The Alternative Vote Referendum:

why I will vote YES

By

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On 5 May 2011 the UK will hold what will be only the second referendum in its history.

This paper sets out the legislative framework and explains why I will vote "YES." It is written in an entirely personal capacity and my views should not be attributed to any organisation that I may be involved with.

The legislative framework

The law is set out in the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2011/1/contents/enacted . Section 1(3) provides that the referendum must be held on 5 May 2011 unless the Minister (defined in s.7(1) to be the Lord President of the Council or the Secretary of State) certifies that this date is impractical. All of the indications are that the referendum will be held on that date.

Section 1 (7) states *"The question that is to appear on the ballot papers is—*

At present, the UK uses the "first past the post" system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the "alternative vote" system be used instead?"

Schedule 2 of the act sets out how the ballot paper will look.

Referendum on the voting system for United Kingdom parliamentary elections	
At present, the UK uses the "first past the post" system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the "alternative vote" system be used instead? Vote (X) in one box only	
YES	
NO	

Section 8 makes it clear that the result of the referendum will be decided by a simple majority of the votes cast. If "YES" gets more votes than "NO" then AV will come into force. That wording makes it clear that in the very unlikely event of an exact tie in the referendum, AV will not come into force.

Section 9 explains how AV will be enacted. The Representation of the People Act 1983 will be amended as follows:

9 The alternative vote system: amendments

(1) In Schedule 1 to the 1983 Act (parliamentary elections rules), after rule 37 there is inserted—

"How votes are to be given

37A (1) A voter votes by marking the ballot paper with—

(a) the number 1 opposite the name of the candidate who is the voter's first preference (or, as the case may be, the only candidate for whom the voter wishes to vote),

(b) if the voter wishes, the number 2 opposite the name of the candidate who is the voter's second preference,

and so on.

(2) The voter may mark as many preferences (up to the number of candidates) as the voter wishes."

(2) After rule 45 in that Schedule there is inserted—

"How votes are to be counted

45A (1) This rule sets out how votes are to be counted, in one or more stages of counting, in order to give effect to the preferences marked by voters on their ballot papers and so to determine which candidate is elected.

(2) Votes shall be allocated to candidates in accordance with voters' first preferences and, if one candidate has more votes than the other candidates put together, that candidate is elected.

(3) If not, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and that candidate's votes shall be dealt with as follows—

(a) each vote cast by a voter who also ranked one or more of the remaining candidates shall be reallocated to that remaining candidate or (as the case may be) to the one that the voter ranked highest;

(b) any votes not reallocated shall play no further part in the counting.

(4) If after that stage of counting one candidate has more votes than the other remaining candidates put together, that candidate is elected.

(5) If not, the process mentioned in paragraph (3) above shall be repeated as many times as necessary until one candidate has more votes than the other remaining candidates put together, and so is elected.

Information to be given by returning officer after each stage of counting

45B (1) If no candidate is elected (as mentioned in rule 45A(2)) at the first stage of counting, the returning officer shall, immediately after that stage, record and make publicly available the following information—

(a) the number of first-preference votes obtained by each candidate;

(b) which candidate was eliminated;

(c) the number of rejected ballot papers.

(2) Immediately after each subsequent stage of counting, except the final stage (on completion of which the requirements in rule 50 apply), the returning officer shall record and make publicly available the following information —

(a) the number of votes obtained by each candidate at that stage (including any reallocated in accordance with rule 45A);

(b) which candidate was eliminated at that stage;

(c) the number of votes of the candidate eliminated at the previous stage that were not reallocated."

How the first past the post system works

While most UK citizens will be familiar with the "first past the post" system (abbreviated to FPTP), it helps to review the details.

How you vote

You receive a ballot paper which looks like the following illustrative example:

Name	Party	Place an (X) in one box only
Brian	British National Party	
Charles	Conservative Party	X
Larry	Labour Party	
Linda	Liberal Democrat Party	
Una	UK Independence Party	

You vote as instructed on the form. In the above example, the vote has been cast for Charles.

How the votes are counted

All of the ballot papers are counted, to see how many votes each candidate has received. The candidate who receives the most votes is the winner.

How the alternative vote system works

The “alternative vote” system (abbreviated to AV) is explained in the above extracts from the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. However it is worth seeing how it operates in an illustrative example.

How you vote

You receive a ballot paper which looks like the following illustrative example:

Name	Party	Number the candidates in your order of preference, starting with “1” for your highest preference, and so on.
Brian	British National Party	5
Charles	Conservative Party	1
Larry	Labour Party	3
Linda	Liberal Democrat Party	2
Una	UK Independence Party	4

You have voted above as instructed. In the above example, the vote has been cast taking into account my preferences which are set out later in this paper.

How the votes are counted

Assume there are 100,000 voters and that when the first preferences are counted, the results are as follows:

Name	Party	Count of first preferences
Brian	British National Party	25,000
Charles	Conservative Party	20,000
Larry	Labour Party	20,000
Linda	Liberal Democrat Party	20,000
Una	UK Independence Party	15,000

To have more votes than all the other candidates combined, a candidate would need to have more than 50,000 votes. No candidate has achieved this. Accordingly the bottom placed candidate, Una, is eliminated and the second preferences counted on the ballot papers which had Una as their first preference.

For simplicity, assume that 10,000 of those voters put Charles as their second preference, 4,000 put Brian as their second preference and 1,000 put Larry. The count now stands as follows:

Name	Party	Count
Brian	British National Party	29,000
Charles	Conservative Party	30,000
Larry	Labour Party	21,000
Linda	Liberal Democrat Party	20,000

No candidate has yet achieved more votes than all the other candidates combined. Accordingly the lowest place candidate, Linda, is eliminated. The votes on ballot papers in her pile are reallocated. Assume that to be 10,000 to Charles and 10,000 to Larry. The count now stands as follows:

Name	Party	Count
Brian	British National Party	29,000
Charles	Conservative Party	40,000
Larry	Labour Party	31,000

No candidate has yet achieved more votes than all the other candidates combined. Accordingly the lowest place candidate, Brian, is eliminated. The votes on ballot papers in his pile are reallocated. Assume that to be 11,000 to Charles and 18,000 to Larry. The count now stands as follows:

Name	Party	Count
Charles	Conservative Party	51,000
Larry	Labour Party	49,000

Charles has more votes than all the remaining candidates (being only Larry) and so Charles is declared elected.

Some comments on the FPTP system

When there are only two candidates, FPTP works perfectly. You vote for the candidate you want, and if 51% of the voters agree with you, your candidate wins. Otherwise the opposing candidate wins.

In this scenario, more complex voting systems are not needed. Indeed they would make no difference. For example AV with two candidates is a meaningless concept; it is logically exactly the same as FPTP.

However, FPTP starts to give peculiar results as soon as there are three candidates. It is particularly problematical when all three candidates are credible winners, but can cause problems even when only two of the candidates are likely to win. Two examples from real elections illustrate the point.

The 1992 US Presidential Election

The detailed results are on the Wikipedia page http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1992 and can be summarised as follows:

Name	Popular vote	Electoral college
Bill Clinton	44,909,806	370
George HW Bush	39,104,550	168
Ross Perot	19,973,821	0

Ross Perot ran as an independent. Politically he was well to the right of the other two candidates, and it is generally accepted that if he had not run, most of the people who voted for him would have voted for GHW Bush. Accordingly, by voting for the candidate they liked most, Perot, they caused the election of the candidate they liked least, Clinton.

The January 2011 Oldham and Saddleworth East by-election

In the May 2010 general election, the results were as follows:

Party	Votes
Labour	14,186
Liberal Democrat	14,083
Conservative	11,773
British National Party	2,546
UK Independence Party	1,720
Christian Party	212
Total	**44,520**

The elected Labour candidate, Phil Woolas was later disqualified by a special election court for breaching the Representation of the People Act, so a by-election needed to take place. It was held in January 2011.

Several public opinion polls were taken before the by-election; details of three can be found at http://www.libdemvoice.org/byelection-polls-labour-17-ahead-22689.html and are summarised below.

Party	ICM	Populus	Survation
Labour	44%	46%	31%
Lib Dem	27%	29%	30%
Conservative	18%	15%	6%

While polls are sometimes wrong, it was clear from both the May 2010 result and the polls that the Conservative candidate was not going to win. If you were a Conservative Party member in Oldham East & Saddleworth, how would you vote?

- If you were completely indifferent between Labour and Lib Dem winning, you would vote Conservative.
- If you cared which of Labour and Lib Dem won, you would vote for one of them. As the Lib Dem's are in coalition with the Conservative Party, you would most probably vote Lib Dem.

The actual result of the by-election was as follows:

Party	Votes
Labour	14,718
Liberal Democrat	11,160
Conservative	4,481
British National Party	1,560
UK Independence Party	2,029
Total	**33,948**

The total turnout was down on the general election. Given the information we have about the May 2010 result, the opinion poll information and the existence of the coalition, the most likely explanation of the result is:

- Some people who had voted Labour in May 2010 did not vote in the by-election, since total turnout was down.
- Some who voted Lib Dem in May 2010 did not vote, while others switched to voting Labour.
- Some who voted Conservative in May 2010 voted Lib Dem in the by-election. However some decided to vote Conservative despite their candidate being most unlikely to win. Had those all voted Lib Dem, the Lib Dem candidate would have won, bolstering the coalition.

Summary

Both of the above elections demonstrate that under FPTP, voting for the candidate you most want (Perot and Conservative respectively) can result in your causing the election of the candidate you want least (Clinton and Labour respectively).

The effect can be demonstrated even more strikingly by considering our hypothetical election in the light of my own personal preferences:

Name	Party	Opinion poll	My personal preferences
Brian	British National Party	25%	I loathe the BNP.
Charles	Conservative Party	20%	I am a Conservative Party member and want Charles to win.
Larry	Labour Party	20%	Labour are a credible party but with some serious weaknesses in their policies.
Linda	Liberal Democrat Party	20%	The Lib Dems appear to have adopted more sensible policies than the past and are in coalition with the Conservatives. Therefore I prefer them to Labour.
Una	UK Independence Party	15%	UKIP are a single issue party. I am pro-European and also UKIP talk about banning the burka, so I am hardly likely to support them.

The opinion polls show that if everyone votes for their preferred party, the BNP will win. This would be a deplorable result from the perspective of most Conservative, Labour and Lib Dem supporters.

However, who on earth do I vote for to stop the BNP? I have no reason to believe that Labour or Lib Dem are likely to be a better choice to stop the BNP than the Conservatives. The Labour and Lib Dem supporters are in the same quandary, in the absence of a clear poll leader amongst the three main parties.

All of the above examples demonstrate that under FPTP, unless you are genuinely indifferent about all candidates other than your top choice, you need to guess how other people will vote before you decide who you are going to vote for.

A full run off system

The most natural way of avoiding having to second guess how other people will vote is to use a full run off system. Under this, you have a simple ballot (“put an X against your desired candidate) and after the ballot is counted:

- If one candidate has over 50%, that person is elected.

- Otherwise, eliminate the bottom candidate and hold another ballot.

Under this scenario, almost everyone would agree that the most natural and appropriate thing to do is in each round to vote for your favourite candidate.

The main drawback of operating a full run off system is the monetary cost and logistical effort involved in organising the election, and also the time it takes you to vote in all the ballot rounds.

If you make the assumption that every voter has a definite set of preferences between the candidates, and that order of preference (between the remaining candidates) does not change as candidates are eliminated, then it is possible to save the cost of repeated ballots. Under the assumption of static preferences the AV system gives exactly the same result as holding repeated ballots.

In the USA the AV system is used for some mayoral and other local elections. However the Americans have a far more meaningful name for the system than AV; they call it the Instant Runoff System (IRV). See the website http://instantrunoff.com

Why I prefer AV to FPTP

The single most important reason is that it allows me to vote for the candidate that I like most, without having to think first about how other people are going to vote.

There are also a number of other reasons why I prefer AV:

- AV makes it much harder for extremist parties to win. In the above hypothetical example, under FPTP the BNP would win even though most of the electorate detested them, because the voters were fragmented amongst the major parties.
- AV encourages candidates to think about the entire electorate and what they want, rather than just concentrating on getting out their "core vote."
- There are likely to be fewer "safe seats" and more "contestable seats" than under FPTP.

The "NO" campaign's arguments against AV

The NO campaign website http://www.no2av.org/ presents a number of arguments against AV. These are worth reading, and then visiting the YES campaign website http://www.yestofairervotes.org/pages/av-myths where they are rebutted one by one. As the YES website does that so well, there is no point my repeating all of the arguments. However I do want to address three NO arguments.

More coalition governments

One argument made repeatedly by the NO campaign is that AV means more coalition governments. However, what causes coalitions is people voting for parties other than the two main ones. A paper on this point, "Worst of Both Worlds: Why First Past the Post no longer works" by Guy Lodge and Glen Gottfried can be downloaded free from the website of from Institute for Public Policy Research: http://www.ippr.org.uk/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=798

It demonstrates how even under FPTP the number of MPs from outside the two main parties has been increasing for decades. It is this trend that has led to the 2010 coalition and which makes coalitions more likely in the future.

Furthermore, for each country where coalitions have led to poor government one can think of others where coalitions have led to good government that avoids lurching between the political extremes.

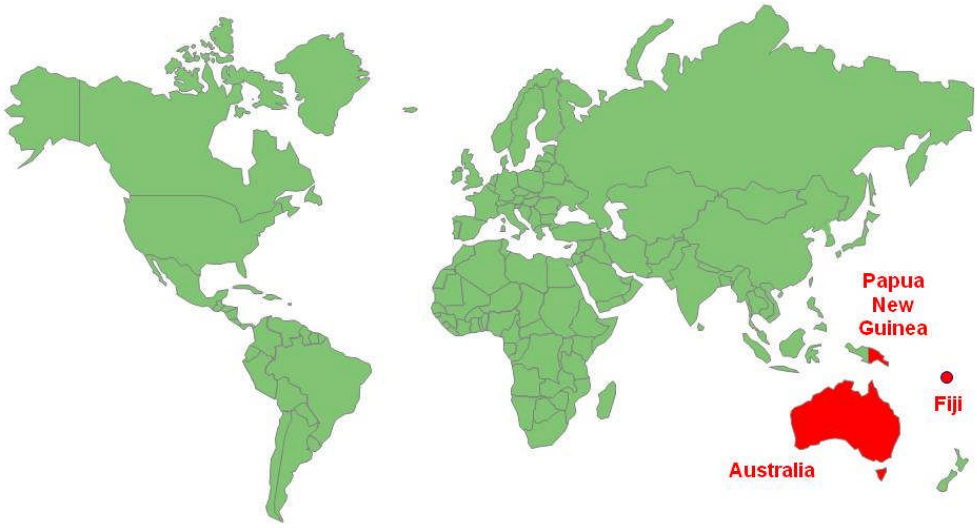
AV also requires tactical voting

No voting system is perfect. With a little creativity it is possible to write down a set of preferences that you hold and that other voters hold that will cause you to be unhappy with the election outcome and wish that you had not ranked the candidates in the order that you actually prefer them.
However, in the real world the key point with AV is that you can vote for your first preference knowing that if he is eliminated your vote will automatically transfer to your next favoured candidate who is still in the race. Even with all of the information available to you from opinion polls etc, in real world situations (as opposed to mathematically contrived scenarios) the most sensible way to vote is to vote for the people you support, in the order that you prefer them.

Conversely FPTP requires you to think and vote tactically whenever there are more than two credible candidates. Otherwise in very simple uncontrived cases as illustrated above, under FPTP voting for the candidate you want most can give you the MP you want least.

Almost nobody else uses AV

The most amusing NO argument is a map of the world along the following lines:



This map is intended to make the reader believe that apart from three countries shaded red, the entire world uses FPTP. It reminds me of the book “How to lie with statistics” by Darrell Huff, which I read as a teenager and which I am delighted to find is still in print. Some of the map’s rather obvious failings are:

- It pleads in aid (by colouring green) countries such as North Korea, China and Vietnam that are one-party communist states that do not have multi-party elections.
- It claims support from countries such as Saudi Arabia that are monarchies without any elections.
- It claims support from many countries coloured green that rig their elections. I prefer not to name them to avoid libel suits! If the NO campaign needs to draw support from them, it is a sure sign of desperation.
- Germany and many other countries coloured green actually have proportional representation. Lumping them into the FPTP column, even by implication as the map does, is to mislead.
- Many countries such as Brazil and France use runoff systems for their presidential elections, which can hardly be pleaded as an argument for keeping FPTP.

Concluding comments

The referendum is a straight choice between two systems, AV and FPTP. It is irrelevant that other systems might be better than either; you can only choose between the two systems which are in the referendum question.

I have no doubt that AV is better. If you are not yet convinced, I recommend further study as this is probably the most important decision our country will take for a generation. In that regard, I recently came across an interesting article "Is AV better than FPTP" by the the Cambridge mathematics professor Tim Gowers on his blog.