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The Alternative Vote

A Briefing Paper

By Dr Alan Renwick, University of Reading

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For Media Enquiries, please contact the PSA Press Office on 0203 463 0805 or email psa.pressoffice@gmail.com.

For General PSA Enquiries, please contact Helena Djurkovic on 020 7330 9289 or email helena.djurkovic@psa.ac.uk

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Executive Summary

We face a very important choice in the referendum on our electoral system on 5th May. But many of the claims being made by both sides are either false or exaggerated. We need a debate that is grounded in solid evidence. This paper provides that grounding.

The basics of AV

- A move to the Alternative Vote (AV) would not be a radical change from the current system of First Past the Post (FPTP). AV is not a proportional system.
- Rather, AV is majoritarian: candidates win by securing a majority of the votes in their constituency. Under FPTP, only a relative majority is required; under AV, the goal is that winning candidates should secure an absolute majority.
- AV allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. If no one wins more than 50 per cent of first preferences, second and sometimes lower preferences are taken into account.

AV's known effects

- AV would increase voter choice between but not within political parties.
- AV would reduce but not end tactical voting.
- AV would not change the principle of equal suffrage. Every voter would still be treated equally; each vote would count only once in deciding who is elected in each constituency.
- AV would give weight to second and lower preferences as well as first preferences. The merits of this move can be debated.
- AV is not a proportional system.
- AV would not eliminate safe seats, though it will probably reduce their number.
- AV would not cost much to implement.

AV's likely effects

- AV would probably not change turnout at elections. Nor is it likely to change significantly the number of spoilt ballots.
- AV is unlikely to change the structure of the party system fundamentally. But it is likely to increase the Lib Dems' share of seats at the expense of the other main parties.
- AV would probably make coalition governments slightly more frequent (but changes in how people vote mean coalitions are already becoming more likely under FPTP).
- AV would probably sometimes exaggerate landslides.
- Minor parties under AV would probably win more votes, but not more seats. AV would be likely to increase the bargaining power of some minor parties, but not of extremists such as the BNP.
- AV would be unlikely to increase the number of women or ethnic minority MPs.
- AV would be unlikely significantly to change the standards of U.K. behaviour or the relationship between MPs and voters. It might make some MPs focus more on constituency work which might or might not be desirable.
- AV would probably reduce the tribalism of political battle only at the margins.
- AV would probably make further electoral system change later on more likely.

Introduction

UK voters will have the right to choose the electoral system for Westminster elections in the referendum on 5th May. This is a fundamental choice: the electoral system is a cornerstone of democracy. So far, however, the debate is not going well. The campaigns on both sides are making claims that are either false or exaggerated. Many voters are mystified: the latest data from the British Election Study suggest that around a third of voters still do not know what they think of the proposed Alternative Vote (AV) system.¹

This briefing paper does not take sides in the referendum debate: there are good arguments both for and against the adoption of AV. Our purpose, rather, is to lay out the basic evidence upon which a well informed debate can be conducted.

This paper begins by setting out the basics of AV: how the system works and where it is already used today. It then outlines the evidence on the various effects that the introduction of AV in the UK might or might not have.

Criteria for judging AV

Electoral systems can be judged against many criteria. This paper takes as its cue the arguments that have been proffered by each side in the debate in the UK so far: we need to know which of them are justified. The paper organizes these arguments into the following categories:

1. AV and the voter: does AV help voters to express themselves at the ballot box?
2. AV and the result of the election at constituency level: does AV guarantee majority support for the MP elected and does it produce fair constituency results?
3. AV and the result of the election at national level: how would AV change the balance between the parties and what impact would this have on the quality of government in the UK?
4. AV and the character of politics: would AV change the nature of political discourse or the behaviour of MPs?
5. the cost of AV: how much independent evidence is there on how much AV would actually cost to operate?
6. AV and the future of the electoral system: would the adoption of AV make further changes to the electoral system thereafter more or less likely?

The main sections of this paper discuss each of these categories in turn. They draw on evidence from the UK and elsewhere – particularly from Australia, the country with by far the most experience of AV. They assess without prejudice what claims about the effects of AV are justified, what claims are clearly wrong, and what claims remain open to debate.

The basics of AV

How AV works

AV is similar to the current First Past the Post (FPTP) system in that it is used in constituencies that elect one member each. This means that AV is not a proportional system.

Under AV, voters can rank the candidates according to preference, placing a 1 by their favourite candidate, a 2 by their next most favoured candidate, and so on. In the version of AV proposed for the UK, voters can express as many or as few preferences as they wish. In most Australian elections, by contrast, a vote is valid only if all candidates are ranked.

In the first stage of the vote count, only first preferences are counted. If a candidate has more than 50 per cent of first preferences, that candidate is elected and the counting process is over.

If no candidate wins more than 50 per cent of first preferences, the candidate with fewest first preferences is knocked out of the race. The ballot papers in their pile are looked at again and added to the piles for the remaining candidates according to the second preferences that these voters have indicated. If a candidate has now passed 50 per cent of all votes, that candidate is elected.

This process continues until a candidate passes the 50 per cent mark. Because voters are not required to rank all the candidates, however, some votes are likely to be exhausted (meaning that all the preferred candidates have been eliminated) before the end of the counting process. This means that some candidates will be elected on fewer than 50 per cent of all the votes cast.

Where AV is used

AV is used for national parliamentary elections in three countries: Australia, Fiji, and Papua New Guinea. It is also used for presidential elections and for parliamentary by-elections in Ireland. Within the UK, it is currently used for local government by-elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Some local elections in the United States also use AV

AV is used in the UK in a variety of non-public elections, including Labour and Liberal Democrat leadership elections, elections of student union officers, and elections in the Church of England. AV is used to elect the chairs of House of Commons select committees.

AV's cousins

AV has a number of close cousins. Mayors in London and elsewhere are elected using the Supplementary Vote system: voters can give their first and second preferences, and all but the top two candidates are eliminated after the first count.

The Conservative Party leader is elected using a multi-round system: if no candidate wins an absolute majority in the first round, the bottom candidate is eliminated and a second round of voting occurs; this is repeated until there is a clear winner. A very similar system is used to elect the House of Commons Speaker.

France and some other countries use a truncated multi-round system: there are two rounds; only the better performing candidates in the first round can run again in the second.

Box 1. The use of AV for by-elections in Scottish local government

Since 2007, elections to Scottish local authorities have used the Single Transferable Vote (STV) electoral system. STV is similar to AV in that it allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference. Unlike AV, it is proportional, electing multiple councillors in each ward according to the votes cast.

For by-elections where only one councillor is to be elected, however, STV becomes identical to AV. AV has thus been used in the 31 by-elections held in Scottish local authorities since 2007. By way of example, we can look at the by-election in the Ballochmyle ward of East Ayrshire held on 11 December 2008. The following table shows how the count proceeded.

Candidate	Party	First count	Second count: Exclusion of Fraser		Third count: Exclusion of Masterton	
		First preferences	Transfers	Total votes	Transfers	Total votes
FRASER, Ian	Lib Dem	93	-93	0		
MASTERTON, Danny	Solidarity	243	5	248	-248	0
McALPINE, Janette	Conservative	273	17	290	18	308
SAVAGE, Roseanne	SNP	1129	31	1160	101	1261
SHAW, David	Labour	1598	19	1617	58	1675
Non-transferable			21	21	71	92
Total		3336		3336		3336

To secure election, a candidate had to secure 1669 votes (one more than 50 per cent). No candidate reached this threshold on first preferences, so the candidate placed last – Ian Fraser – was excluded. Of the 93 ballot papers in his pile, 21 had no further preference marked and therefore played no further part in the count. The remaining ballot papers were added to the piles of the remaining candidates according to the second preferences marked.

The leading candidate, David Shaw, was still slightly short of an absolute majority, so the next bottom candidate – Danny Masterton – was excluded and the votes in his pile transferred to the remaining candidates according to the next preference marked.

This transfer pushed David Shaw above 1669 votes, so he was declared the new councillor for Ballochmyle. He had secured at least some backing from a clear majority of the voters in the ward.

East Ayrshire council is unusual in that it publishes information on all the preferences expressed, not just those counted. We know, for example, that 43 per cent of voters expressed only their first preference, while 57 per cent expressed a second. And we know that 340 voters gave Ian Fraser their second preference, even though these preferences were never counted.²

The Ballochmyle election was decided at the third round of counting. Of the 31 by-elections so far, eight have been decided at the first count, meaning that one candidate secured more than half of all the first preferences. None have been decided at the second count, but there have been three decisions at the third count, five at the fourth count, and so on. One by-election needed nine counts before the winner was established.³

AV and the Voter

AV increases the voter's ability to express her

Under FPTP, voters can express just one preference. Under the version of AV proposed for elections to Westminster, voters can still express just one preference if they wish, but they can also choose to express multiple preferences – as many as there are candidates. As under FPTP, however, they cannot choose between multiple candidates from the same party, as some other systems allow.

The question to be asked is whether voters are interested in exercising this ability. We know that voters in the UK (as elsewhere) are now less likely to be attached to a single party than they used to be.⁴

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nuance than is possible under the current system.

Evidence from the British Election Study supports this. The BES conducted a mock AV election in May 2010. It found that, of those respondents willing to express a first preference, well over 90 per cent were happy to express a second preference, over 80 per cent a third, and over 70 per cent a fourth.⁵

Actual by-elections held using AV in Scotland yield lower numbers. Two councils provide the data required to calculate the number of voters who fill in each preference. In the six by-elections held so far in these areas, between 49 and 63 per cent of voters have expressed a second preference and between 33 and 49 per cent a third.⁶ This suggests that a sizeable but not overwhelming proportion of voters are interested in the extra opportunities that AV provides.

AV and voters' satisfaction with democracy

We can also get at the question of whether voters value the extra opportunities that AV provides them by asking whether voters are more satisfied with their democracy under AV than other systems. The fact that only one country has any substantial history of using AV means there is insufficient direct evidence on this to draw firm conclusions. But a broader study by David Farrell and Ian McAllister finds that voters are more satisfied with democracy in countries where the electoral system allows them to express more choice among candidates (such as AV) rather than less (such as FPTP). The effect is, however, small.⁷

AV reduces but does not eliminate incentives for tactical voting

It is often thought undesirable that the electoral system should force voters to vote tactically rather than expressing their true preferences. Estimates using data from the British Election Study suggest that around 14 per cent of voters voted tactically in the general election of 2001,⁸ 11 per cent in 2005,⁹ and 16 per cent in 2010.¹⁰

AV removes the reasons for tactical voting that exist under FPTP. Under FPTP, a minor party supporter may choose to back a major party candidate in order not to waste his or her vote. Under AV, that voter can give their first preference to their favourite candidate and then transfer it to the major candidate with their second preference.

But AV also creates the potential for new types of tactical voting. If, for example, you are confident that your favourite candidate, A, will be one of the top two candidates and you think that she would defeat candidate B in a runoff but not candidate C, you might vote tactically for B in order to keep C out.

stage and expect that D would defeat E, your favourite candidate, in that runoff but would be defeated by F, your second favourite. You might then vote for F rather than E in order to increase

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So tactical voting can exist under AV. But the information about the local race that voters need in order to exercise a tactical vote is considerable.¹² In fact, there is evidence that fewer than half as many voters vote tactically in Australia (under AV) as in the UK (under FPTP).¹³

AV has no clear effects on turnout

There are some reasons for thinking AV should increase turnout. It allows voters to express themselves more fully and reduces pressure for tactical votes that some voters may be uncomfortable with. Voters who dislike the idea of minority winners may find the whole electoral process more legitimate under AV. And if AV reduces the number of safe seats, voters may consider it more worthwhile to cast a vote than under FPTP.

There are other reasons for thinking AV should reduce turnout. It is slightly more complex for the voter than FPTP. For those voters attracted to the notion that only first preferences should count, AV may delegitimize the electoral process.

Evidence on turnout from contemporary Australia is not relevant, as Australia has compulsory voting. But we can look at earlier evidence from before compulsory voting was introduced. At the federal level, two elections were held between the adoption of AV in 1918 and the adoption of compulsory voting in 1924. Both of these elections saw turnout fall, though from a peak in 1917 that was unusual. states introduced a variety of preferential voting systems at different times between 1909 and 1929. Turnout subsequently rose in some states and fell in others. Overall, these preferential systems (including AV) had no clear effect on turnout.¹⁴

Further evidence comes from several Canadian provinces that used AV between the 1920s and the 1950s. Again, studies find no evidence that either the introduction of AV or its abolition had any effect on turnout.¹⁵

AV has no clear effect on the number of spoiled ballots

Spoiled ballots are a concern if they arise because voters are confused about how to express their preferences.

Australia sees many more spoiled ballot papers than does the UK: 5.6 per cent of the total in the 2010 election, compared to 1.0 per cent here.¹⁶ But there are several reasons for this. First, compulsory voting in Australia leads some voters to spoil their ballot paper in order to express general disapproval. Second, Australian voters are generally required to number all the candidates before their vote is valid. Where this is not the case in state-level elections in New South Wales and Queensland the proportion of invalid votes is lower.¹⁷ Third, large numbers of non-English-speaking migrants also make a difference.¹⁸ Thus, the Australian evidence does not tell us whether

the introduction of AV without compulsory ranking of all candidates in the UK would affect the number of spoilt ballots.

Evidence from the Canadian provinces that formerly used AV suggests that AV in the form proposed for the UK might was placed against one candidate were counted as valid, however, the difference was very small certainly insufficient to draw any general conclusions.¹⁹

Will voters understand how to use their preferences?

Even if they cast a valid ballot, voters might fail to express themselves effectively if they do not understand how AV works. For example, some voters might think that expressing a second n. preference is wrong: lower preferences are not even counted so long as the first-preference candidate remains in the race. But if voters think this they might deny themselves the opportunity to affect the overall result.

In Australia, many voters in fact do not work out their own preference distribution. Rather, they voters have reported using such cards. On the other hand, almost half of all voters did claim to think through their own preference ordering.²⁰

Evidence from the use of the Supplementary Vote system for electing the mayors of London and a range of other cities suggests that some voters indeed do not understand this system and, in effect, on a candidate who cannot win: around 20 per cent of the voters in the London mayoral elections of both 2000 and 2004 cast such wasted votes.²¹ Of course, some may have done so deliberately in order honestly to express what they feel. But others presumably did

It should also be pointed out, however, that, even after decades of experience, many voters do not understand FPTP. Focus group research conducted by David Farrell and Michael Gallagher in 1998

In any case, there will be a need for intensive public education about the nature of AV if the referendum is passed.

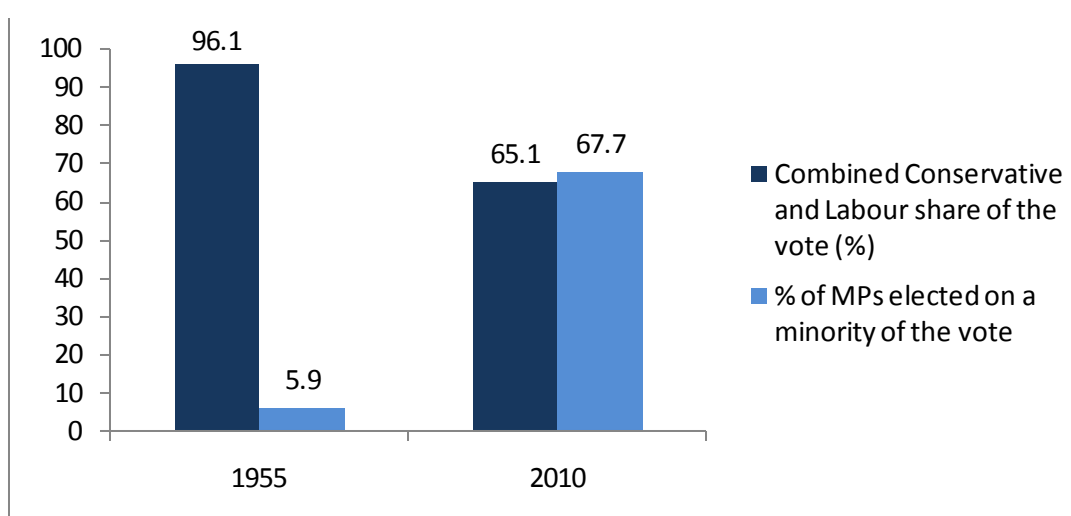
AV and the election result at constituency level

AV and majority winners

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2010, only 210 out of the 650 MPs secured 50 per cent of the vote or more in their constituency. As Figure 1 shows, the number of minority winners has risen enormously since 1955, when 94 per cent of all MPs secured an absolute majority.²³ The change has occurred because votes are much more spread out across parties today than they were in the early post-war decades.²⁴ AV supporters claim that more citizens would feel a connection to their MP if more had voted for them. They also suggest that this would improve legitimacy.

Figure 1. The 1955 and 2010 elections compared



AV would indeed increase the number of MPs elected on a majority vote. But three provisos are needed. First, some minority winners would remain. Because the proposed version of AV does not require voters to rank all candidates, some will express preferences only for candidates who are eliminated in the early stages of the count. It will therefore sometimes be the case that neither of the last two candidates in the race secures an absolute majority. In state-level elections in New South Wales and Queensland where voters are allowed to rank as many candidates as they wish the proportion of constituencies with minority winners has ranged from just 1 per cent to 31 per cent in elections since the early 1980s.²⁵ In the 31 Scottish local authority by-elections held using AV since 1997, twelve just under 40 per cent have produced minority winners.²⁶

Second, some of the votes in the majority block might be quite low preferences. Whether such low preferences should matter. This issue is discussed further below.

Third, there is little evidence that minority winners are widely seen as illegitimate. Few voters know the details of their constituency election result: fewer than half can even correctly name their MP.²⁷ As noted above, focus groups suggest that many voters do not even realize that minority victories are possible.²⁸ This suggests that whether their MP secured an absolute majority or not is unlikely to make much difference to many voters.

The claim that AV gives some voters extra votes is a fallacy

Many supporters of FPTP have argued that AV gives some voters extra votes. This is wrong. Under

In the first round of counting, if your favourite candidate is still in the race, your first preference still counts for one vote. If your favourite candidate was eliminated, your first preference now counts for zero but your second preference counts for one vote. From each ballot paper, only one vote is being counted. This remains true at each stage of the counting process. Box 2 on the following page gives an example of how this works in practice.

The weighting of higher and lower preferences

A second concern (often muddled with the first, but actually quite different) is that AV gives higher and lower preferences equal weight: it treats a sixth preference as one vote just as it does a first preference.

This is true in a sense: *when a sixth preference is counted* it is given the same weight as a first preference. In the example on the following page, the second preferences of voters who originally favoured Taylor are given the same weight as the first preferences of the supporters of Jones and McDonald. In another sense, however, it is not true: AV gives extra weight to higher preferences by counting them first. A candidate may be the second choice of most voters, but if he does not capture a decent share of first preferences, he will be eliminated from the race before this broad support can be tapped.

So how *should* preferences be weighted? One view is that our first preference captures something special – our core belief – and should therefore carry special weight. Another view is that we cannot

choose someone from the right instead of someone from the left, but not be so concerned about which right-wing candidate they get. Some voters find it very difficult to decide their first preference but

There is therefore no clear basis for discounting lower preferences completely. But there is legitimate debate over whether AV (or any electoral system) gets the balance right.

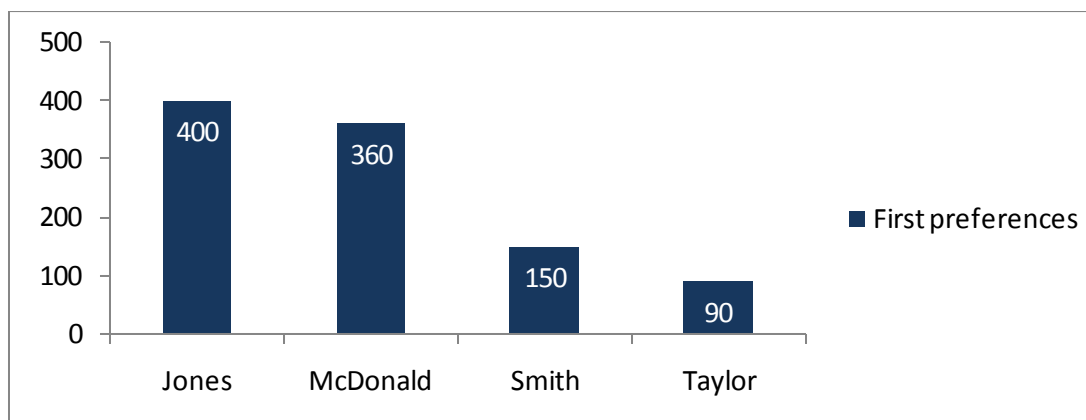
AV, in an important sense, is more likely than FPTP to elect the candidate with broadest support

Under FPTP, how well a candidate does depends partly on how popular he or she is and partly on how many other similar candidates are running in the constituency. In a constituency with one left-wing candidate and three right-wing candidates, the left-wing candidate could win even if right-wing voters are in the majority because the right-wing vote splits.

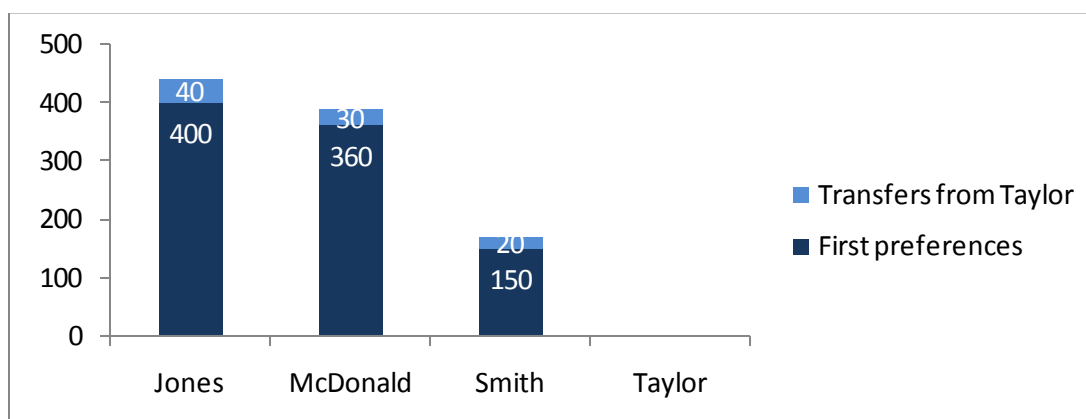
AV is designed to prevent such outcomes. It allows the right-wing voters to coalesce around the most popular right-wing candidate and secure the seat. Thus, in such scenarios, provided we are happy to treat lower preferences as meaningful, AV is more likely than FPTP to elect the candidate with broadest support.

Box 2. How votes count under AV

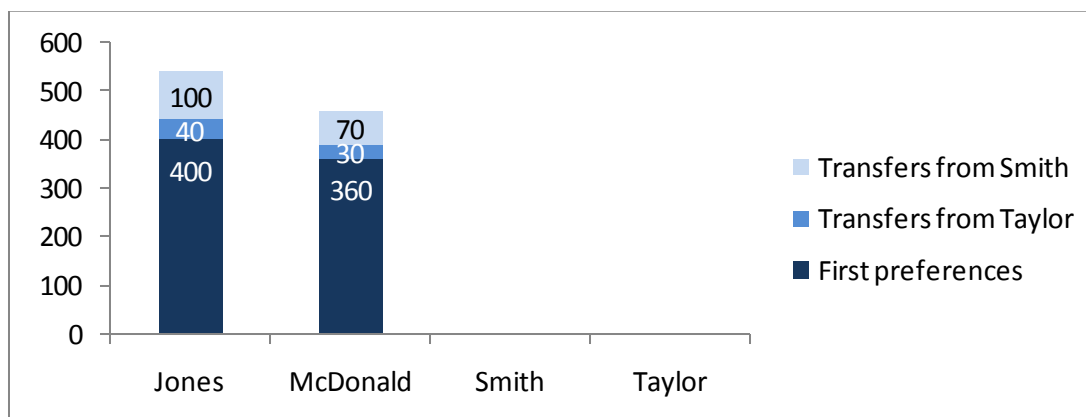
Imagine an election with four candidates. 1000 valid votes are cast, so a candidate needs 501 votes to win. The first preferences for each candidate are as follows:



No one has passed the 50 per cent mark, so the bottom candidate (Taylor) is eliminated. The first-preference votes for Jones, McDonald, and Smith all still count as one vote each. The votes cast for Taylor also still count as one vote each, but now they count for the candidate that these voters ranked second, not for Taylor.



Still no one has gained an absolute majority. The votes for the remaining two candidates are counted as one vote, for whichever of the remaining two candidates is ranked higher by the voter. Jones is preferred by more voters than McDonald and is therefore elected by 540 votes to 460.



The number of occasions on which AV produces a different result at constituency level from FPTP is, however, likely to be low. The British Election Study team estimate that AV would have produced a different result in the 2010 election in 43 seats – fewer than 7 per cent of the total.²⁹ Similarly, in Australia, the number of seats in which the ultimate winner has not led on first preferences has been between 5 and 7 per cent in each of the last three elections.³⁰

Non-monotonicity is devilish but not very important

An electoral system is non-winning more votes. FPTP does not have this feature, but AV can. Say that candidate A could win a runoff against B but not against C. A transfer of votes from B to A could eliminate B from the race, allowing C to win.

Non-monotonic outcomes are undesirable, but research employing mathematical models suggests they should occur very rarely. One estimate is that such an outcome would occur in a UK constituency less than once a century.³¹ They are not therefore a major concern.

AV and the election result at national level

Simulations of election results under AV

Surveys that ask respondents to indicate second and sometimes lower preferences can be used to simulate what the result of an election would have been had AV been used. Such simulations have limitations, as discussed below. But they do give a useful rough guide.

The table below compares actual election results since 1983 with the simulated results under AV produced by Prof. John Curtice (1983–2005) and the British Election Study (2010).³²

Table 1. Simulated AV election results compared to actual results, 1983–2010

	1983			1987			1992		
	Actual seats won	Seats under AV	Change	Actual seats won	Seats under AV	Change	Actual seats won	Seats under AV	Change
Con	397	391	-6	375	381	+6	336	328	-8
Lab	209	190	-19	229	202	-27	271	268	-3
Lib Dem	23	48	+25	22	44	+22	20	31	+11
Others	21	21	0	24	24	0	24	24	0
Majority	144	132	-12	100	112	+12	21	5	-16

	1997			2001			2005		
	Actual seats won	Seats under AV	Change	Actual seats won	Seats under AV	Change	Actual seats won	Seats under AV	Change
Con	165	70	-95	166	140	-26	198	171	-27
Lab	418	445	+27	412	423	+11	355	377	+22
Lib Dem	46	115	+69	52	68	+16	62	68	+6
Others	30	30	0	29	29	0	31	31	0
Majority	177	231	+54	165	187	+22	64	108	+44

	2010		
	Actual seats won	Seats under AV	Change
Con	306	284	-22
Lab	258	248	-10
Lib Dem	57	89	+32
Others	29	29	0
Majority	-	-	-

These simulations imply the following:

- AV always boosts the Liberal Democrats: as a centrist party, they pick up many second preferences. It sometimes also boosts a landslide winner (a party winning many first preferences is likely to gain lower preferences too).

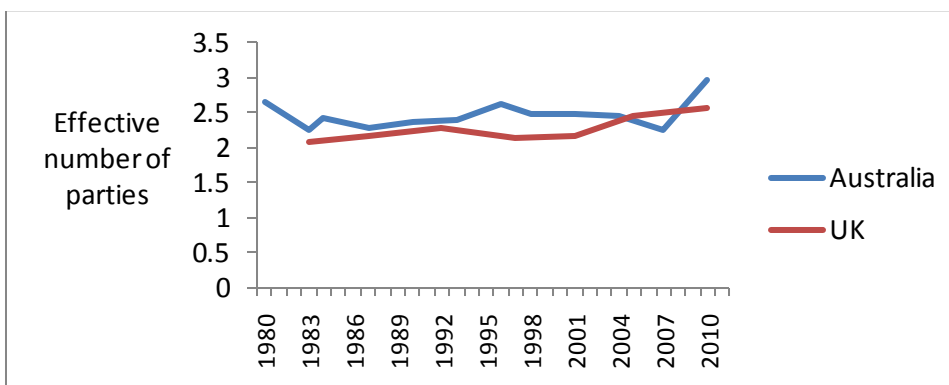
- Overall, however, **AV does not increase proportionality compared to FPTP**. It does not generally help small parties win seats. It can exaggerate the over-representation of the largest party. Like FPTP, it can produce biased election results, where two parties with the same vote shares secure very different numbers of seats.³³
- It is thus possible, under AV as under FPTP, for one party to win most votes while another wins most seats. This happened under FPTP in the UK in 1951 and February 1974. It has happened under AV in the Australian federal elections of 1954, 1961, and 1969, as well as in a number of state elections.³⁴
- Contrary to some daims, **AV would not lead to permanent hung parliaments** and coalition governments. Of the last seven elections, only the most recent would have delivered a hung parliament just as under FPTP. By boosting the Liberal Democrats, however, AV does increase the likelihood of hung parliaments a little. Some simulations suggest a hung parliament in the close election of 1992.³⁵
- **AV tends to exaggerate landslides**. This is because of the boost it can give to a party with a large national lead. The dearest case of this is the larg majority in 1997. But AV would not, according to these simulations, have boosted the #

Would AV induce more fundamental change in the party system?

Simulations such as those above need to assume that the party system will remain basically the same. But it is possible that, under AV, voters would think about the parties differently and that the overall menu of parties would change. There is a logic, long recognized among political scientists, according to which an electoral system such as AV should be expected to produce two-bloc politics, or stable blocs.³⁶ Multiple parties on the right or on the left would be able to compete among themselves without letting their opponents in on a minority vote, so they would face little pressure to coalesce.

We can see something of this in Australia, where the Liberal and National parties form a stable coalition on the right. But the Australian party system has not fragmented under AV as some predicted: using a standard measure of fragmentation, Figure 2 shows that Australia and the UK are actually very similar in this respect.³⁷ It appears that there are still strong pressures for parties to remain unified under AV, as under FPTP.

Figure 2. Party system fragmentation in Australia and the UK



Still, there is a question over the future of the Liberal Democrats in the UK. The simulations assume they will stick together and benefit from AV. But AV would put pressure on the Liberal Democrats as a party to state to whom they would like their supporters to give their second preferences: Australian experience suggests that parties generally gain from issuing such guidance.³⁸ In current circumstances, that might increase the likelihood of a split in the party between left and right. On the other hand, the Australian Democrats achieved success for some years without issuing guidance, hoping thereby to attract support from both left as well as right.³⁹ The Liberal Democrats in the UK might be able to maintain the same strategy.

AV's effect on small and fringe parties

AV has three effects on the significance of fringe parties. First, it makes it easier for them to win votes: a vote cast for a small party need no longer be wasted, as the voter can support one of the main parties with their second preference.

Second, AV makes it harder for fringe parties to win seats: parties adopting positions far from the centre ground are unlikely to pick up many second preferences.

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Hanson is instructive here: she would have won a seat in the 1998 election under FPTP, but AV thwarted her, as she picked up very few lower preferences from mainstream voters.

Third, AV gives small parties bargaining power over large parties. In many seats, the leading candidates will need the second preferences of small-party supporters if they are to secure victory. The small parties are likely to seek policy concessions before agreeing to ask their supporters to transfer their votes to a particular party or candidate. In Australia, this mechanism has given such parties as the Democratic Labor Party, the Australian Democrats, and the Green Party significant influence, even when they have failed to win any seats.⁴⁰

On the other hand, [°] also suggests that such bargaining is of little benefit to extreme parties, because the mainstream parties refuse to deal with them. This helps explain the failure of h = party in 1998, as the example in Box 3 on the following page shows.⁴¹ When some politicians gave in to the temptation in the Queensland state election of 2001, they appear to have been punished by voters for doing so.⁴²

Overall, Professor Ben Reilly concludes that ° †

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The effects of hung parliaments and coalition or minority governments

We have seen that AV would tend slightly to increase the likelihood of hung parliaments. This is not a radical change: fragmentation of the vote means that hung parliaments have become increasingly likely under FPTP too in recent years.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, it is important to consider what the effects of more hung parliaments would be.

In fact, hung parliaments can be praised or criticized on many grounds: there is no consensus. There is strong evidence for the following points:

- coalition or minority governments are less stable than single-party majority governments;⁴⁵

Box 3. Crows Nest, Queensland, 1998

by Antony Green

Queensland politics was shaken in 1998 by the rise of a new political force, Pauline Hanson's One Nation. With its anti-Asian and anti-Indigenous rights rhetoric, One Nation attracted 22.7% of the first preference vote across the state, electing eleven members to the Queensland state parliament.

One Nation polled strongly in the rural heartland of the governing National Party. One of those seats was Crows Nest, previously the National Party's safest seat. Had the election been conducted under FPTP, One Nation David Cockburn would have defeated sitting National MP Russell Cooper.

However, under AV, Cockburn needed more than a simple plurality of votes. The count of first preferences was as follows.

Candidate	Party	Transfers	Votes	%
Fiona BUCKNALL	Labor Party		3,908	16.5
David COCKBURN	One Nation		9,342	39.5
Russell COOPER (MP)	National Party		9,060	38.3
Brenda MOLONEY	Reform Party		635	2.7
John LANGFORD	Green		704	3.0
Formal Votes			23,649	

As no candidate had achieved a majority of the vote, Moloney (Reform Party) was excluded and her ballot papers examined for second preferences. Still no one had a majority, so Langford (Greens) was excluded. Only three candidates now remained. Cockburn still led, but lacked a majority, so Bucknall (Labor) was now excluded.

Labor had actively campaigned to prevent One Nation winning seats. Though the National Party was Labor's traditional political opponent, Labor recommended preferences to the National candidate. Around 40% of the Labor candidate Fiona Bucknall's ballot papers had no further preferences and exhausted, but of those with preferences, 63% gave their next preference to Cooper. This allowed Cooper to overturn his deficits at previous counts and win with a majority of 377 votes.

Candidate	Party	Votes after 3 rd count	Transfers	Votes	%
Fiona BUCKNALL	Labor Party	4,287	-4287	0	
David COCKBURN	One Nation	9,613	+950	10,563	49.1
Russell COOPER (MP)	National Party	9,329	+1611	10,940	50.9
Votes still in count				21,503	
Exhausted prefs			+1726	2,146	

Though One Nation candidate had a plurality of the first preference vote, the majority view amongst voters opposed her election. The AV count revealed majority support for the National candidate against the One Nation candidate.

It should be noted that in this example, 9.1% of ballot papers were exhausted before making a final choice between the One Nation and National Party candidates. While Cooper achieved a majority of the votes remaining in the count, he therefore won only 46.3% of the total valid vote.

- government spending tends to be higher with coalition than with single-party governments; budget deficits tend also to be higher with coalitions;⁴⁶
- there are rich countries that routinely have coalition governments as well as rich countries that generally have single-party-majority governments: doom-mongering is not justified;⁴⁷
- coalition governments encourage more consensual decision-making;⁴⁸
- the connection between the votes cast and the composition of government is generally clearer when one party has a majority;⁴⁹
- hung parliaments rarely give excessive power to small parties: the oft-cited example of the German FDP is unusual.⁵⁰

The effects of exaggerated landslides

While there are good reasons for thinking comfortable single-party majorities desirable, it is generally thought that large landslides can weaken the opposition and allow the government to ignore broader opinion. We are not, however, aware of any studies that have tried to assess this belief against solid evidence.

The effects of bipolar multipartism

If a two-bloc system of bipolar multipartism emerged in the UK, it might involve a left-wing bloc consisting mainly of Labour and some Liberal Democrats and a right-wing bloc comprising the Conservatives, the remaining Liberal Democrats, and perhaps UKIP. Such a system would generally lead to coalition governments. But the coalition options and their agreed programmes would be clear before each election and such coalitions would be almost as stable as single-party governments. The clearest example of such a coalition – the Liberal National coalition in Australia – has broken down only rarely and briefly since the 1920s.

Special note should be made of the possible effects of AV in Northern Ireland. Under FPTP, both unionists and nationalists face the danger that, by competing among themselves, they may lose seats to the other side, even in areas where they are in the majority. AV would largely remove that danger.

AV and the representation of women and minorities

FPTP leads to underrepresentation of women and of minorities that are not geographically concentrated. It is still the case today that only 22 per cent of Westminster MPs are women while 4 per cent are from minorities.⁵¹ The crucial factor determining representation for women and dispersed minorities is the number of MPs elected in each constituency. Where only one MP is elected, selection committees and voters will seek out the candidate they think strongest. So long as there remain even subconscious biases about who makes the best MP, white men will be overrepresented. Where several people are elected per constituency, by contrast, parties and voters are likely to seek more balance.⁵²

AV retains the single-member constituencies of FPTP. It should not therefore be expected to alleviate underrepresentation of women and minorities. We can see this from the Australian House of Representatives, where the proportion of members who are women is 25 per cent – little different from the figure in the UK.⁵³

AV and the character of politics

AV would not eliminate safe seats but would somewhat reduce their number

A safe seat is one that a party is very unlikely to lose over successive elections. The claim made by some AV supporters that AV would eliminate safe seats is wrong. Seats where one party regularly scores over 50 per cent of the vote will probably remain safe, given current patterns of party support. Even some seats where the winning candidate does not always secure more than half the votes under FPTP will be safe because there is a clear majority for the left or the right.

AV would make some seats that are currently fairly safe less safe. In recent elections, this would have been most likely in Conservative-held seats where both Labour and the Liberal Democrats won substantial votes.

But AV would also make some seats safer. Seats that were previously marginal seats would likely be strengthened by lower preferences. In recent elections it would also have applied to some Labour-held seats where the Conservatives came second and the Liberal Democrats were a strong third.⁵⁴

AV's tendency to exaggerate landslides means that, overall, it would somewhat reduce the number of safe seats: for example, Labour would have picked up even more Conservative seats in 1997. But the change should not be exaggerated: the structure of competition in most constituencies is unlikely to change radically.

Are MPs in safe seats more likely to misbehave?

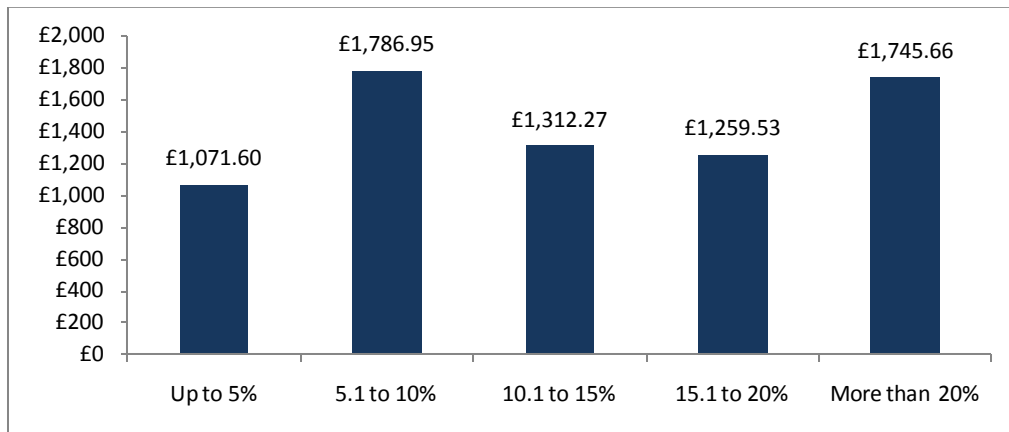
Evidence from international comparisons suggests that one form of corruption – exploiting public office for private gain – becomes more common when MPs feel safer in their seats. But another form of corruption – buying votes – is more likely where MPs have to fight hard to keep their jobs.⁵⁵ This implies that action designed to tackle the first form of corruption (into which the worst excesses of the expenses scandal fell) might just encourage the second form.

Furthermore, there is very little evidence that MPs were more likely to be implicated in the 2009 scandal over expenses if they occupied safer seats. Early analysis conducted by a Lib Dem blogger did find a correlation and received much media attention.⁵⁶ But later analyses based on the sums that MPs were actually required to repay by Sir Thomas Legg have found no clear correlation with seat safety.⁵⁷ Figure 3 shows the average repayment required for MPs with majorities in the 2005 election of different sizes. While MPs with the safest seats did have higher repayments than those with the most marginal seats, there is no clear pattern across the categories.

Would MPs have to "work harder for us" under AV?

The pro-argument is that AV would force MPs to seek support from at least 50 per cent of voters in their constituency. Evidence from the UK and elsewhere suggests that MPs in marginal seats do focus on servicing their constituency more than those in safe seats.⁵⁸ Insofar as AV reduces the number of safe seats, it could therefore be expected to

Figure 3. Average expenses repayment per MP, by size of majority



It can be asked, however, whether this is a good thing. Westminster MPs already devote a great deal of their time to constituency activities.⁵⁹ This reduces the time they can spend scrutinizing government at the national level. A recurring theme in current reform debates in Ireland is that politicians there have been too focused on local matters and failed to notice the policy mistakes that level is therefore a matter for debate.

AV would reduce the tribalism of party political battle only at the margins

In debates about electoral systems around the world, AV has been backed by some political scientists as the best system for overcoming ethnic or other tensions: they argue that AV can force politicians to broaden their appeal to voters outside their own group.⁶⁰ That is why it was introduced in Fiji and Papua New Guinea.

there is no reason to expect a sudden move towards civility in relations between the two main parties. This expectation fits the pattern observed in Australia. On the one hand, as Ben Reilly for secondary preference votes and thus to bargain, cooperate and compromise in search of ⁶¹ On the other hand, each of the two main parties generally urges its supporters to rank the candidate of the other main party last: there is no love lost between them.⁶²

Thus, the main political battle remains just as intense and hostile as under FPTP: political discourse in Australia is at least as combative as it is here. A recent exchange in the Australian parliament over climate change policy between opposition leader Tony Abbott and prime minister Julia Gillard will

to Richard Nixon, who was said to have lied whenever he opened his mouth. He called her

The cost of AV

AV would not require the use of expensive voting machines

There is no truth in the claim that AV would require the introduction of electronic voting machines. Elections held under AV (and, indeed, under the more demanding STV system) in Australia, Ireland, and Scotland are all in general conducted using traditional paper ballots.

Electronic *counting* of votes was introduced in Scotland in 2007 for local elections, which use the more complex STV electoral system. There is no reason to think electronic counting would be necessary for elections held under AV.

The cost of AV

Under AV, the cost of a referendum itself, which, of course, is incurred whether there is a vote or not. Removing this reduces the claimed figure to £156 million. The remainder comprises up to £130 million for the purchase of electronic voting machines (which would not be necessary) and £26 million for voter education.

It is reasonable to expect two principal costs from the introduction of AV. First, at least for a transitional period, a campaign to educate voters in how to vote under AV would be highly desirable. Second, counting votes under AV would take longer than under FPTP. We are not aware of any independent estimates of what these costs would be.

However, even if we suppose (unrealistically) that the current cost of running an election (up to £90 million) would be doubled by the introduction of AV, that implies an annual cost across a five-year electoral cycle of only around 30 pence per person. Clearly, this is a very small sum.

AV and the future of electoral system change

U They support it because they believe it will ease the path towards further reform later on. Many of those campaigning against change agree that AV would not represent a radical change, but worry that it would be a step towards a proportional system in the future.

U would affect the future politics of electoral reform. But the following points can inform debate on the subject.

Referendum dynamics

A followed by what Professor Law (O) issue should be left alone. Supporters of change, by contrast, argue that the referendum has not decided the issue: they might say, for example, that voters were offered the wrong reform option or that a better information campaign should have been launched.⁶⁴

U the UK too. Supporters of FPTP will say that the people have decided in favour of the status quo. Supporters of change will argue that AV was the wrong reform and that a more substantial change should be offered.⁶⁵

The question is, who will win this battle? Given that the issue of electoral reform has not caught the public imagination and that few voters understand the intricacies of electoral systems, it is likely to be difficult for reform supporters to convince many that another reform should now be considered. Such was the experience of reform supporters after recent referendums in three Canadian provinces: the battle of interpretation was decisively won by the supporters of the status quo.

Electoral reform dynamics

It is clear that changing the electoral system is easier where change has already recently happened: the idea of reform is no longer so radical; more people are familiar with the reform options; there are fewer interests vested in the status quo. Four established democracies – France, Italy, Japan, and New Zealand – have introduced major reforms to their national electoral systems in the last thirty years. Two of these – France and Italy – have subsequently instituted further major reforms, while Japan passed a further smaller reform, and New Zealand will hold a referendum creating the possibility of another major reform later this year.⁶⁶

The impact of AV

U y M their chances of holding the balance of power in the future. This would give them the bargaining position from which to push for further reform. On the other hand, if AV leads to bipolar multipartism, it could strengthen two-bloc politics and thereby reduce pressure for greater proportionality.

Further resources

Introductions to electoral systems:

- FARRELL, David M., *Electoral Systems: A Comparative Introduction*, 2nd edition. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- HIX, Simon, Ron JOHNSTON, and Iain McLEAN, *Choosing an Electoral System* British Academy, 2010. Available at <http://www.britac.ac.uk/policy/policy-centre-reports.cfm>.
- NORRIS, Pippa, *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- RENWICK, Alan, *Electoral Systems*. London: Biteback, 2011.

Valuable sources of discussion and evidence relating to the debates in the UK:

- <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/> has many relevant entries by a wide range of political scientists.
- HAZELL (ed.), *Constitutional Future Revisited: A New Vision for the UK*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, pp. 233-48.
- JOHNSTON, Ron, Charles PATTIE, Danny DORLING, and David ROSSITER, *From Votes to Seats. The Operation of the UK Electoral System since 1945*. Manchester University Press, 2001.
- SANDERS, David, Harold D. CLARKE, Marianne C. STEWART, and Paul WHITELEY, *Electoral Systems in the UK*. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 63, no. 4 (October 2010), pp. 623-38.
- SANDERS, David, Harold D. CLARKE, Marianne C. STEWART, and Paul WHITELEY, *Electoral Systems in the UK*. *Parliamentary Affairs*, 64, no. 1 (January 2011), pp. 5-23.

On the operation of AV in Australia:

- GREEN, Antony, *Antony Green's Blog*. *Antony Green's Blog*, 8, no. 1 (January 2011), pp. 1-8. Analysis: <http://blogs.abc.net.au/antonygreen/>.
- Knowledge Network (http://aceproject.org/ace-en/topics/es/esy/esy_au).
- For full information on recent Australian election results, see the website of the Australian Electoral Commission: <http://www.aec.gov.au>.
- FARRELL, David M., and Ian McALLISTER, *The Australian Electoral System: Origins, Variations, and Consequences* Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006.
- LEICHHARDT, NSW: Federation Press, 2001, pp. 78-95.
- JOSEPH M. COLOMER (ed.), *Handbook of Electoral System Choice* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, pp. 475-86.

Notes

¹ British Election Study, Continuous Monitoring Survey, February 2011, q551rev. See <http://www.bes2009-10.org/>.

² All information on the Ballochmyle election is taken from the East Ayrshire council website (www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk).

³ Figures supplied by Prof. John Curtice, University of Strathclyde.

⁴ Webb, David Farrell, and Ian Holliday (eds.), *Political Parties in Advanced Democracies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 438–60.

⁵ David Sanders, Harold D. Clarke, Marianne C. Stewart, and Paul F. Whiteley, *Parliamentary Affairs* 54, no. 1 (January 2011), 5–23.

⁶ The two councils are East Ayrshire and Glasgow. The relevant information is available on their websites (www.east-ayrshire.gov.uk and www.glasgow.gov.uk).

⁷ David M. Farrell and Ian McAllister, *The Australian Electoral System: Origins, Variations, and Consequences* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2006), pp. 147–65.

⁸ Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart, and Paul F. Whiteley, *Political Choice in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 83.

⁹ Harold D. Clarke, David Sanders, Marianne C. Stewart, and Paul F. Whiteley, *Performance Politics and the British Vote* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p.163.

¹⁰ Local # Environment and Planning, forthcoming.

¹¹ Gary W. Cox, *U.S. Voting Procedures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 93–4; Michael Dummett, *Voting Procedures* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984).

¹² *Social Choice and Welfare* 8, no. 4 (1991), 341–54.

¹³ presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, 20–23 April 2006.

¹⁴ # *Politics* (Australian Journal of Political Science) no. 2 (1966), 81–95, at pp. 87–8; unpublished research by Antony Green.

¹⁵ = *Canadian Journal of Political Science* 37, no. 3 (September 2004), 647–69.

¹⁶ # *Official 2010 Federal Election Results, House of Representatives*, available at www.aec.gov.au

¹⁷ # *Electoral Studies* 12, no. 1 (1993), 23–40.

¹⁸ @ *Electoral Studies* 12, no. 1 (1993), 23–40.

¹⁹ Jansen (note 15), pp. 657–60.

²⁰ Farrell and McAllister (note 7), pp. 135–6.

²¹ = *Representation* 12, no. 2 (2006), 91–102, at p. 99.

²²) *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* no. 3 (October 1999), 293–316, at pp. 299–300.

²³ k *Electoral Studies* 10, no. 4 (1991), 281–98, at p. 284.

²⁴ K # *Parliamentary Affairs* 63, no. 4 (October 2010), 623–38; Patrick Dunleavy, written

Voting System and Constituencies Bill, HC 437, Ev 126–34.

²⁵ Analysis supplied by Antony Green, Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

²⁶ Figures supplied by Professor John Curtice, University of Strathclyde.

²⁷ Hansard Society, *Audit of Political Engagement 7: The 2010 Report* (London: Hansard Society, 2010), p.122.

²⁸ Farrell and Gallagher (note 22), pp. 299–300.

- ²⁹ Sanders *et al.* (note 5), p. 20.
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- Australian Journal of Political Science* 44, no. 3 (September 2009), 521–8; Ron Johnston and James Forrest, 2004 Elections to the Australian Geographical Research 47, no. 2 (June 2009), 95–108.
- ³⁴ . o o U *Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 41, no. 2 (2003), 143–60, at pp. 146–7.
- ³⁵ Patrick Dunleavy, Helen Margetts, a o † = " † *Parliamentary Affairs* 45, no. 4 (October 1992), 640–55, at p. 644.
- ³⁶ This argument is most famously expressed in Maurice Duverger, *Political Parties: Their Organization and Activity in the Modern State* (London: Methuen, 1954), pp. 239–45 and 325–6. See also Cox (note 11), pp. 92–5.
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- ³⁸ C. Sharman, A. M. Sayers, and N. U u h h *Electoral Studies* 21 (2002), 543–60; Dean Jaensch and David Mathieson, *A Plague on Both Your Houses: Minor Parties in Australia* (Sydney: Leonard's, NSW: Allen & Unwin, 1998), pp. 186–7.
- ³⁹ Jaensch and Mathieson (note 38), p. 187.
- ⁴⁰ Dean Jaensch, *The Australian Party System* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1983), pp. 21–22; Cox (note 11), p. 93; U o k-h Josep M. Colomer k (ed.), *Handbook of Electoral System Choice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 475–86, at pp. 483–4.
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- ⁴² h) † u j 7 k *Australian Journal of Political Science* 36, no. 2 (2001), 363–71; personal communication with Antony Green, Australian Broadcasting Corporation.
- ⁴³ " k h # † *Elections: Full, Free and Fair* (Leichhardt, NSW: Federation Press, 2001), 78–95, at pp. 78–9.
- ⁴⁴ Curtice (note 24).
- ⁴⁵ Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Six Countries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 137.
- ⁴⁶ Torben @) o - @) k *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 2 (May 2006), pp. 165–81.
- ⁴⁷ Alan Renwick, # 8 (London: Biteback, 2011), pp. 37–41. k
- ⁴⁸ Lijphart (note 45).
- ⁴⁹ G. Bingham Powell, Jr., *Elections as Instruments of Democracy: Majoritarian and Proportional Voting* (Yale University Press, 2000).
- ⁵⁰ Renwick (note 47), pp. 90 o h K u # " o *Choosing an Electoral System: Issues and Alternatives* (Praeger, 1984), pp. 53 K † o 8 k *British Journal of Political Science* 34, no. 1 (January 2004), pp. 166–79; u - V tive Power and Cabinet 7 h *Party Politics* 14, no. 2 (March 2008), pp. 167–87.
- ⁵¹ House of Commons Library, *General Election 2010: Detailed Analysis* (Research Paper 10/36, 8 July 2010), at p. 45.
- ⁵² Pippa Norris, *Electoral Engineering: Voting Rules and Political Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 187–90.

⁵³ ¶ -Parliamentary Union, www.ipu.org, 31 January 2011.

⁵⁴ See Sanders *et al.* (note 5), p. 12 for estimates of how votes would have transferred between parties in the 2010 general election.

⁵⁵ Benjamin Nyblade and Steven Reed, Who Cheats? Who Loots? Political Competition and Corruption in Japan, 1947-1993 *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 4, (2008), 926-41.

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⁵⁷ Renwick (note 47), p. 46.

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⁵⁹ See, e.g., Gemma Rosenblatt, *A Year in the Life: From Member of Public to Member of Parliament* (London: Hansard Society, 2006).

⁶⁰ See, e.g., Donald L. Horowitz, *A Democratic South Africa? Constitutional Engineering in a Divided Society* (Journal of Democracy 13, no. 2 (April 2002), 156-70).

⁶¹ Reilly (note 43), at p. 94.

⁶² Ben Reilly, *Democracy in Divided Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 53-4.

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⁶⁴ For example, supporters of republicanism in Australia argued after their 1999 referendum defeat that voters had rejected the particular alternative to the monarchy that was offered (a president elected by parliament), not the principle of republicanism in itself.

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Conference, University of Essex, 10-12 September 2010, p. 11.

⁶⁶ Alan Renwick, *The Politics of Electoral Reform: Changing the Rules of Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).