects public opinion of extremist parties, who are unlikely to gain many second-preference votes' - implying that votes to 'extremist' parties will remain the size they already are. But note the 'more accurately', as if the other parties' votes would not be an accurate reflection of their strength due to the addition of lower preference votes.
- AV is also thought to tempt voters to give their 1st preference to an 'unlikely-to-win' party in the hope that it might get one seat somewhere, and put their 'real' choice for governing party in 2nd place. This is not likely, as the outcome of AV advantages the two leading parties, not the smaller ones, because ballots giving smaller parties 1st preference are more likely to put Conservative or Labour as their 2nd preference in order to influence who becomes Prime Minister. All in all, *AV offers nothing to the Greens unless they come top or runner-up with 1st preferences*, which is difficult for them. Again, we face political upheaval without helping a party representing a significant modern political ideology, which could attract younger voters into the political arena.

[Fail]

Aim 11: Ensuring that any new system has a transparent count and is simple to administer.

- AV fails the test of transparency because it is presented to the public in a simplified way that hides the fact that only some voters' preferences count and other voters' choices do not get counted at all. Ballots to *small* parties get their *lower* preferences re-distributed while ballots to likely winners do not. And all easily available explanations are misleading: they go no further than four candidates and gloss over the difficulties. It is doubtful at this point whether its supporters even fully understand the count, let alone its political implications.
- AV fails the test of simplicity since even the Australian government *cannot execute the full count in time to announce it on the night of the poll*. Indeed, so lengthy is it that the chief returning officer is required to produce an *estimate (sic)* by presuming the two main contenders will be the same as in previous elections, and ordering a count of all the 2nd preferences for these two parties simultaneously in order to send in an estimated result to the national tallying centre sooner.^{xi} The full count takes days or weeks, as the Australian Government website freely admits. In other words, in practice Australia *does not use the formal AV procedure it describes*, but turns to a short-cut system and announces provisional results, relying on the fact that their two main parties are so far ahead of others that it is rarely a 3-horse race. If it were, the short-cut could not be used.
- In addition to obscuring public understanding of the count, the Australian experience of AV amounts to an admission that it undermines the public's expectations of an exciting and engaging election night with true results then and there, or the morning after at the latest.

[Fail]

Final Conclusions

As seen in the **Initial Conclusions** about the improvements from the new system, AV in fact fails to offer 3 out of 5 publicly-announced enhancements. On the additional expectations that citizens could have from a new electoral system (given recent public debates), AV fails to reliably offer the kind of improvements that proponents of electoral reform hope for.

| | Aim of Electoral Reform | Verdict on AV |
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| 3 | Stop MPs being elected on only a plurality of votes | gain |
| 4 | MPs' new majority will enhance their legitimacy | danger of major fail (+ possible small gain for a few) |
| 5 | More seats for the Liberal Democrats | small gain |
| 6 | Moderate disproportionality to avoid unstable government | possible small gain |
| 7 | Several MPs per electoral district to avoid disenfranchisement and wasted votes | fail |
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| 10 | Wider range of parties in parliament | fail |
| 11 | Transparent count + simple administration | major fail |

In view of this, it is logical to conclude that AV offers no actual democratic renewal. If adopted, AV will lay myriad false trails of unusable preferences. It would require extensive re-training of returning officers and the public, increased dependence on computerization of the constituency count, and delays in announcing the results. It opens up the chances of political embarrassment for MPs. It offers an unknown improvement on the number of seats gained by Liberal Democrats in relation to their votes - *together with possible further losses* for the LibDems. Its systemic privileged counting of low-ranking preferences on ballots gifted to minor parties instead of using 2nd preferences on ballots gifted to major parties is unjustifiable.

Importantly, there would be no systemic improvement of the under-representation of women and minorities, leaving it entirely to the parties to find ways to overcome electoral systems that are unfriendly and even biased against them.

In such a context, it is hard to see the point of this proposed reform. Is it worth voting 'Yes' in a referendum anyway, just to get a foot in the door of change? Will a 'No' vote close the door on reform for decades to come? Or will a 'No' vote morally oblige the next Labour government to introduce a better proposal?

One step forward would be to find a better electoral system before the referendum. An alternative to AV is one that marries the best features of constituency-based representation with a

more proportional allocation of seats to parties (to become less disproportional than FPTP), so as to redress the Liberal Democrats' unfair lack of seats and meet the *urgent need to remove the many other defects of the current system*.

See:

Threlfall, M. (2010) *Ten Goals and One Solution for Westminster Electoral Reform: Marrying Constituency Links with Proportional Representation*, ISET Working Paper 16.

http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/iset/wps/wps_home.cfm

Threlfall, M. (2010) *Proposal for A New Electoral System: Constituency-based Voting with Proportional Allocation of Seats*, ISET – London Metropolitan University,

<http://www.londonmet.ac.uk/research-units/iset/staff/monica-threlfall.cfm#Publications>

Forthcoming: Threlfall, M. (2010) 'The Purpose of Electoral Reform', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 81, Nr.4, December.

ⁱ <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/article.php?id=55>

ⁱⁱ In Australia: "Volunteers from political parties stand outside polling places distributing how-to-vote cards. These cards show voters how political parties or candidates would like you to vote. They may be taken into the polling place to assist in marking ballot papers."

<http://www.aec.gov.au/Voting/polling.htm#How-to-vote%20cards>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Australian Electoral Commission (2010) *Scrutineers Handbook*, Version 2, Federal Election, pp.67-69. Canberra: Australian National Commission. Also the Video *Counting the Votes for the House of Representatives*, http://www.aec.gov.au/Voting/counting/vid_hor.htm. The London Mayoral Election also redistributes votes from all but the top 2 candidates: "If no candidate receives more than 50% of 1st preference votes, the top two receive 2nd preferences from remaining candidates", BBC Homepage > World Service > Education > London Elections 2000, http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/static/uk_politics/vote2000/london/default.stm but this precludes the possibility that the third candidate might receive a majority of 2nd preferences from ballots to the two leading ones.

^{iv} If the Liberal Democrat candidate comes third on 1st preferences, it is likely s/he will be eliminated so the 2nd preferences on these ballot papers will be distributed. But if some are for already eliminated candidates, these ballot papers' 3rd preferences will be looked at (otherwise these ballot papers will have counted for nothing), and if some are also to an already eliminated candidate, these ballots' 4th preference will be distributed, and if... The process repeats itself. In this way the Conservatives and Labour pick up votes too.

^v Barton, Lewis (2008) *A Better Alternative?*, London: Electoral Reform Society.

<http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/downloads/AVReportweb.pdf>

^{vi} Barton, Lewis (2008) as above, p. 12.

^{vii} Barton, Lewis (2008) as above, p.16.

^{viii} Barton, Lewis (2008) as above, p.46.

^{ix} <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/article.php?id=55>

^x Barton, Lewis (2008) p.46.

^{xi} Australian Electoral Commission (2010) *Scrutineer Handbook*, Version 2, Federal Election, Canberra: Australian Electoral Commission, pp.35-6.