

The Alternative Vote is a worthwhile reform that will make a big difference in improving the democracy and accountability of British politics

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In the 5 May referendum voters across Britain have a chance to improve elections to Westminster by adopting the the Alternative Vote (AV) system for general elections. Continuing our series profiling both sides of the referendum campaign, [Katie Ghose](#) from the [‘YES to Fairer Votes’](#) campaign explains why a campaign lead by thousands of ordinary voters, of all parties and none, is seizing this unprecedented chance for a change that will greatly improve how the Westminster Parliament responds to all its citizens.

The UK’s ‘first past the post’ voting system is a relic from another era. Some could argue it worked in the 1950s, when the two main parties regularly polled over 90 per cent of the votes between them. But in 2011 voters have clearly moved on, while our broken voting system is yet to catch up.

First past the post requires winning candidates to secure just one more vote than their next-placed opponent. That may have been satisfactory in a two party system, but as voters have embraced a wider range of parties, so the individual mandates of our MPs have steadily declined. Barely a third of those sitting in the House of Commons now gained a majority of the votes in their local constituencies. This is an historic low point, yet also one that is likely to get even lower in future.

In the UK general elections are won and lost in [marginal seats](#) – at the last election even a broad definition suggests only 100 constituencies fell into that category. That means that all general election results now hang on the handful of swing voters in those constituencies whose votes matter more than others. And since the 1950s the number of marginal seats has halved.

Another issue is the culture of complacency amongst MPs that comes with first past the post, bred by ‘safe seats’. We all saw the results of this on how MPs behave in the 2009 [expenses crisis](#) – the duck islands, the sparkly toilet seats. But there is hard evidence of adverse consequences for citizens at large in a clear pattern of lower voter contact, lower voter engagement and lower turnout in safe seats. These seats contain voters of all parties (both winners and losers) who are routinely taken for granted.

The old system depends on hard tribal loyalties to just two parties. But the UK can no longer be described as a two party or even a three party system. One in every ten of us voted in the 2010 general election for parties other than Labour, Conservative or the Liberal Democrats.

First past the post is a system which fails even the tests that its own advocates set. As the [IPPR recently argued](#), the system is no guarantee of strong government – and it may even make hung parliaments more likely in future. It has weakened constituency links by letting MPs in on a tiny fraction of the vote. And even the hoary old chestnut that voters can ‘kick the rascals out’ is evidently false. Since 1885 Edward Heath in 1970 was the only politician who was able to form a clear majority government after kicking out a clear majority government from another party. The current system has

simply failed to keep pace with voters in a modern multi-party Britain.

The reform option

By contrast, the Alternative Vote (AV) offers a chance for voters to have a stronger say and to vote honestly for any candidates they feel are up to the job. The system ensures that all MPs will need to win at least 50 per cent support locally in order to be elected, meaning politicians have to work harder and go further to secure majority support. It means making 'safe seats' less safe and British democracy more competitive.

AV keeps all the same constituencies as currently exist, but the key difference is that in each local contest voters fill in a ballot paper where they number the candidates in order of preference – that is, they put 1 for their first preference; 2 for their second choice; 3 for the party they like 3rd, and so on. This is a simple change that most voters welcome.

We count up first preferences and if someone has a majority on these, they are elected straightaway, just as now. If no one has a majority, the candidate who has the fewest 1st preference votes is knocked out of the contest, and we look at the second preferences of their voters, redistributing their votes to the candidates they put as their number 2 choice. This process of knocking out the least popular candidate and redistributing their voters' choices as voters intended continues until one candidate gets 50 per cent. The result is clear – your local MP must have been endorsed by a real majority of local voters.

Campaigning for reform

Our grass roots campaign [YES! to Fairer Votes](#) is calling for a 'Yes' vote. We have developed a network of over 150,000 activists, with full-time organizers working in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and all the English regions. We will be running a full operation on the ground in every region and a cutting-edge digital campaign. We will draw on techniques introduced in the landmark Obama campaign, based on personal advocacy and translating online activity into offline activism.

We are building a broad civil society movement, encompassing environmental activists, faith groups, and people of all parties, all united in a desire to change the electoral system in order to give people a stronger say on public issues and to make politicians more accountable. We are already demonstrating that we are people-centred campaign, in stark contrast to the political [Big Beasts](#) (aged politicians from the bad old days) who are being lined up to oppose all change. Our strategy has three planks:

1) We are talking to voters. The MPs who oppose AV often say that 'they never hear people mention voting reform on the doorstep'. What they fail to mention is that they very frequently hear people on the doorstep complain that politicians are not listening, that they ignore local people's wishes and that they are unaccountable.

We've done our research. People remember the expenses scandal. They are sick and tired of complacent politicians. They want their MPs to work harder and they want to have more of a say. They are receptive to the case for changing to the Alternative Vote. The [polls](#) have indicated up to two thirds of people are open to saying 'Yes'.

We intend to speak to millions of these voters between now and May, identified through extensive research. We now have [volunteer phone banks](#) operating in 50 sites in what is set to be the largest telephone outreach operation ever seen in Britain. We are now

building our activist base, and direct canvassing has begun in earnest.

2) We are making the most of the web. We are using email, social networks, web 2.0 tools and as part of an integrated e-campaign, one that's drawing tens of thousands into online and offline activities. It's supporting traditional campaign activity across the country – weekly street stalls and public debates. And it's filling up our campaign centres and letting volunteers take part in our [virtual phone banks](#) from the comfort of their own homes.

3) We are building our coalition. Our campaign supporters are drawn from [across civil society](#), from people in all parties and from many citizens with no political links. We are supporting authentic voices to speak to their own constituencies in order to make the case for fairer votes. Time is short if we are to make contact with every single target voter by polling day.

Seizing the chance for change

The Alternative Vote is a sensible step forward. It is a logical progression, a development on first-past-the-post, preserving the local accountability of MPs that is familiar to millions of voters – but also raising the bar in terms of the popular support that politicians need to get elected. It is a small but hugely worthwhile change that can make a big difference to how British politics works, changing the shape of political campaigning and strengthening the strained link between voters and MPs.

We are a people's campaign. As ever, the messenger is as important as the message. And our message is already being delivered across Britain by ordinary voters in their communities.

For more information log onto the 'YES to fairer votes' campaign website at <http://www.yestofairervotes.org/content/>