
A Better Alternative?

What AV would mean for Westminster

By Lewis Baston

A large graphic consisting of the letters 'A' and 'V' in a white, sans-serif font, centered on a solid red rectangular background.

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- Electoral
 - Reform
 - Society

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Introduction

The Alternative Vote (AV) is an electoral system with single-member constituencies, as with the present First Past the Post (FPTP) system used for the House of Commons. The difference between AV and FPTP is that there is preferential voting under AV – i.e. voters rank the candidates in order of preference 1,2,3... instead of choosing a single candidate with an 'X'.

“For some, AV is a desirable end in itself. However, for most reformers the aim is for a more radical change.”

AV has long been considered as a possible reform to the British electoral system, with serious proposals discussed in 1917-18 and the House of Commons actually voting in favour in 1931. A related system, the Supplementary Vote (SV), was advocated by the Labour Party's Plant Commission in 1993, and introduced for directly elected Mayors from 2000. Full scale AV as a method of electing the House of Commons has a number of determined supporters, most notably Peter Hain who called for it in his book *Proportional Misrepresentation* in 1986 and has helped spark a discussion on the issue in Labour circles in 2008. 'Australian Rules' – AV, a proportional second chamber, and compulsory voting – has attracted some attention.

For some electoral reformers, such as Hain, AV is a desirable end in itself. However, for most reformers the aim is for a more radical change. In assessing AV, therefore, there are two

dimensions – is it intrinsically better than First Past the Post (FPTP), and is it a useful step towards the ultimate aim of a more proportional system?

This paper aims to study some of the implications of AV in Britain, and assess some of the claims made about AV:

- Is it proportional?
- Is it better than FPTP at relating shares of seats and votes?
- What are the party political implications of AV?
- Would AV help Labour avert defeat, or prevent a Conservative majority government?
- How would AV affect the political culture of Britain, and the way campaigning is done?
- Is the Supplementary Vote (SV) an improved variant of AV?
- Does AV get rid of tactical voting?
- How could AV be introduced?
- And, most crucially, would it block or open the way to further reform?

The Electoral Reform Society's policy on the Alternative Vote is as follows:

The Society advocates the Single Transferable Vote (STV) while not opposing those who campaign for AV as the only change they believe possible in the foreseeable future. The Society regards the introduction of preference voting as a step in the right direction, although under AV only a very minor one.

Expressions of opinion in this paper are those of the author, Lewis Baston, and not necessarily the ERS corporately.

Errors and omissions are also, of course, my own and I welcome any factual corrections readers may have to offer, as well as thoughts about the issues raised in the paper. The work

has benefited from discussions with members of the ERS Council, other members of staff at the ERS and the Lakeman Library, and others (including Mr Philip Kestleman) to all of whom I am most grateful.

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Executive summary

1. The Alternative Vote (AV) is **not** proportional representation.
2. However, in many circumstances it produces results that relate seats a little more closely to votes than is usual under FPTP. But with single seat electoral systems like AV and FPTP proportionality depends on a range of contingent factors.
3. The relationship between first preferences and seats is but a crude measure of proportionality in systems with preferential voting.
4. AV would tend to give the Liberal Democrats more seats than FPTP under nearly all imaginable circumstances.
5. The effect of AV on the balance between the Conservative and Labour parties would be different in different political climates and historical circumstances, but will usually not be large.
6. AV will not do much to help fourth parties with widely dispersed support gain representation, but may enable a more constructive engagement between them and the main parties.
7. Tactical voting and electoral pacts can be used under FPTP to produce AV-style election results, and if voters do not use second preferences under AV the result is effectively the same as a FPTP election. The distinction between the two systems therefore depends somewhat on the behaviour of voters and parties.
8. AV will do little if anything to expand the field of electoral competition, which is currently focused on the minority of seats that can be classified as marginal. It may even exacerbate regional polarisation.
9. However, AV might make a small contribution to making a more civil and pluralist politics by encouraging parties to seek second preferences.
10. AV is superior to the Supplementary Vote (SV) in that it does not require voters to engage in a guessing game about which two candidates will enter the final decisive stage of the count.
11. AV by using preferential voting gives voters the chance to make a more nuanced and meaningful statement than FPTP.
12. AV enables voters to cast their first preference for their real first choice party, and therefore does away with the usual form of tactical voting.
13. However, there is another more sophisticated form of tactical voting that is possible in AV.
14. AV addresses the current problem whereby only a minority of MPs have the support of a majority of their voters.
15. AV would also increase the measurable support from the electorate for a national government.
16. AV is therefore a majoritarian system like FPTP, and fails to give the minority representation which is a benefit of proportional representation.
17. However, AV is a more robust and defensible majoritarian system. AV is intrinsically a better system than FPTP, and if we were starting from a position of having AV, few if any electoral reformers would give consideration to moving to FPTP.

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18. AV could be introduced quickly and simply – it would not require complex legislation, new boundaries or a referendum.
 19. There is a valid debate on whether or not AV would hasten the introduction of a more proportional system. Its intrinsic merits may mean that it persists for a considerable time. But there are also avenues that lead from AV to further reform, such as hung parliaments, anomalous results and harmony between the component parts of the UK.

Is AV ‘proportional representation’?

No. No system which elects only one candidate in a single district can produce proportional representation.

Is AV more proportional than FPTP? A short answer

This is a difficult question.

Proportionality (the extent to which seats are distributed in accordance to the votes for each party) can be measured by arithmetic scores such as the Loosemore-Hanby index. In post-war Australian elections using AV the disproportionality is in a tighter range than in post-war UK FPTP elections – the most proportional (1974) a little less so than the most proportional UK election (1951). The most disproportional (1977) is more representative than the ‘worst’ UK elections such as 1983, 2001 and 2005.

The shortest empirical answer is therefore that AV does tend to be more proportional than FPTP.

“AV has a tendency to increase the leading party’s advantage over its main competitor”

Another way of looking at the impact of AV is to model what might have happened in recent UK general elections had AV been in force. While avoiding the problems of trans-national comparison, this involves hypothetical reasoning and introduces a new set of assumptions. Modelling starts from the votes as cast under FPTP and then simulates AV by distributing preferences for lower-placed candidates according to polling data. The impact of AV in the UK does, in general, tend to increase proportionality (see below). The main mechanism by which it does this is by increasing the share of seats going to the third

party (the Liberal Democrats/ Alliance/ Liberals), who are severely under-represented under FPTP.

However, against this trend is AV’s tendency (in UK modelling) to increase the leading party’s advantage over its main competitor. In 1997, for instance, Lib Dem transfers would have helped Labour win extra marginal seats from the Conservatives.

In short, then, the answer is along the lines of Yes, but with heavy caveats and reservations. The disproportion of the modelled 1997 result between the two major parties inclined the Jenkins Commission away from recommending pure AV, and recommending a small proportional top-up element that would tend to help second and third parties achieve fairer representation.

Three problems in talking about the relative proportionality of AV and FPTP

What is proportionality?

With preferential voting there is a difficulty in establishing what ‘proportionality’ amounts to. It is simplest to take simply the share of first preferences going to each party as being their ‘share of the vote’ but this leaves out some of the additional information that preferential systems like AV and STV provide about the way voters think.

For instance, in Ireland in 1997 Fianna Fail gained seats under STV despite having hardly increased their first preference vote since 1992; what happened is that the party’s share of second preferences went up. This did reflect, at some level, an increase in the positive feelings the electorate had about the party that deserved to be rewarded in seats. Changes in the way second preferences were used also determined the Irish election in 1973. In Australia in 2007 Labor’s lead over the Liberal-Nationals on first preferences was relatively small, but transfers from the largest small party (the Greens) flowed strongly to Labor and reflected Labor’s greater popularity, as a whole, with the Australian electorate.

The Labor Party won 9 seats in which Coalition candidates led on first preferences. In most cases a transfer of votes from Green to Labor was primarily responsible for the result.

If these 9 seats had been won by the Coalition, instead of the national election result being a Labor win with 83 seats to 65 for the Coalition, the two blocs would be dead level on 74 seats each, with two Independents holding the balance (and probably allowing the Coalition to continue in office).

It is of course possible that in FPTP conditions fewer people would have voted Green in some marginal constituencies. In Bennelong the initial Liberal margin was only 143 votes, a small number compared to a Green vote of 4,811 and 610 for the Australian Democrats. In Braddon the initial Liberal margin was 204 votes. In the other 7 constituencies the margin was much larger and would probably not have been overhauled by tactical votes under FPTP conditions. So a real-world FPTP count might well have given Labor a majority of 2, i.e. 76 seats to 72 for the Coalition and 2 Independents.

Labor’s popular vote margin in first preferences was fairly slim, being 43.4 per cent to 42.2 per

		Initial leader		Final winner	
Bass	TAS	Lib	Campbell	ALP	Ferguson
Bennelong	NSW	Lib	Howard	ALP	McKew
Braddon	TAS	Lib	Baker	ALP	Sidebottom
Corangamite	VIC	Lib	McArthur	ALP	Cheeseman
Deakin	VIC	Lib	Barresi	ALP	Simon
Hasluck	WA	Lib	Henry	ALP	Jackson
Page	NSW	Nat	Gulaptis	ALP	Saffin
Robertson	NSW	Lib	Lloyd	ALP	Neal
Solomon	NT	CLP	Tollner	ALP	Hale

(CLP – Country Liberal Party)

cent for the Coalition and 7.8 per cent for the Greens. But the level of popular support and consent for Labor as opposed to the Coalition was greater than the 1.2 per cent first preference vote margin. AV generates additional information about the levels of public support for each party, as reflected in measures such as *final ballot* and *two-party-preferred* in Australia and *tour decisif* in France. In terms of the two-party preferred measure of support for the parties of government Labor had a larger lead (52.7 per cent to 47.3 per cent) which arguably justifies a clear workable majority.

Systems affect voting behaviour

The existence of AV would itself affect the share of the vote (if that is taken as being the share of first preferences). Vote totals under FPTP include tactical voters, who if they were 'allowed' to vote sincerely without the risk of 'letting in' the party they dislike most, would choose another party.

Under AV, first preferences going to major parties that are disadvantaged in one constituency or another because of tactical voting (e.g. Conservatives in Durham, Lib Dems in Northampton, Labour in Bath) would be higher than votes under FPTP. The AV first preferences for smaller parties would increase as well – for instance UKIP and Green supporters would be more likely to vote their true colours on the first preference and choose the major party they feel warmest towards with their second preference. Using the example of Australia in 2007 again, had the election been under FPTP Labor would have worked to try to squeeze Green votes in seats that were marginal between the two main parties, and

some Greens would have voted tactically for Labor in a FPTP ballot.

What is Australian and what is caused by AV?

There is only one large country with prolonged use of AV for electing legislatures, i.e. Australia (for its federal lower house and the lower houses of most of its states). As with assessing the effects of STV in Ireland and Malta, it is important though difficult to distinguish between the consequences of the national political culture and the consequences of the electoral system.

Australian AV has probably reinforced what is effectively a strong two-party system but there is no guarantee that it would do the same in the UK (and there is every reason to suspect it would not). Parties that challenge the duopoly of Labor and Liberal-National have occasionally risen but then nearly all fallen, finding it very difficult to make headway in House of Representatives elections. The mechanics of AV have also encouraged the tendency of Australian third parties to line up formally or informally with one of the two main parties, the Democratic Labor Party (DLP, a Cold War breakaway from the ALP) channelling votes to the Liberals in the 1950s and 1960s and the Greens, to some extent, to Labor now.

Third parties survive in the Senate because of its proportional system. It is nearly always (simplifying the position slightly) elected by halves every three years alongside House of Representatives elections, and voting is in six-member STV seats, although the 'above the line' feature of Senate STV gives it properties that

approximate list PR. However, small parties can exploit the properties of above the line voting to channel votes to each other and break up the duopoly of the main parties. The Greens and Australian Democrats have won representation, and because both main parties have roughly comparable support it has tended to mean that the government will usually not have a Senate majority (the 2004-07 final Howard term was unusual in this respect). The Senate is a particularly powerful second chamber, and its proportional system means that governments will usually bargain with smaller parties to some extent to get legislation through. A proportional Senate mitigates some of the majoritarian properties of Australian-style AV.

despite a very short (three year) electoral term. Since 1945 there have only been six changes of power at national level (1949, 1972, 1975, 1983, 1996 and 2007).

“Australian AV has reinforced a strong two-party system, but there is no guarantee that it would do the same in the UK”

Australia has a more radical form of AV than would be suggested here, in that it is compulsory for voters to express all their preferences (i.e. if there are 9 candidates one must express preferences from 1 to 8). This will tend to increase the importance of transferred votes in deciding results – with optional preferences many voters will choose not to use lower preferences.

AV with compulsory preferences, plus compulsory voting, in Australia has tended to be accompanied by relatively long stretches of single party government and infrequent alternation in power between the parties

Is AV more proportional than FPTP? A more complete answer

Single-member district systems (FPTP and AV) can only be *contingently* proportional – that is, their proportional or disproportional qualities depend on factors other than the electoral system.

Some of these factors do not differ between the two systems, such as:

- Geographical distribution of the vote. Small parties with concentrated votes will do better than those with broadly dispersed votes (e.g. compare Plaid Cymru with UKIP). Conversely, the largest party is often better off with evenly distributed votes.
- Turnout effects – a party (such as Labour in 2001 or 2005) will do better for a given national share of the vote when turnout is low in its strongholds; it does not ‘waste’ votes by piling them up in safe seats.

This means that changing to AV cannot help correct these sources of disproportionality in election results.

“The more parties there are under either system the more distorted and chaotic the translation of votes into seats becomes”

Some factors matter less under AV than FPTP in translating votes into seats, and the deeper process of representing the preferences voters sincerely have between candidates, and the opinions and preferences that underlie *that* choice.

One source of disproportionality that matters under FPTP but not so much in AV is candidate proliferation, i.e. it is very damaging for a party to have a viable competitor in FPTP which is attractive to the same sorts of voters. A 60-40 majority can thus turn into a 40-30-30 plurality win for the other side. Under AV this will tend to resolve itself through the operation of transfers. For instance, in Australia Liberal Party and National Party candidates can stand in the same constituency in the knowledge that the ‘split’ will not let in the Labor Party. AV would make attempted blackmail by minor parties, trading policy concessions for withdrawal of candidates, less important.

However, AV is not neutral in relation to the shape of the party system. Broadly, the more parties there are under either system the more distorted and chaotic the translation of votes into seats becomes. AV is the same as FPTP in a pure two party system. The differences become more apparent the more parties there are in the system. AV becomes more unstable in four-party politics, as the model result from Scotland in October 1974 (see below) suggests. The SNP may well have ended up with a majority of Scottish MPs on the basis of 30.4 per cent of Scottish first preferences, and minority support for its principal policy of Scottish independence. But FPTP also has strange properties in multi-party politics, with MPs elected on small shares of the vote and abrupt tipping points between radically different outcomes. In a situation where four-party politics is well established in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and voting behaviour in England is increasingly fragmented as well, the suitability of both systems is questionable on these grounds.

One contingent factor in Britain is that the third-placed party with relatively evenly spread support is transfer-friendly and therefore

benefits from transfers when it manages to attain second place. Since 1974, the third party has had sufficient national support to achieve second places and thereby put itself into position to exploit its transfer-friendliness. In modelling AV compared to FPTP in Britain, there are two principal effects:

1. To enable the Liberal Democrats to win seats from either main party when they are in a relatively close second place.
2. To transfer seats from the major party that is less attractive to Lib Dem second preferences to the party that is more attractive.

There is a third, more minor, source of difference:

3. To allow voters who support a small party with their first preference to exercise a choice over which major party candidate they prefer.

Third party disproportionality

AV is likely to do something about the most consistent and systematic disproportional feature of FPTP as it operates in British general elections, namely the under-representation of the Liberal Democrats.

	Vote %	FPTP seats	FPTP seats %	AV model seats	AV model seats %
1966	8.6	12	1.9	20	3.2
1970	7.5	6	1.0	13	2.1
1974 Feb	19.3	14	2.2	51	8.0
1974 Oct	18.3	13	2.0	52	8.2
1979	13.8	11	1.7	13	2.0

1983	25.4	23	3.5	47	7.2
1987	22.6	22	3.4	49	7.5
1992	17.8	20	3.1	31	4.8
1997	16.8	46	6.9	82	12.4
2001	18.3	52	7.9		
2005	22.0	62	9.6	74	11.5

1966, 1974: Butler and Kavanagh Nuffield election studies; 1992 and 1997; research cited in Jenkins Report; 1970, 1979, 1983, 2005: ERS model

This tendency is dependent on a specific contemporary British circumstance, namely that the third party is both fairly large and also attractive to transfers because of its perceived centrist political position. Because of its size, and its tendency to have some local strong points (rather than being thinly spread nationally), the Liberal Democrat party can gain a considerable number of second places and therefore be in a position to receive transfers. Being most Conservative and Labour voters' second choice party, if it gets in this position it can benefit and win AV seats from either of its larger rivals provided that the transfers are efficient enough to overhaul the leading party. AV, given the British structure of opinion, would serve to reallocate a number of seats from Conservative and Labour to the Liberal Democrats, and reinforce the Liberal Democrat hold on seats where they have achieved first place under FPTP.

It is quite possible to imagine a situation where these factors would operate differently. In the Australian context, third parties have had too small a share of first preferences to go through to the final round, and have been eliminated before they could receive transfers. This was more or less the position of the Liberals in Britain between 1931 and 1974. In Canada, the national third party, the New Democrats (NDP), is to the left of the two competitors, and their representation might be reduced because Conservative voters would probably transfer to Liberal candidates rather than the NDP, and perhaps to some extent vice versa. The net

effect might be to reduce the NDP even further. AV (as opposed to FPTP) is not necessarily good for third parties, or centre parties, but it is reliably good for centrist third parties with a reasonable level of active public support.

First and second party disproportionality

One objection to AV is that it would unfairly alter the balance between the two major parties, possibly creating more disproportionality. Most AV modelling in the last three general elections has shown that it would add to the pro-Labour bias already apparent under FPTP. Is this a permanent state of affairs?

The effect of AV on the balance between the first and second party is, like its effect on the third party, contingent on other factors.

1. Which of the leading parties is most affected by the third party factor? In the British context, does AV tip more Labour seats or Conservative seats to the Lib Dems? What proportion of voters will actually use their second or lower preferences? To what extent do trends in second preferences track trends in first preferences, both locally and nationally, and is this relationship linear or not?
2. Is there a skew of transfers from the third party in favour of one or the other of the two main parties? In the British context, do Lib Dem transfers favour Labour or the Conservatives?
3. To what extent are votes for one or other of the leading parties lumpy? Is one party's vote is strongly polarised between very strong areas, where it can win over 50 per cent of

first preferences (or near enough to survive even a hostile flow of transfers), and weak areas where it is not in contention? Such a party would not be affected by a change to AV.

Which party suffers most damage from the seats tipped to the Lib Dems by AV?

The Conservatives would generally have suffered most from this factor, because the Liberal Democrats have always been a threat to more Conservative seats than Labour seats. This was particularly the case in the elections of 1992, 1997 and 2001, although in 2005 the Liberal Democrats came into contention in the largest number of Labour seats of any election since the early 1920s. The Electoral Reform Society's AV simulation based on a BBC/NOP poll of second preferences in 2005 would have tipped 4 Conservative seats under FPTP to Lib Dem under AV, and 8 Labour FPTP seats to Lib Dem under AV.

Do Lib Dem transfers skew left or right?

It is a plausible hypothesis that votes for small parties of the left and right will tend to transfer to the major party that is positioned on the relevant side of the political spectrum, and that this will take place pretty much regardless of national movements of opinion between the two main parties. But there are competing hypotheses about how the centre vote (in the British context the Liberal Democrat vote) might behave. These are as follows.

- a. The progressive bloc theory, i.e. that most Liberal or Lib Dem voters share progressive traditions and values with Labour and that their parties are relatively close in ideology. This seemed a particularly strong trend in the

1990s, when the parties co-operated on constitutional issues and Paddy Ashdown and Tony Blair used the language of progressivism. It was reflected in the results in 1997 and 2001 when many voters clearly regarded the differences between Lib Dem and Labour as being relatively unimportant compared to the gap between both parties and the Conservatives.

b. The bourgeois bloc theory, i.e. that liberal and centre voters are essentially part of a middle class centre-right political bloc. Mainland European liberal parties have often evolved in this direction, and in the heyday of the two party system in Britain in the 1950s it was probably the case that Liberal voters would split more to Conservative than Labour. Evidence for this is available from the 1951 results, when the Liberals pulled out of many seats, and local electoral pacts were agreed between Conservatives and Liberals

c. The soggy centre theory, i.e. that Lib Dem voters will divide between the major parties roughly in proportion with the strength of those parties in the country. At times when Labour is in the ascendant, second preferences will tend to help Labour, and conversely when the Conservatives are dominant. An elaboration of the soggy centre account of Lib Dem second preferences could be to suggest that they will follow whichever of the two major parties is locally more dominant. A further complication is whether this relationship moves in proportion with the balance of opinion between the two main parties, or less dramatically, or exponentially.

A single reading taken from polls or second preferences in an actual election (as in Scotland, or a mayoral election in England) will not give definitive support for any particular

theory. The availability of several different plausible (and somewhat historically specific) accounts should rule out any simplistic assumptions about the impact of AV on the relative fortunes of the Conservatives and Labour. While it may work one way in one election, there is no guarantee that it will do so at the next election.

For most of the post-war period, Liberal second preferences were usually thought of as being mostly Conservative by a margin of something like 60-40. The following table shows estimates based on a reasonably even division of second preferences – a pro-Conservative tilt would of course affect the numbers.

	1966		February 1974		October 1974	
	FPTP	AV	FPTP	AV	FPTP	AV
Con	253	246	297	261	277	227
Lab	363	363	301	291	319	296
Lib	12	20	14	51	13	52
SNP	-	-	7	14	11	42
Other	2	1	14	18	15	18

(Appendices to relevant editions of the Nuffield General Election studies)

Lib Dem second preferences were less pro-Labour in 2005 than in 1997 and probably even less so (or a bit pro-Conservative even) next time. Evidence from opinion polls is patchy and sometimes based on relatively small, national samples of Lib Dem voters which do not permit study of regional variations in the flow of second preferences. The following table shows estimates based on recent polling.

1. YouGov, with acknowledgement to <http://politicalbetting.com/index.php/archives/2008/07/18/is-this-the-backcloth-to-cleggs-tax-cutting-approach/> for highlighting the finding

%	2005	2008
Conservative voting intention	33	43
Labour voting intention	36	32
Labour lead in voting intention	+3	-11
Conservative share of Lib Dem second preferences	26	28
Labour share of Lib Dem second preferences	54	44
Labour lead in second preferences	+28	+17

Sources: BBC/NOP surveys 30 April and 1 May 2005; ICM survey for Sunday Telegraph reported 6 April 2008.

This suggests that Lib Dem second preferences do track the national ratings for each party, but that there is a substantial pro-Labour skew. However, polling in July 2008¹ found that people intending to vote Lib Dem split 51-31 in favour of Cameron and the Tories in a question requiring a 'forced choice' between the two Prime Ministers. This is rather different from the pro-Labour skew in the April 2008 poll, but that may reflect different question wording. In the two elections for London Mayor in which the final choice was between Labour and Conservative, Lib Dem votes divided rather evenly in 2008, and for Labour in 2004. The evidence seems consistent with a general slight pro-Labour skew compared to the electorate at large, although this seems to disappear when Labour are very unpopular.

	2004	2008
Lib Dem first preferences %	14.9	9.6
% transferring to Con	21.9	29.6
% transferring to Lab	28.6	31.1
% Non-transferable	49.5	39.3
Con % of transferred votes	43.4	48.1
Lab % of transferred votes	56.6	51.9

The net effect of the very slight pro-Labour transfer pattern in London in 2008 was tiny – a decrease in the Conservative lead (149,884 votes on first preferences) of only 3,455 votes. In 2004 it was rather larger, increasing Labour's first preference lead (143,118 votes) by 19,046 votes. But even so, the evidence in real elections that Lib Dem second preferences will automatically put the Conservatives at a disadvantage seems weak. Taking all the smaller parties into account, the allocation of second preferences in 2004 was 53.4 per cent to Labour, 46.6 per cent to Conservative, and in 2008 an even narrower 51.9 per cent to Labour, 48.1 per cent to Conservative. These shares discount the very large numbers of voters whose second preferences are discarded under the SV variant used for Mayoral elections (or unrecorded) – 57.9 per cent in 2004 and 45.6 per cent in 2008. In most electoral contexts, the large party effect will probably not amount to much because it is split fairly evenly and a considerable proportion of minor party voters will not choose one or the other main party.

How are the parties' votes distributed?

Labour's vote sank to only 27.6 per cent in 1983, and the party was unpopular and isolated in its political platform. The choice between Thatcher's Conservatives and Foot's Labour was an unpalatable one for supporters of the Alliance in 1983, and Labour could be far from guaranteed a net flow of transfers from that source. Even on some fairly stringent assumptions about Alliance second preferences (i.e. that two thirds of them were effective, and of those they split 2:1 to Conservative, and that 60 per cent of Conservatives transfer to Alliance), however, AV would not have done much to marginalise Labour further than FPTP. On these

2. Alyn & Deeside, Birmingham, Erdington, Bradford South, Burnley, Carlisle, Crewe & Nantwich, Derby South, Derbyshire North East, Gower, Great Grimsby, Greenwich, Ipswich, Mansfield, Newcastle North, Stockton North, Thurrock, Wakefield, Walsall South, Walthamstow, West Bromwich East, Wolverhampton North East, and Wrexham.

3. Blyth Valley (SDP), Durham City (SDP), Edinburgh Leith (SDP), Islington South & Finsbury (SDP) and Sheffield Hillsborough (Liberal).

assumptions, AV would have switched 22 seats from Labour to Conservative² and 5 from Labour to Alliance,³ for a net loss of 27 (from 209 seats to 182). If the flow of preferences was less strong, or was affected by the political composition of the region, Labour's losses to Conservative would be less than this. The lumpiness of Labour's vote – reasonably high in the party's stronger areas and tiny in hopeless seats – would have protected the party's representation.

Labour's vote in 1983 was high enough in the party's strongholds to be over 50 per cent, or close enough not to be threatened by transfers, and so these seats would have still been safe under AV. Labour's vote was distributed in a way that protected it from the sort of wipe-out result the Conservatives suffered under FPTP (and would have suffered under AV) in 1997 and 2001. The Conservatives were less fortunate with their vote in these elections, having a less lumpy distribution that gave them fewer places where they could withstand such a swing. This adds even more to the argument that the 1997

circumstances were pretty unusual. In Australian AV there seem to be relatively few if any solid cases of disproportional landslides exaggerated by preference transfers, and certainly nothing of the sort that occurred in Britain in 1931 thanks to an electoral pact.

AV and 'fourth' parties

The political spectrum beyond the Labour and Conservative parties is not identical to the Lib Dem vote. In the 2008 London mayoral election the Lib Dem vote accounted for just under half of the 'minor parties' vote. Transfers from these parties, on the evidence of London, tend to go to the major party that is closest to their position ideologically.

This relationship works out very much as one might expect, although the strength of the flow from BNP to Conservative in 2008 may be surprising, as is the clear identification of the Greens with Labour (or at least with Ken

	2004			2008		
	% votes transferable	% transfers to Con	% of all votes to Con	% votes transferable	% transfers to Con	% of all votes to Con
Right						
BNP	23.9	74.0	17.7	38.1	83.6	31.8
UKIP	39.1	78.0	30.5	37.2	79.9	29.7
E Dem	-	-	-	33.7	68.9	29.6
Left						
Green	40.9	18.9	7.7	61.2	23.2	14.2
Resp/ LL	31.5	22.2	7.0	47.5	16.6	7.9
Others	37.5	36.9	13.8	50.3	49.7	25.0

'Others' includes Christian People's Alliance both times, Independent (different candidates each time) and Independent Working Class Association in 2004. Data supplied by London Elects.

Livingstone). Parties without a clear position on the left-right spectrum tended to see their voters split rather for Livingstone in 2004 and evenly in 2008, suggesting a slight pro-Labour skew in general. The overall importance of the relationship between the minor parties and their nearest major party depends on three factors – the size of the vote for the minor party, the extent to which valid lower preferences transfer, and the skew of the preferences that do transfer. The clear nature of the second-round choice in 2008 encouraged valid second preferences to be cast, although it did also seem to depress the number of first preferences for smaller parties including the Lib Dems.

probably be open recommendations from smaller parties to give lower preferences to the larger parties, and some policy concessions. This has been one of the mechanisms by which the Australian two party system has absorbed new strands of politics.

AV does not do much to help fourth parties, unless they are locally concentrated (like the SNP and Plaid Cymru, which are not minor parties in the areas in which they operate).

“AV does not do much to help fourth parties, unless they are locally concentrated”

Under AV (and to some extent SV) the relationship between outrider parties and the main party on that side of the ideological spectrum will change, because unlike in FPTP a vote cast for a small party does not necessarily harm the larger party. This will have the effect of putting bargaining between parties on a more collaborative footing than in the past. Right of centre Eurosceptic parties have used their ability to draw a few votes to persuade (some might use the word blackmail) Conservative candidates and the party in general to move closer to their position to avoid a rival for that section of the electorate under FPTP. AV would make pressure tactics much less useful, and make the relationship much more transparent. Under AV, there would

The practical implications of AV

In 2006 the ERS conducted a series of simulations of the outcomes of a general election with differing combinations of party support under FPTP and AV, using two assumptions about Lib Dem transfers in Con/Lab contests. The first was simply that they split in line with the ratio between the Conservative and Labour shares of first preferences, and the second was that they tracked this ratio but were 4 per cent more pro-Labour than the national ratio (i.e. if there were level votes nationally, Lib Dem preferences would split 54:46 for Labour). There were 256 combinations of vote share considered, taking the Conservatives from 29 per cent to 44 per cent and Labour from 27 per cent to 42 per cent (the Lib Dem share is given by the balance after the Labour and Conservative vote shares and a residue for 'others' is taken from 100 per cent). The total proportion of valid second preferences is assumed to track the national combined standing of the Conservative and Labour parties, a defensible simplifying assumption.

Of the 256 scenarios of Conservative and Labour Party support in each of the 16 by 16 tables, the following table summarises the resulting House of Commons.

	FPTP	AV (C:L)	AV (Lab skew)
Lab majority	120	90	99
Lab-LD	26	42	47
Either-LD	48	56	55
Con-LD	25	30	23
Con majority	34	38	32
No coalition	3	0	0
Con govt impossible	146	132	146
Con govt possible	110	124	110

Lab govt impossible	60	68	55
Lab govt possible	196	188	201
Majority govt	154	128	131
Hung parliament	102	128	125

Converted into percentage probabilities if each of the scenarios is equally weighted, this gives the following results.

	FPTP %	AV (C:L) %	AV (Lab skew) %
Lab majority	46.9	35.2	38.7
Lab-LD	10.2	16.4	18.4
Either-LD	18.8	21.9	21.5
Con-LD	9.8	11.7	9.0
Con majority	13.3	14.8	12.5
No coalition	1.2	0	0

Con govt impossible	57.0	51.6	57.0
Con govt possible	43.0	48.4	43.0

Lab govt impossible	23.4	26.6	21.5
Lab govt possible	76.6	73.4	78.5

Majority govt	60.2	50.0	51.2
Hung parliament	39.8	50.0	48.8

AV increases the chances of the Lib Dems having their strongest bargaining position, i.e. their support could produce a majority for either Labour or the Conservatives, but not apparently by very much. Within hung parliaments, the outcome set that seems to grow most is a position in which the Lib Dems could put

Labour, but not the Conservatives, into power.

AV has the effect of reducing the likelihood of a single-party Labour majority by about 8-12 percentage points (depending on which assumption is made regarding LD transfers) compared to FPTP, but both AV models still leave a Labour majority the most likely single outcome in this range of possibilities. It does not do much to alter the slim set of possibilities of the Conservatives gaining an overall majority (a Labour majority is a 35 per cent possibility to 15 per cent for a Conservative majority even on the more conservative set of assumptions). It reduces the overall chance of a majority from 60 per cent under FPTP to around 50 per cent.

If one takes only the inner 100 squares in which the Conservatives poll between 31 and 40 per cent, and Labour between 29 and 38 per cent, the picture is as follows.

	FPTP	AV (C:L)	AV (Lab skew)
Lab majority	37	26	32
Lab-LD	35	26	29
Either-LD	17	34	31
Con-LD	11	11	7
Con majority	0	3	1
No coalition	0	0	0
<hr/>			
Con govt impossible	72	52	61
Con govt possible	28	48	39
<hr/>			
Lab govt impossible	11	14	8
Lab govt possible	89	86	92
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Majority govt	37	29	33
Hung parliament	63	71	67

“ AV increases the chances of the Lib Dems having their strongest bargaining position ”

Of these, which probably rank higher in probability than the outer fringes of the 16 by 16 table, AV does considerably increase Lib Dem bargaining power, from 17 per cent of scenarios under FPTP to over 30 per cent under AV giving them the choice of larger party.

Even AV with LD second preferences dividing with the national popular vote preserves Labour’s advantage in forming a government, particularly in these middle squares. AV with a pro-Labour skew reduces even further than FPTP the range of options in which Labour would be unable to form a government.

When considering the thresholds of support for either of the two larger parties to gain a House of Commons majority, the effect of AV is not startling. Under FPTP the Conservatives require a minimum of 39 per cent (using the standard set of assumptions about uniform swing), and that is if Labour plunge to 27 per cent support. The same is true with AV if there is a pro-Labour skew of Lib Dem second preferences – and if those Lib Dem second preferences track the national levels of support, the threshold falls to only 38 per cent of first preferences. Unless there is a massive pro-Labour skew of Lib Dem second preferences, AV will not keep the Conservatives out if they are in a winning position under FPTP. With a Conservative share of 41 per cent to 30 per

cent for Labour, the result would be something like Conservative 356, Labour 195, Lib Dem 65, others 34, a Conservative majority of 60 if Lib Dem second preferences tracked the national vote ratio. The Conservatives would still have a majority, albeit only 17 seats, with the same vote shares if there were a significant skew of first preferences towards Labour.

The effect on who wins the election nationally of AV compared to FPTP, albeit on fairly moderate assumptions, is therefore not particularly dramatic if one takes 2005 (allowing for boundary changes) as a starting point and uses uniform swing. It does not justify the hopes (or fears) of those who regard it as a piece of pro-Labour manipulation.

The Alternative Vote, landslides, 1997 and Jenkins

4. Report of the
Independent
Commission on the
Electoral System Cm
4090 TSO: 1998,
para 85.

Jenkins and AV

The Jenkins commission was convened shortly after the 1997 election, a contest in which AV would have produced dramatic results because Labour and Lib Dem transfers would have helped both parties win extra seats from the Conservatives. The Commission's projection of the result of the 1997 election under AV would have seen the Conservatives reduced to 96-110 seats in the House of Commons, while Labour's seats would have been further inflated to something in the range 436-452, a majority comfortably over 200.

Fairness... inhibits a Commission appointed by a Labour government and presided over by a Liberal Democrat from recommending a solution which at the last election might have left the Conservatives with less than half of their proportional entitlement.⁴

First, the Lib Dems were a good second in a fair number of Conservative seats and very few Labour seats, so would win more seats on transfers from the Conservatives than from Labour. Second, Lib Dem second preferences would have clearly favoured Labour quite strongly in 1997 and (combined with the fairly even distribution of the Conservative vote) tipped a number of marginal seats to Labour.

Neither necessarily applies in all circumstances and there are reasons for expecting that they are in the process of changing. The 2005 election saw a significant increase in Lib Dem second places to Labour, and Lib Dem second preferences are not fixed in a pro-Labour direction – they move according to the balance of opinion between the main parties. They are also politically specific, in that they will respond

to the ideological positioning of the two parties, with a Conservative Party in a more small-l liberal mould being more attractive to these voters than an extreme or traditionalist Conservative Party.

AV and landslides

AV will tend to exaggerate landslides even more than FPTP because a strong tide towards a party reflected in first preferences will tend (at least according to a reasonable hypothesis) to also affect second preferences – basically, a party that is popular will tend to move up in voters' esteem across the board. With a close result between two leading parties, second preferences from other parties may well split evenly and affect the outcome in relatively few marginal seats. In landslide conditions, however, AV makes a badly defeated party an even smaller and more demoralised outfit, weakening further its parliamentary base and ability to mount an effective opposition (a necessary feature of a Westminster-type democracy) and present a renewed case to the electorate.

“ Basically, a party that is popular will tend to move up in voters' esteem across the board ”

AV in landslide conditions can accentuate regional biases, in that its likely consequence in an election such as 1983 or 1997 would have

been to knock out even more marginal Labour seats in the south and midlands, or decimate the remnant of urban and northern Conservative seats. It tends to expand the electoral coalition behind the government and drive the main opposition back into its strongholds, which is probably not beneficial for the political system as a whole. It is also possible that even without a national landslide, transferred preferences will take on the dominant political colouring of that region and help the locally dominant party in each case, accentuating a two nations pattern of representation.

A deeper look at preferences under AV and FPTP

Although FPTP is a much less sophisticated instrument than AV, it is still possible for voters to use it to imply things about their order of preference between different candidates, through tactical voting and electoral pacts. The point can be illustrated by imagining a Conservative who wishes to ensure the defeat of a Labour candidate – the voter has a clear order of preference that runs from Conservative first to Lib Dem second and Labour third. Depending on the situation, there are several ways of expressing this view:

1. Under AV with compulsory preferences, voting Conservative first preference and then transferring a second preference to the Lib Dems.
2. Under AV with optional preferences, voting Conservative first preference and then transferring a second preference to the Lib Dems.
3. Under FPTP, casting a vote for a Lib Dem candidate because there is an electoral pact between the Lib Dems and Conservative, and there is no Conservative standing locally.
4. Under FPTP, casting a vote for a Lib Dem candidate where – without an electoral pact being in place – there is no local Conservative candidate.
5. Under FPTP, casting a tactical vote for a Lib Dem candidate even though there is a Conservative in the field, because the Lib Dems are best placed to defeat Labour in that constituency.
6. Under AV, casting a second-order tactical vote for the Lib Dem candidate despite there being a Conservative candidate as well, because Labour are more likely to lose the final round to a Lib Dem than a Conservative.

These options are graded more or less in order of the effort involved for the voter in expressing a negative opinion about the disliked party (in this example, Labour), and therefore – probably – to the relative strength of the two preference relationships being expressed.

The first two options do not involve any element of desertion of the voter's favoured party; in the next two, the favoured party itself has for whatever reason withdrawn the option; in the last two, the voter deserts the favoured party for tactical reasons.

In options 1, 3 and 4, casting a valid vote requires lending a vote to the second-choice party (Lib Dems), either as a transferred preference or as a forced choice between limited options. In option 2, it is not required but can be done at the minimal extra effort of putting an extra mark on the ballot paper. But tactical voting requires a stronger negative motivation than these relatively mild expressions of voter choice; it suggests that the voter is relatively indifferent between his or her top two preferences, but that both are strongly preferable to the third choice.

Quite how different AV and FPTP are, and how disproportional the result is, will depend on how unanimous these choices are and how strongly they are felt.

Voters can make FPTP behave somewhat like AV, if they feel like it, by voting tactically. This is what happened, to a degree, in 1997 and 2001. This requires a relatively high degree of commitment to the view that the differences between the top two parties are less significant than the divide between them both and the less-favoured party. The tactical voting habit takes a while to develop among voters (and also learning by the parties about political positioning, in which convergence can result in increasing tactical voting as in 1992-97). Activating it depends on the information available to the voter, which may be difficult to communicate and is also disrupted by boundary changes and shifts in the national patterns of support for each party. FPTP sets a high hurdle for effective

tactical voting (voter-led AV simulation) because of the information gap and the demand that the voter should not cast a vote for his or her sincerely favoured candidate.

“Voters can make FPTP behave somewhat like AV just by voting tactically”

Parties can make FPTP behave very much like AV if they can come to agreement on an electoral pact, and the voters decide to follow the party's lead. The biggest landslide in British electoral history, 1931, took place because the anti-Labour parties agreed an electoral pact and Conservative and Liberal voters were willing to support each other's 'National' candidates. On a much smaller scale, local electoral pacts between Conservatives and Liberals, and a mass withdrawal of Liberal candidates compared to 1950, contributed to the Conservative win in 1951 despite the party having fewer votes than Labour. In each case, the electoral pact made FPTP resemble AV by narrowing the range of candidates in each constituency so that in most cases there were only two candidates, and in most constituencies the winner had more than 50 per cent of the vote.

FPTP might occasionally produce a less 'disproportional' result than AV, but that is at a high cost for the voter – that there is an undesirable choice between a sincere vote and an effective vote, and a lack of knowledge about how to cast the most effective vote. AV is not entirely free of these problems (second order tactical voting, and attempting to exploit the non-monotonic nature of the system by trying to ensure that one's sincere preference is

pitted in the final count against the least transfer-friendly alternative), but the level of uncertainty and complexity required to attempt to use them make the real-world problems a lot less burdensome than FPTP. And, as has been shown, AV will often get a more proportional result anyway – particularly if one acknowledges that first preferences are not directly comparable to categorical votes cast under non-preferential systems.

AV and the field of electoral competition

Given that if a candidate polls over 50 per cent under AV, he or she is elected at the first stage of the count, AV cannot make those seats in which a party has a majority of the vote competitive. Nor will it have much effect where a party has a large lead over its closest rival, or is fairly close to 50 per cent, because transfers will never be as unanimous and efficient enough to change the result from what it would have been under FPTP.

There will be relatively few constituencies which are currently uncompetitive under FPTP but would be put into play by AV. The most usual pattern for this would be a seat where the Conservatives prevail over the Liberal Democrats, and there is a substantial third placed Labour vote, for example Bournemouth West, or Suffolk South whose 2005 results were:

Conservative	20,471	42.0
Lib Dem	13,835	28.5
Labour	11,917	24.5
UKIP	2,454	5.0

There would be a lively contest in such a seat, with the Conservatives having an incentive to boost their turnout and share of the vote, and the Lib Dems to gain as many Labour transfers as they could. Some Labour seats would also come within range of the Lib Dems (and sometimes the SNP), such as Glasgow North where SNP, Conservative and Green transfers might have made the seat very competitive for the Lib Dems.

However, there will also be some seats which would be made considerably less competitive because Lib Dem incumbents would be boosted by transfers from the third placed party. Carshalton & Wallington, and Sutton &

Cheam, would be reinforced against the Conservatives and Rochdale against Labour.

If second preferences are correlated with the political complexion of each region, AV may worsen regional disparities in representation compared to FPTP.

AV does not expand the field of contention much, if at all, in general elections. For this reason it would do next to nothing to address one of the principal problems afflicting British general elections, the excessive concentration on marginal seats. The marginal seats would remain pretty much the same as under FPTP.

However, even if AV does nothing to expand the number of seats where there is competition, it does at least mean that a larger number of potential switchers are targeted in each marginal seat. In a clearly two-party seat such as, say, Wellingborough where Labour and Conservative both had a little over 40 per cent in 2005, winning second preferences from supporters of other parties will be almost as important as gaining first preference votes. In this rather limited way, the election would become a broader national conversation than under FPTP. The need to appeal for support from voters whose first preference is for smaller parties may also encourage a little more civility in election campaigning.

Designing a single member preference voting system

5. For another analysis, based on systematic properties, see Grofman, B. 'A taxonomy of runoff methods' *Electoral Studies* 27 (2008) 395-399.

There are three related but separable elements to operationalising an AV-type system (including SV, which is already in use in Britain for Mayoral elections), namely the design of the ballot, the counting rule and the definition of a valid vote.

Ballot design: preferential or multiple-X

There are three basic methods of organising an AV-type ballot from the voter's point of view.⁵

1. There is the classic **run-off election**, in which the remaining candidates fight it out in an election that takes place at a later date, after further campaigning. Voting can be by an X as if the two elections were separate FPTP elections. The options are therefore simple, but having an extra election imposes large administration costs and can result in lower turnout for the run-off.
2. Another option is a **multiple column ballot**, with voters marking an X-vote in the first preference column for their first preference candidate, an X-vote in the second column, and so on for as many preferences are permitted.
3. There is also the single column AV **preferential ballot**, which accentuates the similarity between AV and STV. Voters put a number next to the name of the candidate according to their rank order of preference.

The decision about what sort of ballot design is used is affected by other characteristics of the election, including whether the counting method is exhaustive or run-off (see below).

There may be several reasons for adopting a multiple column ballot. One is to make it clear that an election is counted by a constrained method (as with SV). Another, more common for IRV (Instant Run-off Voting) elections in the United States, is that voting machine technology is not set up to handle preferential voting and that a series of X votes or punched holes are needed to read the ballot.

In situations where STV is also used, particularly when AV is being used to fill a casual vacancy arising in a body elected by STV, consistency demands the use of the single column preferential ballot.

Ease of use by voters is of course a part of the process of design. In situations where people are accustomed to using multiple columns, there is logic to maintaining that, and likewise with single column ballots. The evidence from Scotland's elections in May 2007 was that most voters found a single-column preferential ballot reasonably easy to use, while double-column ballots are potentially confusing.

Counting method: exhaustive or run-off?

The classic form of AV uses an exhaustive form of counting. If no candidate has an overall majority of the vote at the first stage of the count, the lowest-place candidate is eliminated and that person's votes redistributed according to the next ranked preference given by those voters. This process iterates until a candidate has received an overall majority of the remaining valid vote at one stage in the count. The maximum number of stages to the count is therefore the number of candidates in the election, minus one.

6. For further discussion of SV and other restricted variants, see van der Kolk, H. 'Supplementary Vote: analysis, applications and alternatives' *Electoral Studies* 27 (2008) 417-423.

The Supplementary Vote as used in English mayoral elections, many run-off elections in the United States, and the two-round system for the French presidential election, are systems that do not work upwards from the lowest-scoring candidate. The counting rule excludes all candidates other than those who poll first and second in terms of first preference votes. There is therefore a fixed maximum of two stages to the count.

There are other forms of AV-type elections with restrictions. The second round of the two round system for elections to the National Assembly in France is open only to candidates who have obtained a minimum 12.5 per cent of the enrolled electorate in the first round (a second round is also held even if a candidate has won over 50 per cent of the votes cast on the first round but this is less than 25 per cent of the electorate). While in theory this would enable multiple candidates to go through (six potentially on a turnout of 75-80 per cent), candidates are permitted to withdraw from the election even if they have qualified for the second round. A second round winner requires only a plurality of the vote.

The reasons for imposing a restriction can be practical and philosophical. It obviously needs to be done if the balloting method is a run-off, otherwise there is a risk of an endless succession of run-off votes to winnow down a large field of candidates, each round attracting lower voter participation. If a decision has been made, for technological or political reasons, or from a belief about what voters find simplest to use, that a two column ballot paper is best, this does imply a two-round system in which the second one is a decisive run-off between two leading candidates.

Deeper reasons can also come in to the decision about constraining choice under AV-type

systems. There may be a felt need to ensure that the eventual winner has a significant amount of positive, first preference support behind him or her and that it should not be possible for a candidate without much positive support to be elected as a lowest common denominator outcome, or through the aggregation of rag tag and bobtail support from the fringes. This may be a particularly relevant criterion for roles such as the presidency of France (and the presidencies of many other countries) where the occupant has strong executive powers and also projects the image of the country on an international stage. It may be less relevant for national legislators (hence the weaker restriction on access to the second round of French National Assembly elections, and the use of pure AV rather than a restricted version for the Australian House of Representatives).

Ballot design and counting rules interact with each other; single column voting with numbers seems particularly appropriate if pure AV is being used, because multiple columns can become unwieldy if there are too many candidates, in terms of the size of ballot paper and possible voter confusion. It is also perfectly feasible to use a number-ranked ballot paper and apply SV (or other restricted) counting rules, as with the 'contingent vote' formerly used in Queensland, but it may be clearer to use a format that makes it obvious that the choice is restricted.⁶

Ballot validity: Optional or compulsory preferences?

Australia has compulsory preferences for elections to the federal House of

Representatives. The vote is not valid without a full ordering of preferences. Compulsory preferences enable the calculation of votes for the two main parties on a 'two-party preferred' basis; every valid ballot will contain the key piece of information as to whether that voter prefers to see a Labor or Liberal-National government. Two-party preferred is a maximal estimation of the party's support among the electorate.

However, preferences are optional (i.e. just a '1' or 'X' is accepted as a valid vote for that candidate) in AV elections in elections for the State House of Representatives in New South Wales and Queensland. They are also optional in STV elections in Northern Ireland, the Republic of Ireland and Scotland, including by-elections that take place using AV to fill a single vacancy.

Optional preferences make AV less distinct from FPTP than compulsory preferences, because some votes will fail to transfer from eliminated candidates, either as a deliberate choice by the voter or perhaps in some cases from not having understood the system.

“Most reformers would find AV preferable to SV, on the grounds of the greater choice it gives to voters, the fewer votes it ends up wasting, and the more majority winners it creates”

Which type in Britain?

In British circumstances, it seems clear that preferences would be optional – there was no serious discussion of compulsory preferences in advance of the introduction of STV in Scottish local government. The main contenders would appear to be a two-column ballot with a top two run-off (the Supplementary Vote) and a single column ballot with an exhaustive counting rule (the Alternative Vote).

Most reformers would find AV preferable to SV, on the grounds of the greater choice it gives to voters, the fewer votes it ends up wasting, and the more majority winners it creates, as well as its congruence with the use of STV in other elections.

SV has at its heart an assumption that politics is a duopoly – that while votes may scatter around to minor parties, the essential decision being made is between two parties. While this may still be the nature of the national choice of government, it is a choice which the electorate has increasingly rejected, through third-party voting and abstention.

SV, as noted elsewhere, has significant operational flaws, many of which stem from its two-party assumption. Key among them is that it requires voters to guess which two candidates will face each other in the second round, something which is uncertain in principle and has proved a close-run thing in several mayoral elections in England. Another basic flaw is that it regards preferences below the second as being weak, which they often are not – for instance, a voter whose sincere top preferences are Green and then Lib Dem may well have strong views as to which of Labour and Conservative is to be preferred. It

also neglects strong negative preferences – for instance, there will be many voters who would prefer any other candidate to that of an extreme party.

These questions of ballot design and counting rule may be secondary to the idea of a preferential element to an electoral system, and have a small effect on the results, but they will be important in terms of the principles under which the system operates. AV emerges as a stronger system than SV in nearly all respects, and one more in accord with reforming values.

AV and the voter

Preferential voting

AV asks the voter a rather more sophisticated question than FPTP. FPTP is a categorical question – it asks for a simple (pre-literate one might say) statement of support for a candidate which is taken as being a statement of equally strong opposition to every other candidate.

Real life decisions are not often like that, in that people generally have mixed feelings of partial support and opposition for each candidate. Political decisions, in what is becoming a multi-party system, are increasingly nuanced as well. Preferential voting recognises this reality and gives voters more freedom to state what their choices really are.

Tactical voting

The Alternative Vote eliminates the sort of tactical voting usually found under FPTP, in which people whose real preference is for a party that is locally in third place (or lower) cast a vote for their preferred option among the top two candidates. There is no need to do this under AV because votes are transferable and there is no risk of letting an unpopular candidate slip through because of a divided vote. This is the reason why transferable voting systems normally transfer votes from eliminated candidates at full value.

AV allows parties to provide voters with more choice, in that under FPTP smaller parties come under intense pressure not to stand candidates, for fear of splitting the vote and letting in the more disliked of the major parties.

AV would also do something about the way FPTP, by encouraging tactical voting, prevents three-way marginals from being sustainable and tends to collapse support for the third-

placed major party even when it starts with a substantial core of support, as with for instance Labour in Colchester or the Lib Dems in Hastings. Tactical erosion leads in turn to the decline in third party organisation and therefore the decline in local party competition. However, it is possible that AV would not do much to prevent the drift towards a political geography of separate two-party systems in different places – this remains to be seen.

Second order tactical voting

However, there is another form of tactical voting that can take place under AV, based on altering the order in which candidates are eliminated. To take a very simple example, take a situation where Party A has 39 per cent of first preferences, Party B has 31 per cent of first preferences, and Party C the remaining 30 per cent. Party B's supporters are quite hostile, on balance, to Party A and their second preferences divide in a ratio of 2:1 between A and C. However, Party C's supporters are evenly divided between A and B in their second preferences.

The result in this constituency would be as follows.

	First preferences per cent	Transferred votes per cent	Result per cent
Party A	39	+15	54
Party B	31	+15	46
Party C	30	-30	
	No majority	C eliminated	A wins

However, if Party C could persuade a few of Party B's voters to cast a tactical vote for their candidate, it would all change.

	Sincere first pref. per cent	Tactical switch per cent	Actual first pref per cent	Transferred votes per cent	Result per cent
Party A	39		39	+10	49
Party B	31	-1	30	-30	
Party C	30	+1	31	+20	51
			No majority	B eliminated	C wins

So, if the priority for some supporters of party B is to ensure the defeat of party A, rather than show support for their own candidate, they are able to achieve this objective through second order tactical voting. While these sort of voting problems are too complex to compute *ex ante* and manipulate under multi-member STV, it is possible under AV, distorting its ability to represent first preferences sincerely. It could be possible, given Britain's political configuration, for transfer-friendly parties eventually to get this message across to the crucial category of voters. One possible response to this problem would be to elect House of Commons seats by AV, but distribute some other political good in proportion to first preference votes. A formula for state funding of political parties would be an obvious candidate, as would appointments to other public bodies (by analogy with the second chamber under a secondary mandate model).

Systems that use different counting rules are even more susceptible to strategic considerations than pure AV. Two round systems

are particularly vulnerable in cases where there is one clear leader and a number of candidates vying for second place. It would make sense for some supporters of the leading candidate to 'lend' their votes to the least attractive potential competitor in the run-off, thereby eliminating candidates who might be able to defeat their real choice in the second round. A Chirac supporter in 2002, for instance, would have made his or her vote count most towards electing Chirac President of France by selecting Le Pen in the first round. A run-off between Le Pen and Chirac would see that voter choose sincerely, and also ensure Chirac's victory by uniting most of the political spectrum behind him against Le Pen. Such strategic considerations have been observed in Presidential elections in Cyprus.

Taking the top two candidates in an SV style election is also vulnerable to this sort of consideration, although the cost is higher than in a two round system because the voter's strategic choice remains with the unpopular opposition candidate. But the principal observed problem with SV in Britain has been the lack of certainty in many cases as to which candidates would feature in the second stage of the count. In Stoke-on-Trent, for instance, while Labour would clearly be one of the leading candidates the other could have been one of three (Independent, Conservative or BNP) and voters wishing to cast a decisive ballot could end up puzzled or, worse, actually voting to defeat their real second choice (see *Britain's Experience of Electoral Systems*, ERS 2008, page 107)

“ Political decisions, in what is becoming a multi-party system, are increasingly nuanced. Preferential voting recognises this reality ”

AV and the lack of majority mandates

The 2005 general election saw the lowest proportion ever of MPs elected with the support of a majority of voters in their constituency (in neither 2001 nor 2005 did any MP obtain a majority of the electorate).

	Minority mandates	Minority mandates per cent
1918	97	14.5
1922	174	30.2
1923	203	35.2
1924	124	21.5
1929	310	53.8
1931	34	5.9
1935	58	10.1
1945	174	29.0
1950	187	29.9
1951	39	6.2
1955	37	5.9
1959	80	12.7
1964	232	36.8
1966	185	29.4
1970	124	19.7
1974 Feb	408	64.3
1974 Oct	380	59.8
1979	206	32.4
1983	336	51.7
1987	283	43.5
1992	260	39.9
1997	313	47.5
2001	333	50.5
2005	426	65.9

Source: British Electoral Facts 1832-1987 FWS Craig 1989; Electoral Commission 2001, 2005; pre-1950 percentages given as percentage of single member seats

The sheer number of MPs with minority support, and the upward trend in recent years, is – at least from the voters’ point of view – straining the connection between MP and constituency. In all respects other than the provision of casework, the constituency link is

as weak as it has ever been. A majority of MPs speak for their constituents despite the fact that a majority of those who bothered to cast a vote did not do so for the incumbent. While before 1974 this was relatively peripheral, it has become an ever more important feature of the political landscape since then.

AV requires that an MP will have at least a qualified majority of local voters; there will be times that the final vote for the winner will not be half of the ballots cast because of ballots that do not transfer, but most MPs will have a proper majority under AV if not SV. A majority of voters will get some degree of support, and therefore have some degree of ownership, over the MP – the constituency link should not be a one-way relationship. AV will enhance the constituency authority of the MP as well.

AV and the declining mandate given to governments

In the 1922 election, the Conservatives won an overall majority with 38.5 per cent of the vote, but in this election there were 42 unopposed Conservative seats, and a considerable number of seats in which the Conservatives did not put up a candidate – the figure for percentage of the vote understates the mandate for the Tories from the electorate. From the arrival of the two party system at the election of 1924, until the Liberal revival of the early 1970s, majority governments under FPTP in Britain all had reasonably high levels of electoral support. The lowest share of the vote to produce a majority government was 44.1 per cent in 1964, and this was a tiny majority insufficient for a full parliament.

From 1974 until 2001, the re-emergence of multi-party politics set the threshold for an overall majority rather lower, with 39 to 44 per cent of the vote being rewarded with an outright majority. In October 1974, Labour fell not too far short of 40 per cent and only had a parliamentary majority of 3 seats, which was whittled away by 1976 – for most of the parliament there was no majority and the government was forced to pay attention to the House of Commons. The three other cases in which no party reached 40 per cent, namely

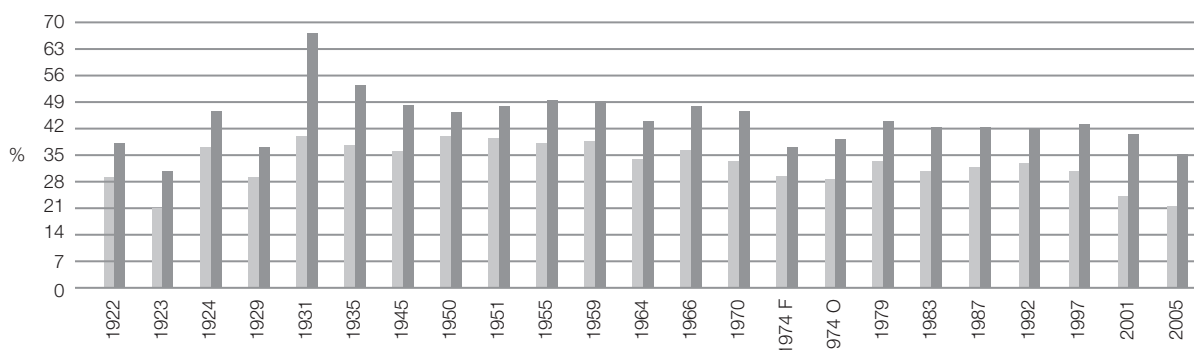
1923, 1929 and February 1974, all produced hung parliaments.

The situation in 2005, therefore, was unprecedented – a government with a comfortable Commons majority on less than 40 per cent support – and not just a little under, but massively below at only 35.2 per cent of the UK vote. One has to go back to the restricted franchise that existed before 1918 for a comparably low level of active popular support for a majority government, once those not voting in 2005 are taken into account.

While turnout and the winning party share of the vote may both increase at the next general election (although it is also possible that they might not), there does appear to be a declining trend. Turnout, and support for the main political parties, is strongest among older electors, and as they are replaced by new cohorts who are less attached to these institutions and values, the future may well hold more elections in which FPTP produces an overall majority in parliament on low shares of the vote.

There are three main lines of response to the declining strength of the popular endorsement given to governments under FPTP.

Governments' electoral support since 1922 ■ Electorate ■ Voting



1. Regard the formation of single party majority governments on low shares of the vote as acceptable. This entails no change to the system. In the 1970s 39 per cent was regarded as being a weak mandate, but since 2005 the no-reform position implies that a majority government on 35-36 per cent of the vote is regarded as acceptable. Does the logic of this position imply that a majority of seats on, say, 30 per cent is acceptable? The problem with this position is that it gets the issue of how much public support constitutes a mandate back to front, by regarding any outcome produced by FPTP as justified.

“AV may be a better system at manufacturing consent for a government than either FPTP or maybe even large-seat PR.”

2. Require coalition or minority government in cases where there is no party with a substantial lead and/or a share of the vote not too far short of a majority. This is entailed by a change to proportional representation. The hurdle for forming a single party majority will vary, being lower in a mainly constituency-member MMP system (such as Wales) or small-seat STV (such as Scottish local government) than in a more balanced MMP system, party list PR or large-seat STV. Discussion about what level of support is required to justify a single-party majority can be incorporated in the design of the electoral system. The lack of a popular endorsement for any single party govern-

ment can be dealt with by constructing a coalition representing parties with a higher combined level of popular support, at the cost of diluting the extent of positive popular support for that government as a whole. An alternative is minority government, in which a single party government may continue but is responsive to the balanced situation in parliament.

3. Extend the ways in which the electoral system can confer legitimacy on single party government. A single-post mayoral or presidential election can do this, and so, in a different way, can AV. By enabling the expression of second and lower preferences, AV makes explicit and measurable the weaker forms of consent that often do exist when a government wins a majority, as – in all fairness – it did in 2005. By raising measurable popular consent, if not wholehearted support, back up into the higher ranges of support the major parties formerly enjoyed (40 per cent or more), AV would provide a more solid foundation than FPTP for the exercise of government power.

This line of argument points towards AV's potential at averting, or delaying, a crisis in legitimacy of government under FPTP. AV's possible, and debatable, property of sometimes producing more disproportional results than FPTP when one considers legislatures as a whole neglects its necessary ability to increase the legitimacy of the individual MP, and its positive effect on the overall legitimacy of single party government. AV may be a better system at manufacturing consent for a government than either FPTP or maybe even large-seat PR. Its advantages in an executive-dominated political system therefore may be strong enough to resist pressure for a more representative and legitimate legislature for some time.

How could AV be introduced?

AV is a very simple electoral reform. The Bill to introduce it could be a relatively short piece of legislation amending the legal descriptions of how votes are cast and how the winner of an election is defined, and some statutory instruments to flesh out the other details. It need not take much Parliamentary time. Nor does it involve the extensive administrative resources and time that a full boundary review would take.

It is sometimes supposed that a referendum is necessary or desirable to implement a change such as a reform to the voting system. Does this apply to the Alternative Vote?

For

- There has been an assumption in recent years that constitutional changes should be validated directly by the people through their votes, and that there is something undemocratic about not doing so. This underlay the government's decision to offer referendums over the transfer of legal and administrative power to Scotland and Wales, and even to regional government in London and the North East of England.
- Validation through a referendum would make it difficult for any future government to repeal a reform – it would lock in progress, in a way in which ordinary legislation could not.

Against

- AV in itself expands the power of voters over the political system, working directly on Westminster politics.
- AV alone is not a radical enough constitutional reform to justify the holding of a referendum – it does not involve a transfer of legal powers as did devolution to Scotland, and it leaves the single-member majoritarian

basis of the Westminster system unchanged. It is therefore a refinement, a ballot redesign, rather than a radical reform.

- Being a minor and rather technical issue, it is hard to see how a proper referendum campaign might be waged on the issue of AV. Referendums where the issue is not perceived as clear and important to the voters tend to attract low turnouts and voters will sometimes use them as a stick to beat the government rather than on their own merits.

On balance, the arguments against seem more compelling than the arguments in favour, particularly the consideration that it is too minor a change to merit a referendum and too technical to generate the informed and interested public debate that is required if the referendum process is to work properly.

Beyond AV: How AV could develop towards PR

Three broad sets of circumstances that are conceivable under AV would create the conditions for a further change in the electoral system. One or other is highly likely to arise at some point, although the timing will depend on contingent factors. There could well be a series of 'well behaved' AV elections in which governments have workable majorities, the opposition is not too badly represented, and the third party gets a fairer deal than under FPTP, before any of these occurs.

AV produces hung parliaments, and thus a coalition for PR

When the national lead for either Labour or Conservative is relatively small, AV is more likely than FPTP to deny either an outright majority (depending on the extent to which Lib Dem second preferences skew left or right). This is because AV will tend to expand the numbers of Lib Dem MPs relative to FPTP in nearly every situation. As electoral reform with a proportional dimension is long standing, core Lib Dem policy, further progress could well end up being part of a coalition agreement.

However, life under AV is fairly comfortable for Liberal Democrats. All their incumbent MPs are likely to find their seats safer than under FPTP, and change to proportionality would destabilise this comfortable position. AV also suits Lib Dem campaigning techniques quite well, and the party could reasonably look forward to faster electoral progress than under FPTP in its target constituencies because acquiring second preferences is easier than acquiring tactical votes. It would be understandable if the party settled for AV for a – perhaps lengthy – 'transitional period' or 'national conversation'

rather than move quickly into a more thoroughgoing electoral reform.

AV produces a highly disproportionate national result

Election landslides do not occur very often, but the fact that there have been four elections in a recent 18-year period (1983-2001) which have produced majorities of over 100 seats should suggest that one should make the eventuality part of the process of thinking about the future of electoral systems. AV's potential to exaggerate landslide results may therefore have a bearing on the future direction of reform. Perhaps the steadiest path to a reform process is when one of the major parties has been severely penalised by the existing electoral system and therefore starts thinking about how to introduce more 'fairness' to the system. In a future 1997-type election when a party has been crushed by a landslide, the correction mechanism is more likely to involve proportionality than reversion to FPTP.

AV produces a highly disproportionate sub- national result

The model result in Scotland for October 1974 illustrates some of the destabilising possibilities of AV (as well as FPTP) in multi-party politics. A result in Scotland or Wales for a Westminster election under AV could have wider implications, rather as the February 1974 Unionist landslide (accomplished through an electoral pact) did in Northern Ireland. While it

would be technically possible for a more proportional system to be introduced just for a component part of the UK, except in the case of STV covering Northern Ireland alone this does not seem a practical political option. Further electoral reform at Westminster (from AV or FPTP) could be the price of preserving the Union.

Where would reform go after AV?

Introducing a more proportional component to the electoral system than can be offered by AV alone is the most likely future step for several reasons. The electoral reform movement is not going to go away after AV and accept a permanent settlement that is not based on proportionality.

Proportionality, as well as being an essential goal of a well-established movement, is also increasingly congruent with the way politics and society is evolving. As we have seen, AV in multi-party politics can be as chaotic as FPTP, and a lot of the argument for AV seems based on popular acceptance of a two party choice of government. This is a good description of Australia, but an increasingly poor one of the UK. Different party systems have evolved in different areas of the country and this would be changed only at the margins by AV. Party allegiances will probably continue to weaken and fragment. But there are also increasing demands for parliament and other elected bodies to be representative in a further sense, that of including people from all significant social and ethnic groups. AV is not significantly different from FPTP in this respect.

Proportionality is also the solution for the aspects of AV that are likely to prove most

problematic, namely unfairness to an unpopular second party and capricious behaviour in a multi-party environment. Reversion to FPTP would not improve these problems significantly, while proportionality would solve them. Social representation – ensuring that elected bodies have a reasonable number of women, and reflect the diversity of society – has become increasingly significant in public discussions about democracy. Single member seats, as prevail under both FPTP and AV, are inimical to wider representation along these lines.

A further incremental reform to add proportionality to a system operating under AV could take one of several forms:

1. A re-balancing of power between a House of Commons elected by AV and a second chamber elected by a proportional system, with more power and legitimacy than the current House of Lords. This is essentially how parties outside the Labor-Coalition duopoly in Australia ever achieve influence, because the Senate is powerful, proportionally elected, and frequently has smaller parties holding the balance.
2. Adding a proportional top-up to constituency seats elected by AV, as originally proposed by the Jenkins Commission in 1998 with its 'AV+' system providing for a small (15 per cent or so) number of top-up members elected one or two at a time in small districts to compensate for the local disproportionality of the AV results. Such a small top-up would maintain a fairly majoritarian outcome, with the possible regional and second-party effects of AV dampened. It would of course be possible to provide for a more proportional overall outcome with a larger top-up.
3. Increasing the number of MPs elected per seat from one (single district systems can

never be described as proportional) to several, maintaining the preferential method of voting – i.e. the Single Transferable Vote (STV). At least in the initial incremental reform, this might involve a relatively small-district version of STV with perhaps a standard size of 3 MPs for a seat, and some 2-member and single-member seats for geographically difficult territory. Small-district STV is considerably more proportional than small-top-up AV+, but it is still more majoritarian than large-district STV or large-top-up MMP systems.

Each of these options would be a logical development to remove some of the weaknesses of AV, but the reluctance of MPs to contemplate them should not be underestimated. The first option would involve modifying what MPs regard as a cardinal constitutional principle, namely the primacy of the Commons. The second option would involve adding complication to the electoral system and creating a new category of MP which would be difficult to absorb into the constituency based political culture of Westminster (as it has been in Wales and Scotland). The third option at least maintains these, but at the cost (for MPs at least) of giving up their cherished single-member monopoly constituency link.

Part of the charm of AV for current MPs is that it is such an easy reform, and avoids facing up to any of the difficult issues that a further reform would involve (bicameralism, different types of MP, multi-member constituencies). Precisely for this reason, AV requires – as would FPTP – an outside process to continue to monitor it and the case for further reform, and that sovereignty over the process of further reform needs ultimately to rest with the electorate rather than what would remain an essentially unreformed Westminster.

Conclusion

AV is possibly a ‘better’ system than many reformers have hitherto conceded, in that it does have intrinsic merits that make it superior to FPTP. The ability of voters to record a sincere first preference, the widening of political choice available to the elector, and the disincentives it offers for parties to pursue core vote strategies that ignore the wishes of the majority of the electorate, are all positive. The much-discussed negative of occasionally producing more disproportional results than FPTP is a weaker counter-argument than generally admitted, as the circumstances in which it does are rare, actually replicable in FPTP by electoral pacts and tactical voting, and somewhat defensible in principle.

“AV leaves some of the core problems of British politics as it is currently constituted unchanged. It does nothing for the majority of the country that falls into safe constituencies”

But, perhaps perversely, some of AV’s strengths may not attract it from a reformer’s point of view. It is a more robust and defensible majoritarian system than FPTP, in that it gives both the single member constituency MP and a government that commands a majority in the House of Commons a stronger claim to legitimacy from the popular vote. Its intrinsic merits work, to some extent, against its strategic benefits. It leaves some of the core

problems of British politics as it is currently constituted unchanged. It maintains a tight focus on a category of marginal seats, which is barely, if at all, larger than under FPTP, and does nothing for the majority of the country that falls into safe constituencies. It may worsen regional polarisation. It remains disproportional, and therefore leaves a lot of voters unrepresented by someone they have chosen and with whom they have sympathy. It also maintains the discriminatory qualities of single member representation with respect to women and minorities. In moving to a better majoritarian system, would one be blocking progress to a new, more plural, democratic and accountable form of politics?

Against this is the idea that AV would unlock further progress. Most obviously, a change to AV makes the logic of a single, preferential mode of voting extremely strong and it could well be followed quickly by the introduction of STV in local government and throughout elected bodies other than the House of Commons with its unique government-forming responsibility. As noted above, AV itself could lead to further reform in a number of ways – it is a Spaghetti Junction of possibilities on any road map to thoroughgoing electoral reform. But its major importance could be less direct and tangible. By altering the electoral system for the House of Commons, AV would bring electoral reform into a different realm of politics – no more a vague idealistic dream, but the stuff of arguments over principles and detail. Do it once, and one shows that it can be done, one brings the debate onto a much more realistic and sensible plane. Even if the opposition ends up arguing for the restoration of FPTP, this in itself is some sort of progress – that they are trapped into a position of justifying electoral systems on their merits rather than appealing to tradition or inertia. The reform case should prove the strongest in such

a practical debate. But even if AV ends up sticking for 20 years (or 30, or 50) before the next stage, it is worth doing. That would amount to decades under a better system, more possibilities of further reform, and bringing electoral reform of the House of Commons into the realm of the art of the possible.

A Better Alternative?



What AV would mean for Westminster

Founded in 1884, the Electoral Reform Society is the oldest organisation in the world concerned with electoral systems and procedures.

The Society is campaigning to change the way we choose our politicians. We believe that a fair voting system will improve our democracy, allow politicians to better represent you and help

them to tackle the serious issues facing our society. Fairness, accountability and a real choice for voters should not be compromised.

Alongside the Society's permanent staff, over 2,000 individuals from across the political spectrum take an active day-to-day role in its campaigning activities.

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