

Unfair, expensive and a politicians' fix – why British voters should reject the Alternative Vote

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The upcoming referendum on the Alternative Vote (AV) on 5 May offers the Liberal Democrats a chance to achieve one of their political holy grails – electoral reform, though not in the form that they may have ultimately desired. In the first of our series on the AV referendum, [Matthew Elliott](#) from the 'NO to AV' campaign outlines their case in favour of the UK staying with the present First Past the Post voting system.

In February this year, when Gordon Brown first mooted the idea of offering the British people a referendum on the Alternative Vote, the electoral reform lobby in Britain were disgusted. Chris Huhne, then Liberal Democrat Home Affairs Spokesman, [wrote in the Guardian](#) 'not only does AV fail to give voters the power they should have, but it also fails to remedy the unfairness of the present system'. Pam Giddy, then Chair of Power 2010 – before she became the chair of 'Yes to AV', fumed on [ProgressOnline](#): 'without troubling the public for their views he [Brown] has hand-picked a voting system which will not really offer more choice to voters or open up the political system.'

Their anger was understandable. After the disgraceful episode of the expenses scandal and a sharp rise in voter apathy and support for the BNP, the then Prime Minister had dodged making a real decision on democratic renewal and instead plumped for a voting system that the Lib Dem leader Nick Clegg [would describe](#) as a 'miserable little compromise'. Yet nine months on Clegg, Giddy and Huhne are now [touring the country](#) trying to convince us that the Alternative Vote is actually the answer to our all our woes. If their aim is to engage people in politics, they might like to start by being honest.

'NO to AV' is the non-partisan, cross-party campaign against the Alternative Vote in the proposed referendum next May. We are made up of people who would defend the current system, also known as First Past the Post; people who believe in proportional representation; and people who are ambivalent towards the voting system but are dismayed that, in a time of economic uncertainty, Britain is to spend time and money (£90 million according to Nick Clegg) debating the way politicians get elected. What unites us is the belief that the Alternative Vote is a voting system that would not be on the table if it wasn't the most change that the Liberal Democrats could have wrung out of the coalition negotiations. We don't want Britain to be saddled with a system that isn't right for the country and which nobody really wants.

The Alternative Vote is unfair. It breaks the principle of one person, one vote because supporters of fringe parties end up having their vote counted several times while supporters of mainstream parties only have their vote counted once. It artificially inflates the value of third, fourth or fifth preferences, meaning that the candidate coming in third can win. People have a right to know where their vote goes. Voters should decide who the best candidate is, not the voting system.

Alternative Vote is just a politician's fix, taking power away from voters and allowing the Liberal Democrats to choose the government after each election. The only vote that really counts under this system is Nick Clegg's. AV will lead to more hung parliaments and broken promises, like the tuition fees U-turn. Our current tried and tested voting system delivers clear outcomes and everyone's vote is equal. One person, one vote is the fairest way to elect an MP and the most democratic way to choose a government.

We are also concerned that AV would require the introduction of expensive electronic vote counting machines. When these machines [have been used in the UK](#) and elsewhere, they have

cost several millions and have frequently failed to work. Errors like this would only be borne by the taxpayer.

When it comes to the actual referendum campaign, we are playing catch-up. Those on the Yes side have been around for several decades – such as Unlock Democracy, which grew out of Charter88 (established 1988) – and in some cases even longer, such as the Electoral Reform Society, established as long ago as 1884, (albeit as the Proportional Representation Society, a mission which seems to have been quietly ditched). Once the AV referendum had been proposed by the coalition government, alongside the [Liberal Democrats](#), these groups sprang into action, mobilising their existing networks of support and extracting large amounts of cash through their organisations.

Don't let the Yes campaign fool you into thinking that their grassroots network has been created since the announcement of the AV referendum – the people they use for their stunts have been part of these overlapping organisations for many years. Yet it speaks volumes that, on the day AV was proposed by the coalition, the Electoral Reform Society put out a press release saying: 'AV would prove a very modest reform, with second preferences having minimal impact...significant regional imbalances would remain between the main parties.' They have since changed their tune and are now ploughing significant amounts of money into the Yes campaign.

By contrast 'NO to AV' was only established as a campaign back in September. We have had to raise funds from scratch and we have spent the last three months of 2010 putting together a team of people from across the political spectrum, united in the belief that AV would be a backwards step for Britain. We are proud that, with patrons as diverse as John Prescott and William Hague, we can legitimately claim to be the real cross-party campaign in the referendum, as opposed to the narrow special interest groups lined-up behind the Yes Campaign.

Those on the No campaign have cast aside partisan and political differences to work together for a No vote. We are working with volunteers across the entire country – rather than the Yes campaign's paid regional organisers. We are encouraging the grassroots network that will help deliver that 'No' vote next May. We know that there are many out there who will want to campaign against AV in the New Year. We have a new website coming shortly that will be the central hub of our online operation and from there we expect our social networks to grow and our support online and on the ground to expand.

We are confident that as people begin to engage with the AV referendum, support for a No vote will grow. The Yes vote has [seen a marked decrease](#) since the AV referendum was first proposed by the coalition in May as people have found out more about the system. Several pro-AV commentators have [already decided](#) that the result is a forgone conclusion. But we can't afford to sit back and let others make this important decision for the future democracy of our country. We can't afford to let the Liberal Democrats rig future elections in their favour. We can't afford, in our current economic situation, to spend taxpayers' money installing a 'compromise' voting system that we might ditch four or five years down the line. So on 5 May, we urge UK electors to vote NO to the Alternative Vote.