

# Electoral Reform: A Vote for Change?

The Con–Lib coalition has put voting reform firmly on the agenda but will this really change how the House of Commons and the House of Lords work? **Simon Hix, Ron Johnston and Iain McLean** explore the proposed reforms and predict their likely impact on the British political scene.

In the United Kingdom, electoral reform is not a novel topic. The issue has been around for many decades – but has rarely caught the public imagination for long. Over the last 65 years only the Liberal Democrats and their predecessors have ever taken electoral reform seriously. Labour occasionally flirted with changes to the voting system, notably in the 1980s when the party wondered if it could win again under first-past-the-post (FPTP); while the Conservatives set themselves resolutely against any reform, arguing that FPTP best ensures a single-party majority government that the electorate can replace by another party, also with a majority.

The 2010 general election was thus highly unusual, with all three parties including manifesto commitments to some form of electoral reform. The Liberal Democrats sustained their commitment to election by single transferrable vote (STV) in multi-member constituencies – giving voters a choice of candidates within parties and likely to produce an outcome consistent with proportional representation (PR). The Conservatives remained committed to FPTP, but – linked to a proposed reduction of MPs from 650 to 585 – wanted to ensure that all UK constituencies had the same number of electors, believing that this would largely eliminate the systemic biases that had delivered landslide victories to Labour at recent elections. Finally, Labour in February 2010, attempting to win Liberal Democrat support in a possible coalition after the general election, promised a referendum by October 2011 on the alternative vote (AV) – a change that would probably advantage it and the Liberal Democrats and disadvantage the Conservatives. A senior Liberal Democrat indicated that although this fell well short of STV and the ‘fair votes’ his party advocated, it was a useful first step that would at least eliminate the tactical voting that characterised recent elections.

All three parties were also committed to creating a (wholly or largely) elected House of Lords. Only Labour published details of its preferred system – closed PR list, as used for elections to the European Parliament

from Great Britain (though not Northern Ireland). The Conservatives said they ‘support the first-past-the-post system for Westminster elections’, apparently including elections to their proposed ‘mainly elected second chamber’. The Liberal Democrats merely called for a ‘fully elected second chamber with considerably fewer members than the current House’.

The Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition formed in the wake of the 2010 general election pledged to consider voting reform in both houses. For the Commons, their published agreement included both a bill to replace FPTP by AV if such a move had been positively approved in a referendum, and a commitment to create a ‘wholly or mainly elected upper chamber on the basis of proportional representation’. But what are these different systems, and what might be their implications for British politics?

## AV and the House of Commons

The alternative vote system involves electors ranking all candidates in single-member constituencies. If a candidate obtains 50 per cent plus one of the first preference votes, he or she is elected. If none crosses that threshold, the one with the least first preference votes is eliminated and his or her second preferences added to those already received by the other candidates. This procedure continues until either one candidate crosses the 50 per cent plus one threshold, or only two candidates remain.

AV was introduced in Australia in 1918 to counter the tendency there for a single left-of-centre party to defeat the incumbent right-of-centre parties, which split the non-left votes between them by pooling their votes where a candidate of the left failed to gain a majority. Its introduction was clearly made with partisan intent and impact.

It is generally thought – based on assumptions of which parties would receive most of the second prefer-

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ences from eliminated candidates – that use of AV in the UK would favour the centre-left Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. Further, tacit promotion of tactical voting since 1992 (and more explicit suggestions by several Labour cabinet ministers in 2010) has seen Labour voters prepared to support Liberal Democrat candidates where they apparently have a better chance of defeating Conservatives, and vice versa. On this basis, the Electoral Reform Society calculations suggest that if the alternative vote had been used in the 2010 election in the 424 seats (excluding Northern Ireland) where the winning candidate obtained less than half of the votes cast, Labour would have obtained four more seats than under FPTP and the Liberal Democrats a further 22; the Conservatives would have obtained 26 fewer. Although this means a difference in the outcome between FPTP and AV affecting only 4 per cent of British constituencies, it would have given Labour and the Liberal Democrats a clear House of Commons majority.

Any simulation of how the 2010 election would have resulted under AV, or any other electoral system, however, should be treated with caution. We do not know how many people in each constituency voted tactically, and might have voted for several other parties than the one they chose under FPTP had they been given the opportunity to rank all of the candidates. In 2005, however, 15 per cent of British Election Study survey respondents said that they voted for a party other than their most preferred; of those whose first preference was neither Conservative nor Labour 45 per cent did not vote for their preferred party; and of those whose first preference was not Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat, fully 79 per cent did not.

One indication of how fragmented first preferences might be under AV is the proportion of votes received by smaller parties in other elections. A large percentage of the British electorate regularly votes for a minor party in elections for the European Parliament, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly of Wales, the London Assembly or local government. Whereas in the 2010 general election only 10 per cent of British voters supported a party other than the Conservatives, Labour or the Liberal Democrats, in the 2009 European Parliament elections some 43 per cent of voters supported minor parties. Some British voters may well be willing to use their first preference under AV to support a smaller party in a general election, using their second preference to indicate which



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of the larger parties they prefer to see in government.

The potential for fragmentation of the vote under the alternative vote makes it very difficult to predict what would happen under this system. However, if there is considerable fragmentation of the electorate as a result of the increased choice, the gap between the proportion of (first preference) votes received by each party and its proportion of seats could be even larger under the alternative vote than the traditional first-past-the-post method.

Given those calculations, it is perhaps surprising that the Conservatives agreed to a referendum on AV as part of their deal with the Liberal Democrats – and also that the latter were prepared to water down considerably their commitment to ‘fair votes’. Both clearly were prepared to compromise: the Liberal Democrats viewing AV as a first step towards a PR system negotiable when they were in a stronger position in a later coalition; the Conservatives because the impact on their representation *may* not be great – certainly not as great

as under a PR system, which might mean they would never again achieve a Parliamentary majority. In any case, some Conservatives believe that they can ensure that the referendum fails.

If the alternative vote were introduced, however, would Labour voters be prepared to give their second preferences to Liberal Democrat candidates given the latter's failure to create a 'progressive coalition' in 2010? Would Conservative voters be more prepared to give second preferences to Liberal Democrat candidates? Which parties would British National Party, UK Independence Party, Greens, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru supporters be prepared to give second preferences to?

Not all patterns of preference allocation would necessarily disadvantage the Conservatives, but these decisions could be crucial in many places for the supporters of all three main parties. In 2010, for example, Liberal Democrats came third behind Conservative and Labour in 286 constituencies, Labour candidates came third in 203 and the Conservatives occupied third place in 95. How their supporters allocated their second preferences would have been crucial in substantial sections of the country.

Over time, the electorate may realise that AV can be used to deliver policy cues to the parties likely to gain power – by giving first preference votes to smaller parties with little chance of winning seats, and then second preferences to the larger parties. Indeed, before the 2010 election some 15 per cent of respondents to the British Election Study survey said that they really preferred UKIP and about 10 per cent said the Greens, but only about 3 and 1 per cent, respectively, actually voted for those two. Over time, a sophisticated electorate could use AV to make their policy choices clear to those elected to govern.

## An Elected Upper House

On the issue of the House of Lords, the Con-Lib coalition's proposals go much further than either member party's manifesto. The partners have promised to create a committee to bring forward proposals for a wholly or mainly elected upper house by the end of 2010, adding: 'It is likely that this bill will advocate single long terms of office'. There is wriggle room here – the commitment is to bring forward a bill, not to vote for it. This promise sits awkwardly with the next sentences of the coalition agreement, which promise to 'grandfather' (or protect) the rights of existing peers, and to create extra peers from the coalition parties. Nevertheless, the coalition is now offering the same scheme of Lords reform as Labour was before the election.

If the UK gets an elected Senate in the medium term, it will therefore feature long, non-renewable-term senators (for want of a better word) elected, probably a third at a time, from large regional constituencies by proportional representation. All PR systems would work similarly: the crucial figure would be each region's number of senators. The larger the region, the smaller the smallest party that would win a seat: in a nine-senator region,

for example, any party or independent candidate getting 10 per cent of the vote would win a seat, whereas in a four-senator constituency 20 per cent would be needed to gain representation.

The electoral systems for the two chambers should probably be complementary. If the Commons either retained FPTP (if the alternative vote referendum is voted down) or adopted AV, the leading party, by votes, would have an exaggerated share of seats. Probably, on either system, the existing bias against the Conservatives would remain. But while the Commons would quite likely contain a majority party, the Senate almost certainly would not.

## Conclusions

If both proposals were to be implemented, the UK would look very like Australia, which uses AV for its lower house and PR for its upper house. But the UK can avoid the over-representation of small regions that is the worst feature of the Australian federal system. In both Australia and the US each state has the same number of senators regardless of its size but the Conservative proposals to reduce the number of MPs and have equal-sized constituencies should remove this bias in the UK. Currently the most significant over-representation occurs in Wales (the average Welsh constituency currently has some 56,000 voters whereas in England the figure is around 72,000) but drafters of the new bill to create an elected Senate are unlikely to repeat the guarantees of a minimum number of seats for Wales and Scotland included in the House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act 1944, which created the current Welsh over-representation (Scotland's guarantee was largely removed by the Scotland Act 1998).

But there is a long way to go yet. The bills to introduce a (binding) referendum to change to AV for election to a smaller House of Commons and to enact a PR-elected Senate have to pass through both of the present houses – and the referendum has to win popular support.

Sections of the UK electorate have become accustomed to a variety of more proportional electoral systems over the last decade – for elections to the European Parliament, the London Assembly, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly of Wales, the Northern Ireland Assembly and elsewhere – and now the auguries for some electoral reform for the UK's Parliament are better than for a long time. But many hurdles remain – not least the survival of the coalition government that has finally put these proposals firmly on the political agenda.

**Simon Hix** is a professor in the Department of Government at the London School of Economics and Political Science; **Ron Johnston** is a professor in the School of Geographical Sciences at the University of Bristol; and **Iain McLean** is a professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at the University of Oxford and an Official Fellow of Nuffield College. They co-authored a recent report for the British Academy, *Choosing an Electoral System*, which provides an accessible introduction to a wide range of systems.

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