Alternative Vote: An end to wasted votes and a triumph for democracy?

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Many keen supporters of electoral reform and, indeed, any constitutional reform agenda which aims to strengthen processes of representation and accountability, may find it difficult to feel overly excited about the prospect of the introduction of the Alternative Vote (AV) for UK general elections. The reason for this is simple; that the main argument for the introduction of AV is that it would help retain most of the elements of the present system. As such, the major appeal for most advocates of the system is that it fosters continuity rather than any kind of meaningful change.

For this reason, even the Lib-Dems have, until very recently, avoided support for AV, given that it does not provide 'proportionality' between votes cast and the number of seats gained by each party. As with First Past the Post (FPTP), AV is a majoritarian system which elects governments on the basis of seats rather than votes. The system was rejected by the Jenkins Commission on electoral reform in 1998 on the basis that it not only fails to deliver any type of proportionality but, in some cases, it is likely to deliver even less proportionality than the current system. Thus, supporters of the 'Yes' campaign are certainly right to reject claims that the system would lead to regular coalition government. Studies of the effect of AV on past UK general elections have demonstrated that its impact on most electoral outcomes would have been minimal, delivering in most cases the same governing party, albeit with a slightly reduced majority, as FPTP.

Arguments that AV will strengthen the link between constituencies and MPs, thereby preserving the so-called 'bond' between the MP and his/her constituents, are also somewhat spurious. This bond has historically been, in all reality, a largely mythical one given that the disciplinary mechanism of the Parliamentary party whip system ensures that an MP's primary loyalty remains at all times towards their party rather than their constituents. Indeed, this problem brings us to perhaps the biggest argument against AV having a profound impact; that the major cause of the so-called 'democratic deficit' in the UK is the party system, rather than the electoral system per se. Consider the present situation in which both governing parties have radically u-turned on some of their core pre-election pledges. For the Conservatives, pledges to avoid cutting front-line services and 'top-down restructuring' of the NHS have been rendered somewhat meaningless, whilst for the Lib-Dems, the promise to cut university tuition fees has fuelled major student protests. Would the introduction of AV have been likely to prevent both parties from so profoundly breaking these fundamental manifesto pledges? The answer is almost certainly no.

Perhaps the major problem for political parties in the UK is that studies consistently demonstrate a growing lack of trust between voters and their representatives. This has been further fuelled in recent times by expenses scandals, allegations of sleaze, a discernible lack of divergence in the policies of the three main parties and a series of unpopular decisions such as the decision to go to war with Iraq. If AV is introduced in the UK it will represent little more than a minor amendment to the system which has generated this overall lack of trust. As such, it is likely to be regarded by many supporters of reform as the equivalent of taking a sticking plaster to treat a democratic system which is currently suffering from a series of multiple fractures.

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