We use cookies to ensure that we deliver the best user experience of our website. If you would like to, you can change your cookie settings at any time. Continue

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

The Liberal Democrats have long voiced a wish to replace the UK's Single Member Plurality voting system, more commonly termed First Past the Post (FPTP), arguing that it discriminates against smaller parties by failing to convert their votes into seats. Though the Alternative Vote (AV) has, to date, not been the party's system of choice, the party has, for the moment, shelved future aspirations and got behind the fight for AV.

The commitment to a parliamentary vote on AV, and subsequent nationwide-referendum, formed a cornerstone of the eventual 'Coalition Programme' that was published in May last year. The bill was passed in both Houses this February and UK citizens will decide its fate by referendum on May 5th. If a simple majority supports the initiative, future elections will see voters ranking constituency candidates rather than giving support to only one, as they do now. Initial counts that fail to produce an overall winner will eliminate the least favourite candidate and distribute his or her voters' second preferences, until an outright winner is secured. This change will introduce a proportional element to what will still be a predominantly majoritarian system.

By virtue of the need for a majority, AV will encourage the strengthening of constituency ties at a time when civil society's relationship with its elected representatives appears to be at an all time low. In order to maximise the chances of re-election, MPs will be required to extend their appeal beyond natural support groups, minded of the fact that they must attract second, third and fourth preferences. In doing so, they will need to strengthen and innovate both constituency links and representative roles. These changes could revitalise parties' relationships with the electorate: surely a welcome development?

Contrary to understandable fears, extreme parties will not necessarily benefit from the introduction of AV because of the need to exert a catch-all appeal. Those choosing to sit at the edges of the system will, in all probability, stay there. The increased responsiveness of parties and the concomitant revitalisation of constituency linkages may also reduce the appeal of such parties any way.

The 'No' vote campaign argues that the introduction to AV will lead to hung parliaments, backroom deals and broken promises, these arguments should be dismissed and not just because it was FPTP that resulted in the current distribution of seats in Westminster. AV has been used for almost one hundred years to elect the Australian House of Representatives and the country boasts a history of stable parliaments and healthy strong parties.

David Cameron argues that *"[when] it comes to our democracy, Britain shouldn't have to settle for anyone's second choice*", yet at the moment, our democracy fails to give millions of voters any choice at all, as illustrated in last year's General Election when little over one third of MPs were elected with a majority of votes. Political science generally acknowledges that mechanics of FPTP disincentivises the act of voting and therefore political participation in general. Perhaps then, the most important outcome AV could produce is the reengagement of voters.

© University of Birmingham 2014