

from **Corinne Deloy**
Translated by Helen LevyANALYSIS
1 month before
the referendum

Referendum on the Voting Method in the UK

"At present, the UK uses the 'first past the post' system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' system be used instead?" This is the question 46 million British voters are being called to answer in a referendum that will take place on 5th May next. The date chosen for this popular consultation has been criticised by several parties and political leaders. Indeed regional elections will be taking place on the same day in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales; there will also be a local by-election (in some areas of the country). The voters being called to ballot for the local and/or regional elections may be over represented in comparison with the rest of the electorate (for example in comparison with those living in London who are not involved in any other election on 5th May). Scottish, Welsh and even Irish political leaders also regret that the referendum is being organised on the same day as the regional elections, which in their opinion, may confuse the electorate. 40 conservative MPs asked, in vain, that the popular consultation be organised on another date.

The House of Lords, the upper chamber of the British parliament wanted to establish an obligatory minimum threshold (at least 40% of those registered) for the referendum to be deemed valid. This proposal was not retained. Finally a petition by the People Pledge group asking for the organisation of a vote on the upkeep (or withdrawal) of the UK in the EU on 5th May was also circulated around the country. British Prime Minister David Cameron (Conservative Party) has not said however that he is totally against this project.

The referendum on the voting method will be the second organised in the UK. This first took place on 5th June 1975 and involved maintaining the country in the European Economic Community. More than 2/3 of voters (62.7%) approved maintaining their country in the EEC, 32.8% voted against.

The British must register on the electoral rolls before 14th April if they want to vote on 5th May with regard to the voting method.

First past the post vs. alternative vote

The first past the post method is simple: the candidate who wins the greatest number of votes (whether this is

80% or 30% of the vote) in a constituency is elected. The alternative voting system offers voters a chance to rank the candidates running by order of preference within a single member constituency. This selection is not obligatory however and the voter can choose to vote for one candidate only.

Counting then takes place as follows: the voting slips are sorted according to the first choices. The candidate rallying an absolute majority of first choices is declared elected. If no candidate succeeds in rallying 50% plus one first choice votes the one who has won the lowest number of first choices is eliminated from the race and the votes which went to that candidate are then divided between the other candidates according to the number of second choices won by each of them. The operation continues like this until one candidate wins an absolute majority of the vote and is declared elected as a result.

The alternative vote has been employed in Australia since 1919, and is used in the Fiji Islands and in Papua New Guinea. It aims to be representative of voter diversity and to enable people who vote for "small" parties to compete in the appointment of a candidate. The first past the post system benefits the "big" par-

ties more, i.e. in the UK this means the Labour and Conservative Parties. Hence in the last British general elections on 6th May 2010 more than 2/3 of MPs were elected without an absolute majority. During the general election of 1951, Labour, which won a majority of votes (48.8%) finally, had fewer MPs (295) than the Tories who won 302 seats with 44.3% of the vote.

Since there is no perfect voting method the alternative method may lead to distortions between the number of votes won and the seats taken. Hence in the last Australian general elections on 24th November 2007 the Greens won 7.79% of the vote without taking a single seat whilst the National Party which won 5.49% took 10 seats.

According to some political analysts the alternative voting system would have enabled the Liberal Democrats (Lib-Dems) to win 79 seats (instead of 57 at present) in the general elections on 6th May 2010. The Conservatives would have taken 281 seats (307 in reality) and Labour (262) (258). The Lib-Dems would then have had the choice between an alliance with either Labour or the Conservatives – either alliance would have led to an absolute majority. According to other calculations undertaken by researchers in Colchester, the Lib-Dems would have won 89 seats, the Conservatives 284 and Labour 248. However it should be noted that the alternative voting method used instead of the first past the post system can lead to a modification in how people vote (and/or abstained) which is impossible to judge after the fact.

John Curtice, Professor in Politics at Strathclyde University maintains that in the elections organised over the last three decades the Conservative Party would, with the alternative vote, has won less seats than with the first past the post system. In his opinion the Lib-Dems would not have won enough seats to prevent either of the two “big” British parties from winning an absolute majority. All the calculations show that finally the alternative voting system would make little change to the electoral results. So some people wonder about the need to give up a system which the British are used to (and in some cases attached to) and which has the merit of being understood easily.

Proponents of change promote the fact that the alternative vote is a fairer, more representative system. In their opinion this method of voting would force MPs

to work for all of the residents in their constituency. Indeed they accuse some political leaders of looking after their electorate alone and of believing that their seat is a post they can keep for life.

Opponents to any modification of the voting system say that the first past the post system is simple to understand and enables the production of solid majorities and keeps extremist parties under control. The relative electoral weakness of the latter in the UK and therefore their non-representation in the House of Commons, the lower Chamber in Parliament – is indeed often attributed to the voting method used which is said to protect the country from a phenomenon (the rise of populism) that is affecting all of Europe. Proponents of the upkeep of the first past the post system also say that the latter is used by over 50 countries in the world whilst the alternative vote is used in only three.

On 11th March last 25 historians (including Niall Ferguson, Amanda Foreman, Andrew Roberts, Anthony Bevor, David Starkey and Simon Sebag Montefiore) said they were against the alternative vote in a letter published in the daily *The Times*. They believe this system undermines the principle of voter equality which means that every vote has the same weight and the same value. Proponents of the “no” vote in the referendum on 5th May quote Winston Churchill (British Prime Minister from 1940-45 and then 1951-55) who during the last attempt to change to the alternative system (in 1931) said that this “*was the stupidest, least scientific and most unreal voting system*”. “*The result is determined by the vainest of votes granted to the vainest of candidates,*” he maintained.

The Position of the other Parties

The “small” parties all defend the “yes” vote in the referendum, Labour is divided

The desire to the voting method came from the Lib-Dems and was almost a condition for their alliance with the Conservative Party after the general elections on 6th May 2010. Nick Clegg’s party wants to see the UK adopt a proportional voting system. Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg has also qualified the alternative vote as “*a miserable compromise*”. The Lib-Dems however present this voting method as the first stage towards the adoption of a fairer voting system. Hence, Tim

Farron, leader of the Lib-Dem campaign recalls that *"the vote of ¾ of voters is not taken into account with the first past the post system."* This might of course seem exaggerated but it pinpoints a reality worth remembering.

According to Nick Clegg, the present British voting method is outmoded. By enabling the election of an MP with the support of a low number of voters, citizens' confidence in politics is being destroyed. *"Many MPs are elected without the support of most of the electorate they are supposed to represent. This means that millions of votes are not taken in account. This encourages MPs to be lazy and inefficient,"* he declared. The Deputy Prime Minister also insists on the simplicity of the alternative vote. *"It is as simple as 1, 2, 3. All you have to do is to write 1 next to the candidate you want to win, 2 next to your second choice and 3 next to the third etc. And if you only want to vote for one person you can also do that. The system is simple and fair,"* he repeats. *"Some say that this voting method goes against British tradition. This is absurd. The alternative vote is a development, but not a revolution. It is a small change that makes a big difference,"* stresses Nick Clegg.

The Greens support a proportional system but believe the alternative vote to be a step in the right direction. *"I think that with the alternative vote my electorate can vote more for what they believe in,"* declared their leader Caroline Lucas – who is also the first Green MP to be elected to the House of Commons (by incidentally winning 31.3% of the vote on 6th May 2010 in the constituency of Brighton Pavilion).

Plaid Cymru (PC), the Welsh Nationalist Party, Labour and the Social Democratic Party (SDLP), the Catholic Party of Northern Ireland and the English Democrats would like to replace first past the post by a single transferable vote but are still calling for people to vote "yes" on 5th May next. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the Alliance Party, a Northern Irish inter-confessional party, the Scottish National Party (SNP), Sinn Fein (SF) and the British National Party (BNP) also support a change in the voting system.

Finally the hero of the film *"The King's Speech"* (produced by Tom Hooper), Colin Firth and Helena Bonham Carter, decided to commit in support of the "yes".

Labour is divided over the issue of modifying the elec-

tion method. Its leader Ed Miliband indicated that personally he would vote "yes" on 5th May. However he advised Nick Clegg, who is losing ground in terms of popularity after his U-turn on university fees (the Lib-Dems supported the reform enabling universities to increase enrolment fees to £9,000 per year (10,730 €) in compensation for the progressive disengagement of the State from Higher Education), to *"rest a little"*. *"What do the "no" supporters want? They want Nick Clegg's photo on all the posters calling for the "yes" vote,"* declared the Labour leader.

Ed Miliband joined the "yes" camp on 29th March last alongside Caroline Lucas (1999-2006), and other former Lib-Dems leaders Charles Kennedy and Tim Farron. He said that the alternative vote would enable progressive leftwing and centre-left parties to *"build bridges"*. *"The tragedy of the British progressives is that the division between the left and centre-left has led to an increasingly united right, victory after victory. For over 80 years there has been one Conservative Party but several others trying to attract the progressive vote. It is not surprising that the Tories support the present system,"* indicated Ed Miliband.

Former Labour leader (1983-1992), Neil Kinnock, has also said he supports the "yes" vote. *"The UK must move towards a fairer system which prevents an MP who only wins one third of the vote in his constituency to be elected and which is a better reflection of voters' views. The alternative vote is this system,"* declared the former Vice-President of the European Commission (1999-2004).

However many Labour supporters are against any change to the voting method. Hence Margaret Beckett, former Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and the UK Commonwealth (2006-2007) signed a letter in the daily The Times, defending the first past the post system – it was co-signed by present Foreign Minister William Hague.

The Conservative Party, the only party in support of maintaining the present system

The Conservative Party, the Lib-Dems government partner, is against the adoption of the alternative vote system. Prime Minister David Cameron believes that it will produce *"unfair results since second choices will be decisive."* *"The alternative vote is a waste of time,*

money and energy. I do not think that we should replace a system that everyone understands by a system that only some MPs understand," he declared, insisting on the fact that the alternative vote would have enabled Gordon Brown (Prime Minister from 2007-2010) to retain power after the general elections on 6th May 2010.

In a speech delivered in Swansea at the beginning of April the Prime Minister qualified the alternative voting as an "unfair, anti-democratic, obscure system." "It is so unfair that the candidates who come second or third may finally win the election. Imagine the Olympic Games. Usain Bolt wins the 100m. Just as the medals are being awarded the runner who came third takes gold. What we do not accept in the Olympic Games we cannot accept in politics either. We must vote "no" to this absurd system," declared David Cameron.

The head of government also said that this voting method may produce a greater number of hung parliaments and would lead to the creation of "second choice governments". Finally he regretted that the British seemed so uninterested in the question set by the referendum, which David Cameron qualifies as being "extremely important for our country".

During the referendum voters often opt to answer those who ask the question i.e. the government in office, than the question itself. However the singularity of the consultation on 5th May lies in the fact that the govern-

ment is divided over the question being asked. According to the referendum theory set out by Peter Kellner of pollster YouGov in most popular consultations the status quo prevails. If this theory is substantiated the first past the post system – stable and dominated by two political parties – should be maintained.

Just one month before the election the British do not yet seem concerned by the question being asked. The electorate is divided and the number of undecided high. According to the latest poll by YouGov the "yes" vote for the alternative vote is in the lead with 39%. An almost identical share of voters (37%) are however about to vote "no" to any change in the voting system. But 23% of those interviewed say they have not yet decided how they will vote.

Prime Minister David Cameron and his Deputy Nick Clegg have both said that the referendum result will not change anything in terms of government action. "This referendum is not a vote on the government. Whatever the result we shall continue to work for the national interest," declared the head of government. However a "yes" victory would comprise a defeat for the leader of the Conservative Party after his failure to win an absolute majority in parliament in the general elections in May 2010. In the event of a win by the "no" vote the electoral reform would disappear from the electoral agenda for a long time.

The turnout will be decisive for the referendum on the voting method in the UK on 5th May

D-7
7 days before
the poll

On 5th May 46 million Brits are being invited to answer "yes" or "no" to the following question: "At present, the UK uses the 'first past the post' system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the 'alternative vote' system be used instead?" Britons will decide by referendum, a rare event in the UK.

First past the post vs. alternative vote

In the first past the post system the candidate who wins the greatest number of votes in a constituency is elected (whether this is 80% or 30% of the vote).

The alternative voting system offers the electorate the possibility of ranking the candidates standing in the election by order of preference but still within a single winner constituency. The voter does not have to

make this choice however and he/she can also choose to give his/her vote to one candidate only. Counting takes place as follows: voting slips are ranked according to first choices. The candidate who wins an absolute majority of first choices is declared elected. If no candidate manages to win 50% + 1 in terms of the first choice votes the person who has won the lowest number of votes is eliminated and his/her votes are shared out amongst the other candidates according to the number of second choices won by each of them. This operation is continued until a candidate wins an absolute majority of votes and as a consequence is declared elected.

Proponents of a change in the voting method say that the alternative vote would enable a fairer representation of the electorate than the present system in which voters hesitate in giving their vote to a "small" party often believing that this is a "wasted" vote in the first past the post system. Those who defend the upkeep of this system stress that if it is abandoned it will make it harder for a party to achieve an absolute majority and would therefore lead to a multiplication of government coalitions. The first past the post system does indeed make it possible to keep extremist parties down and to protect the UK from the rise of populism, a phenomenon that is affecting all of Europe. *"The alternative vote is not British,"* declared the present Foreign Minister, William Hague adding, *"the rest of the world will think we've gone mad. Our system has been copied by many; including the USA. It would not be logical to change it for a system that is not clear, more expensive and which would lead to many problems,"* he added.

Finally it seems that the electoral results that come from the alternative vote would not be very different from those obtained in the present system.

A certain amount of confusion

The electoral campaign started in a certain amount of confusion. This referendum is already unusual in that the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats in office have agreed to disagree! Prime Minister David Cameron (Conservative) is defending the "no" to the alternative vote whilst Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (Lib-Dem) supports the "yes". The head of government sees *"no reason to change a system that*

makes it possible to get rid of governments which do not satisfy the electorate as was the case in 1979 and 1997." He is protesting against an *"obscure, unfair, costly" system which allows "a candidate that came third to win the election,"* and rejects the idea that the alternative vote would restore British confidence in politics again. The Prime Minister has however stood back from criticism of the Liberal-Democrat leader: *"I am not leading the Conservative "no" campaign."* Nick Clegg has played all of his cards in the success of the referendum. *"The "no" campaign is supported by fascists and extremists,"* he declared. The British National Party (BNP), just like the Communist Party is against the alternative voting system. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Sinn Fein (SF) are both in favour of the alternative vote.

Although the Tories and the Lib-Dems disagree over the change in the voting system, Prime Minister David Cameron shared the stage with former Minister and eternal Tory enemy, Lord John Reid (Labour), who are both defending the first past the post system. *"John and I do not agree on much but we absolutely agree on one point: the alternative vote would be bad for the country,"* declared the head of government. *"Not only is this system bad but it would be outrageous to change the electoral system to help a party which goes against the citizens' right to an equal vote,"* added John Reid. *"If you lose an election, you have to sit tight and work harder to win the support of the electorate. You can't tell them: ok we're going to change the rules of the game and move the goal posts,"* he added.

Officially the Labour Party supports the change in the voting method even though it remains divided over the issue. John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister (1997-2007) and David Blunkett, former Minister are both campaigning for the "no". Hence there is a certain amount of confusion amongst the main opposition party. *"This referendum is not a vote on Nick Clegg, on David Cameron or even on myself, it is an opportunity to have better policy in the UK,"* repeats the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, who is trying to dissuade Labour from punishing the Deputy Prime Minister by voting "no". Nick Clegg has indeed been losing ground in the popularity polls since his u-turn on university fees (whilst he had declared that he would oppose their increase, he did in fact support the reform thereby enabling uni-

versities to set fees at £9000 per year (10,730€) in compensation for the State's progressive withdrawal from higher education.

The "no" ahead in the polls

Although the polls differ with regard to the final referendum result they do all forecast however a general trend: except if there is last minute change the British are due to say "no" to the suggested modification to the voting method.

According to the most recent poll by YouGov 44% of the British are about to reject the alternative vote on 5th May whilst 37% say they are in favour of it. Opposition to giving up the first past the post system is even greater when those interviewed were asked again after listening to a detailed explanation of both voting methods: 45% say they support the "no" and 33% support the "yes". Those who want to retain the present system say they are *"satisfied with first past the post" and say that this is the main reason behind their vote* (56% of the answers). Proponents of the alternative vote qualify it as being "fairer" (54%). YouGov shows that regional differences in turnout may be decisive for the final result. Finally voting is closely linked to partisan support: Conservative sympathisers are against any change in the voting scheme, those close to the Lib-Dems support it and Labour sympathisers are divided.

The poll by ICM for the daily The Guardian reveals that 58% of the British support the upkeep of the present voting system and that 42% of them want to see the alternative vote replace the first past the post system. 23% of those interviewed have still not decided and do not know whether they will go and vote on 5th May next. The polls shows that three quarters of the Conservatives are about to vote "no" just like a majority of Labour sympathisers. Young people are more in favour of a change in voting method, pensioners want to retain the present system.

"Most of the British are against any change in the voting method but it is not certain that an adequate number will turn out to vote on 5th May to prevent it," said David Cameron who greatly fears low turnout. Indeed this would be advantageous to the "yes" whose proponents quite logically more motivated. The Conservatives are also emphasising the fact that

the final decision may belong to the Scots, Welsh and Irish who are also being called to ballot to appoint their regional representatives on 5th May. According to the polls the Scots are amongst the most in favour of the alternative vote: 52% are about to vote "yes" to the change in the voting system and 33% say will reject it.

The Tories point out that the country may experience major constitutional change even though a low number of Britons turn out to vote. The House of Lords, the Upper Chamber in the British parliament vainly tried to set an obligatory minimum threshold (at least 40% of those registered) for the referendum to be deemed valid.

A victory of the "no" would of course be a failure for Nick Clegg and all the more serious since the Deputy Prime Minister made the change of voting method his party's number one objective and the main reason for his participation in government. The Lib-Dem base may wonder whether it is worth continuing work with the Conservatives if the "no" vote wins. *"Lib-Dem MPs are experiencing a slow-motion car crash. They have two options: either they jump out of the moving car or they snatch the wheel from the driver,"* analyses political science professor at Sussex University, Tim Bale. *"The government coalition is in place for five years,"* repeats Nick Clegg. A "yes" victory would be a setback for the Prime Minister. *"If David Cameron loses his wager he will really be forced to accept a voting system that would make it more difficult for the Tories to govern alone,"* indicates Tim Bale.

A "yes" victory would undoubtedly push the Lib-Dems to ask for more quite rapidly, i.e. the use of the proportional system.

Divided, the Labour Party will not therefore be a total loser on 5th May next. Ed Miliband is standing as a proponent of the "yes" vote, a position which may prove difficult in the end. Labour should however emerge as the victor in the local elections that will take place on the same day as the referendum on the voting method. Most of the seats that are up for election were lost by Labour in the last elections on 3rd May 2007, the latter should therefore improve their results.

If the "yes" vote wins the alternative voting system will enter into force in the next general elections in Britain, planned for 2015.

The British reject the modification of their voting method en masse



RESULTS

An overwhelming majority of the British voted to maintain the first past the post voting method for the election of the Members of the House of Commons during the referendum on 5th May. The Lib-Dems led by Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg secured the organisation of a popular vote in “exchange” for their participation in the government coalition led by Prime Minister David Cameron (Conservative Party). Two-thirds of the electorate (67.87%) voted “no” to the following question: “At present, the UK uses the ‘first past the post’ system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the ‘alternative vote’ system be used instead?” One third (32.09%) voted in favour of changing the voting method. Of the 440 constituencies only 10 voted mostly in support of the alternative vote: Hackney (60.68%), Glasgow Kelvin (58.8%), Haringey (56.62%), Islington (56.92%), Lambeth (54.69%), Cambridge (54.32%), Oxford (54.11%), Southwark (52.73%), Camden (51.40%) and Edinburgh central (51.36%).

Turnout was higher than political analysts had expected and rose to 41.97%. Scotland fulfilled its civic duty most: more than half of the electorate voted in the referendum but the Scots were also called on that day to renew their regional parliament. In London which was not affected by any other local election turnout was the worst. Only 35.4% of the electorate went to vote.

Those who supported the “no” vote in the referendum and notably the Conservatives, finally convinced the British of the merits of the stable, simple first past the post system which enables the constitution of strong majorities and keeps extremist parties in check; they also convinced them that the alternative vote was complicated and that it would not really lead to any real progress.

With this referendum and also via the regional and local elections that took place on the same day Britons seemed to want to punish the Lib-Dems, whom they criticise for having made u-turns on some of their campaign promises and for having supported the austerity policy that is being implemented by the government. As is often the case in a referendum Britons gave their answer rather to those who were asking the question rather than answering the question itself – in this case they targeted the Lib-Dems who were the initiators of this popular consultation.

On 5th May the Lib-Dems lost around half of their town councils and many of their regional councillors in Scotland where they collapsed. The party’s regional leader, Tavish Scott resigned from office after the election. In

Liverpool former city council leader (1998-2005), Mike Storey (Lib-Dem), was beaten by Labour Jake Morrison, just 18. The Lib-Dems also suffered a symbolic setback as it lost Sheffield, the stronghold of Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg, to Labour.

“It is a terrible blow for those who supported the reform such as myself” declared the Lib-Dem leader when the referendum results were announced. “The result is clear. In democracy when people are asked a question and the answer is as clear as this you have to accept it,” he stressed. He promised to learn the lessons of this and step up work and rejected the idea that the Lib-Dems might quit the government coalition. “We have to create jobs. This is the work we have started and that we are going to complete,” indicated Nick Clegg. Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron said, “I am quite determined to ensure that this government coalition, which I think beneficial for the country works for the five years of its term in office.” The local elections and the referendum were the first major test for the government coalition since it took office in May 2010. Although the Lib-Dems lost half of its

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town council seats the Tories won some, notably to the detriment of the Lib-Dems in the south of the country. David Cameron, who actively led the “no” campaign to the referendum is therefore the winner in this election. “The rejection of the alternative vote by the electorate is resoundingly clear,” declared the head of government who stressed that the British “in the name of general interest now wanted the government to continue its work and for it to take care of the problems which the country was facing.” Although the government coalition should not collapse it has however been weakened by the downturn suffered by the Lib-Dems and friction between the two parties may grow more acute. Labour leader Ed Miliband who voted in support of the referendum whilst his own party remained divided over the issue admitted that he was “disappointed” by the results. “The population has clearly spoken and I accept the verdict,” he indicated. The opposition leader did however say that the electoral system should be improved so that greater participation on the part of

the population might be achieved. Labour can however be pleased with the results it achieved in the local elections in which it made slower progress than expected however. Labour declined in Scotland (7 seats less in the Scottish parliament that has 129 in all) where the Scottish National Party (SNP) led by Alex Salmond made a spectacular breakthrough (23 seats more). Iain Gray, Labour’s leader in Scotland, resigned from office after the election. Labour remained stable in Wales where it is due to continue as the region’s leader in the alliance with the Welsh National Party – Plaid Cymru (C) led by Ieuan Wyn Jones. Peter Kellner’s referendum theory – Kellner is an analyst for pollster YouGov, which suggests that the status quo prevails in most popular consultations, has again proven to be true. The result on 5th May will mean that electoral reform will disappear from the political agenda for a very long time.

Result of the referendum on the modification of the voting method on 5th May in the UK.

Turnout: 41.97%

Question asked	% of “yes” (The number of votes is in brackets)	Pourcentage de « non » (The number of votes is in brackets)
<i>“At present, the UK uses the ‘first past the post’ system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the ‘alternative vote’ system be used instead?”</i>	67.87 (6 152 607)	32,09 (13 013 123)

Source : BBC

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