



REPORT

The Right Alternative?

Assessing the case for
the Alternative Vote

Guy Lodge and Glenn Gottfried

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Addenda

On 20 April 2011, the following correction was made:
p15: Australia has had two hung parliaments, not one

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Executive summary

The upcoming referendum offers voters the choice between moving to the Alternative Vote (AV) or retaining First Past the Post (FPTP). The evidence presented in this report and ippr's previous publication – *Worst of Both Worlds: Why First Past the Post no longer works* – shows that there is a strong case for reform.¹ AV is a superior voting system to FPTP principally because it goes with the grain of contemporary political life in Britain: it is better at reflecting the diversity and pluralism of the modern electorate, something FPTP conspicuously fails to do. However, there is no such thing as a perfect electoral system and we should be careful not to exaggerate the claims of AV. It is not a proportional system and so does not give all parties a fair share of seats in parliament.

Why AV?

- FPTP is a system designed for an age of political tribalism which no longer exists. **AV suits the electoral conditions prevalent in Britain today** – particularly the shift to multi-party politics. Voters are much more promiscuous in the way they vote than in the past and AV is more adept at probing and reflecting the electorate's political pluralism. There is clear support for AV among non-tribal voters.
- **AV empowers the voter** locally by enhancing voter choice and ensures candidates are elected with broad-based support. Under FPTP a candidate can be elected on the votes of a minority of committed supporters, which means that the majority of voters are represented by a candidate they did not vote for. With the rise of third party representation this deficiency of FPTP is set to get a lot worse. AV addresses this directly: where the leading candidate falls short of a majority, the election will return a member with greater support in the electorate than the candidate with the simple majority of first preferences.
- **UK voters are happy to express a range of preferences when voting** – certainly up to and including a third choice. For the majority of voters, especially the growing number of non-tribal voters, their sense of allegiance to these top three parties does not vary substantially. Those with loose party affiliation – 40 per cent of the electorate – give their first two preferences almost equal weighting. With their looser sense of party affiliation, today's voters are able to simultaneously support a handful of parties that in some way represent their values.
- **AV reduces the fear of wasted votes**, and significantly reduces the level of tactical voting. Half of voters think there would be less tactical voting under AV. AV enables a larger number of voters to contribute to the outcome of elections than under FPTP. However, it does not make all votes *count*, as it is not proportional. It does not breach the principle of 'one person, one vote'. All votes are equal under AV.
- Although it does not eliminate safe seats, **AV will make elections more competitive**. By raising the threshold for success it will oblige parties to appeal to a larger section of the electorate to a much greater extent than they do under FPTP. Had the 2010 general election taken place under AV then preferences for parties other than the winning party would have been counted in 434 seats (66 per cent). In contrast, under FPTP, 438 seats (69 per cent) are defined as safe seats, where there is little incentive for incumbent MPs to reach out beyond their core vote. AV will change the nature of political competition. It creates more uncertainty, which is good for democracy.
- **AV will not lead to permanent coalition**, nor will the Liberal Democrats be made the king-makers of British politics. By strengthening the representation of the Liberal Democrats, AV might slightly increase the chance of hung parliaments. However, the biggest driver of hung parliaments is not the electoral system but voting behaviour: this suggests that hung parliaments are more likely whether elections are held under FPTP or AV.

¹ Lodge and Gottfried (2011). <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=798>

- Minor parties might increase their share of the vote but they will still struggle to win seats. Their influence will grow by virtue of having the major parties seek their supporters' second preference votes. However, **extremist parties like the BNP will be penalised by AV** and their recycled votes will not influence election outcomes.
- **AV will not radically transform our democratic culture.** It is unlikely to increase turnout. Then again, voting systems per se have little impact on whether people choose to vote or not.
- **AV is not too complicated to use.** Two-thirds of British voters say they think AV is 'fairly' or 'very easy' to understand. UK voters have, in recent years, proved themselves to be highly adept at using a range of different electoral systems, including preferential voting systems like AV which are already used in a number of UK elections. The British public has a broad experience of using variants of AV to elect figures in organisations across the country – and to select winners in TV programmes like *The X Factor*. It appears that the more familiar the public are with the way AV works, the more they support reform.

Introduction

The 2010 general election produced the first ‘hung parliament’ since 1974, which led to the formation of Britain’s first peacetime coalition government since the 1930s. A key component of the historic Conservative–Liberal Democrat Coalition Agreement was the decision to hold a referendum on the Alternative Vote (AV) in spring 2011. This paper is intended to help inform the referendum debate by empirically testing several of the claims made for and against AV. It draws on:

- Relevant academic literature²
- ippr’s own original analysis of voting election data
- A major ippr/YouGov poll exploring important procedural aspects of AV.³

It should be read alongside a previous ippr report, *Worst of Both Worlds* (Lodge and Gottfried 2011), which looked in critical detail at the way the current First Past the Post (FPTP) voting system works.

How AV works

AV shares many similarities with FPTP. It is part of the same ‘majoritarian’ family as FPTP, which is to say that individual MPs are elected in single-member constituencies.

It is not a proportional electoral system. The two most significant differences between AV and FPTP are:

- AV is a preferential system: it allows voters to rank candidates in order of preference
- AV requires winning candidates to secure an absolute majority of the vote, unlike FPTP under which the winner is the candidate who gets the most votes.

Under AV, instead of putting an ‘X’ alongside one name (and one name only) on the ballot paper, the voter instead marks the paper with a ‘1’ to indicate their most favoured candidate, a ‘2’ to indicate the next favoured candidate, and so on.

If a candidate receives an absolute majority of first preference votes, they are elected. But if no candidate has received an absolute majority of first preference votes, then the candidate with the fewest first preference votes is eliminated and that candidate’s votes are redistributed according to those voters’ second preferences. The process continues until one candidate receives an absolute majority of the votes.

The version of AV that is being considered in this referendum is best described as an ‘optional preferential’ model, because voters can rank as few or as many candidates as they like, and are not obliged to express a preference for all candidates – where there are five candidates running, a voter could still choose to indicate their first preference only. One consequence of an optional model is that if sufficient voters choose not to express a range of preferences then it is not guaranteed that the winning candidate will pass the 50 per cent threshold.

Tribal or plural? UK voters today

Any assessment of the case for AV must start with an understanding of the key characteristics of the contemporary British voter. Of particular relevance is the degree to which voters are considered ‘tribal’ – expressing a strong attachment to a particular party – or ‘non-tribal’, where there is no perfect party match and they have some sympathy with more than one party. Logically speaking, AV – a system that allows voters to express multiple preferences – is better suited to the ‘non-tribal’ voter than is FPTP, which allows voters to express just one. Indeed, many of those who oppose AV do so not only on the grounds of concerns they have about the way AV works (these are discussed below) but because they object to the very idea of being asked to rank multiple preferences. The Conservative MP Daniel Kawczynski, who chairs the All-Party Group for the Promotion of First Past the Post, recently summed up this position when interviewed on the BBC’s *Today* programme (6 April 2011):

2 In particular we have drawn on publications by Alan Renwick (2011a and 2011b) which provide excellent summaries of the existing academic literature on AV.

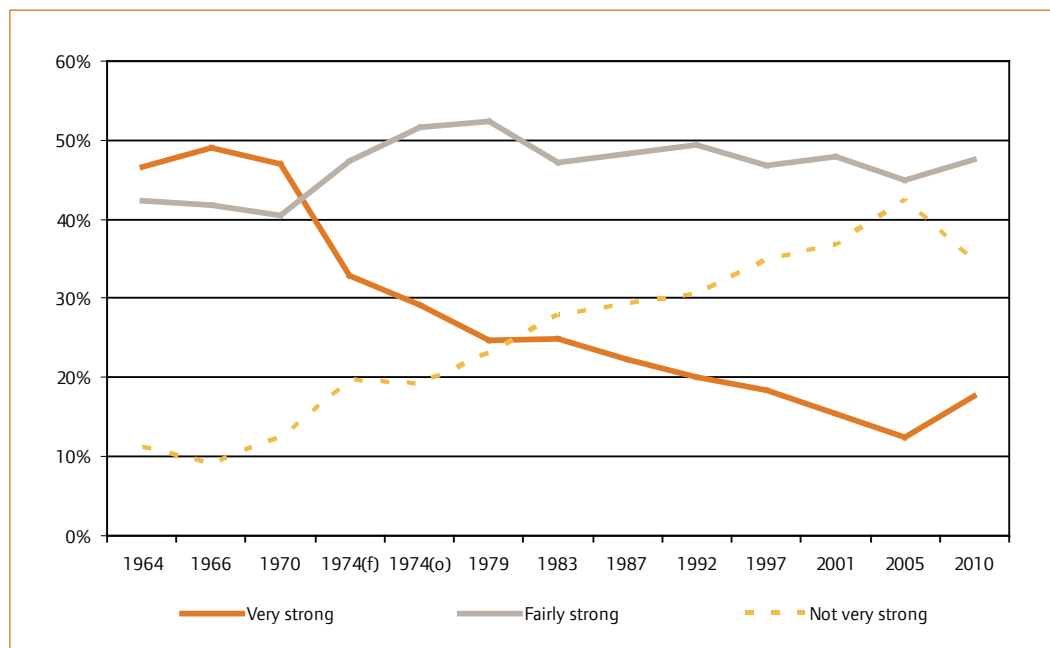
3 Full results of this poll are available at <http://www.ippr.org/publicationsandreports/publication.asp?id=814>

I've participated in an AV election for mayor of London⁴ – when I go to the polling booth, I only voted once as I couldn't dream of voting for any other party.

It is easy to see why someone with Kawczynski's views would continue to support FPTP, since the current system works well for voters who have a strong commitment to a particular party. FPTP was designed to facilitate a simple political contest between two parties that represent contrasting ideological positions, providing the voter with a straightforward choice (Duverger 1954).

But is the Kawczynski view in line with the major developments in British voting patterns and electoral trends of the past 30 years or so? Political tribalism – that is, strong attachment to a specific party – has declined steadily since its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, to be replaced with a much more fluid form of political affiliation and much greater voter volatility. The British Election Study (BES) shows that the number of voters claiming to have a 'very strong' attachment to a particular party has fallen from just under 50 per cent in the 1960s to below 20 per cent in the 2000s. Conversely, the number of voters claiming a 'not very strong' attachment has trebled in the same period.

Figure 1
Strength of party attachment, 1964–2010



Source: BES

An ippr/YouGov poll designed to examine public attitudes towards party affiliation found that just 18 per cent agreed with the following statement: 'One political party comes close to reflecting my views and values; I am strongly opposed to all of the others.' By contrast, 60 per cent of voters supported statements which reflected a willingness to support more than one party. Non-tribal voters, according to this survey, are in the majority in the UK.

Table 1
Political tribalism

	Number	Proportion
One political party only [†]	397	18.06
One political party closest; some sympathy for other parties [†]	642	29.20
Some sympathy for two or more parties [‡]	672	30.56
Little support or sympathy for any party	374	17.03
Don't know	113	5.16
Total	2199	

Source: ippr/YouGov 2011

[†] Politically tribal

[‡] Non-tribal

Note: Those who responded as 'Little support or sympathy for any party' are not considered tribal or non-tribal.

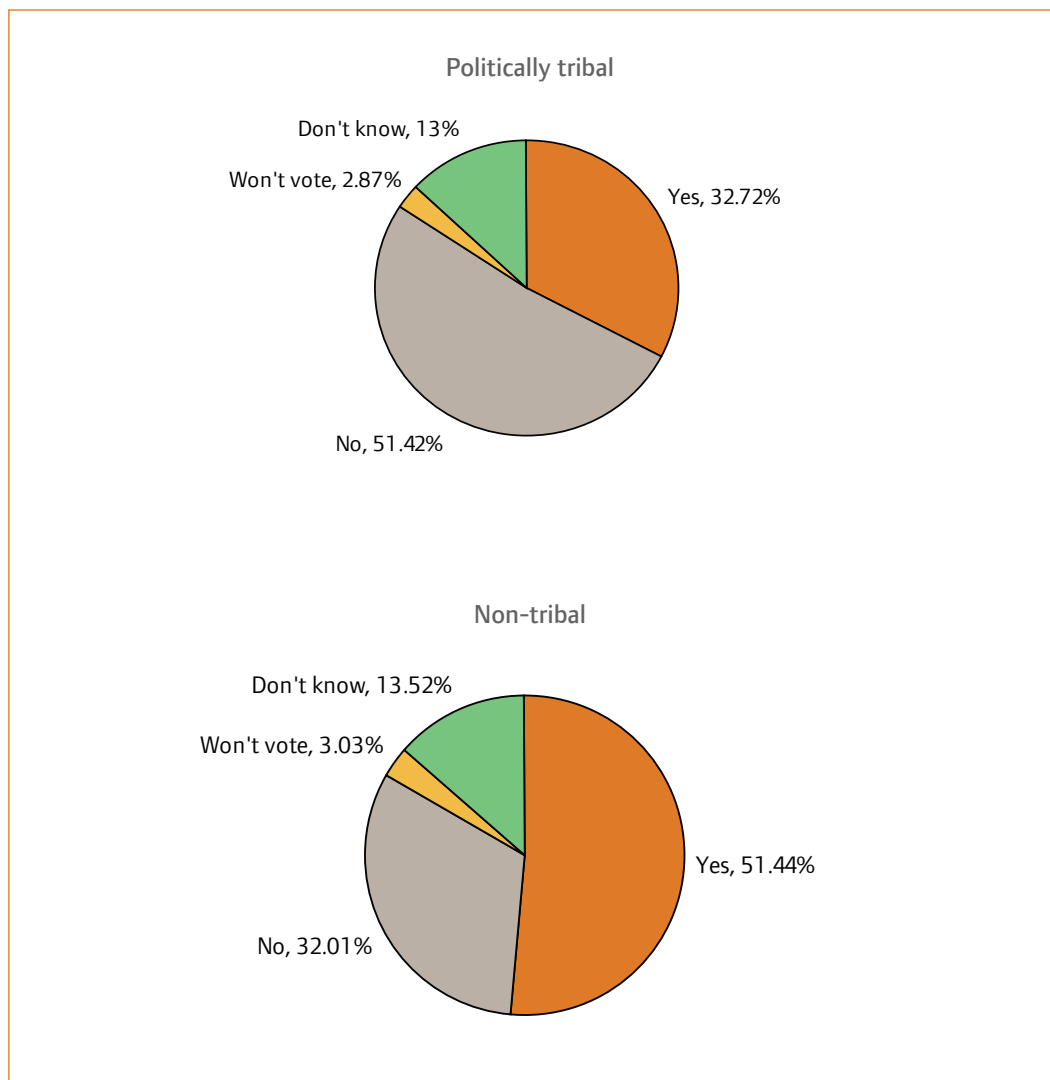
⁴ Kawczynski is referring to the Supplementary Vote that is used to elect the London mayor. It is a preferential voting system that allows voters to rank their first and second favourite candidates.

This decline in party attachment mirrors a range of other trends which suggest that British politics has become much more 'plural' in recent years, including the collapse in membership of the major political parties and the significant decline in combined electoral support for the two main parties, down from over 90 per cent in the 1950s to 65.1 per cent at the last general election (Lodge and Gottfried 2011).

Voters today are motivated more by 'issues' than they are by background or class. Not only are voters more inclined to support a wide range of parties, they are also more volatile and more prone to switch allegiance between elections. ippr analysis of the 2010 British Election Survey data indicates that 30.72 per cent of those who voted in 2005 voted for a different party in 2010. Today's voters are more indecisive too: in 2010, 40 per cent of voters only made their mind up who to support during the election campaign itself (this is discussed further below).

But does a decline in political tribalism correspond into support for a system of preferential voting? The ippr/YouGov poll also asked respondents how they intended to vote in the AV referendum. This shows clear support for AV among the politically non-tribal, with 51.44 per cent in favour and 32.01 per cent against. Unsurprisingly, FPTP is more popular with the politically tribal, with 51.42 per cent saying they would vote 'no' in the referendum.

Figure 2
 Voting intention
 in the AV
 referendum, by
 attitude to party
 affiliation



Source: ippr/YouGov 2011

Next, we need to consider what has happened on the few occasions when British voters have been given the opportunity to express multiple preferences. There is a range of examples to draw on:

- London and local authority mayoral elections, which use the Supplementary Vote
- Scottish local government by-elections, which take place under AV⁵

⁵ Data is only available for the six seats where counting was done electronically.

- Surveys which ask respondents to take place in ‘mock AV ballots’, in particular the 2010 BES ballot.

As with the proposed system of AV for Westminster elections, there is no obligation for voters/respondents to rank more than one candidate – in each of these cases, it is up to the voter whether they express one or multiple preferences (or indeed none). So, when given the opportunity, do British voters choose to express a range of preferences? In short: yes, and usually in substantial numbers for the ‘stronger’ preferences at least. However, rankings tend to decline markedly after the second and third preferences. In other words, there are limits to how many meaningful preferences voters have: they are happy to support some parties but not others.

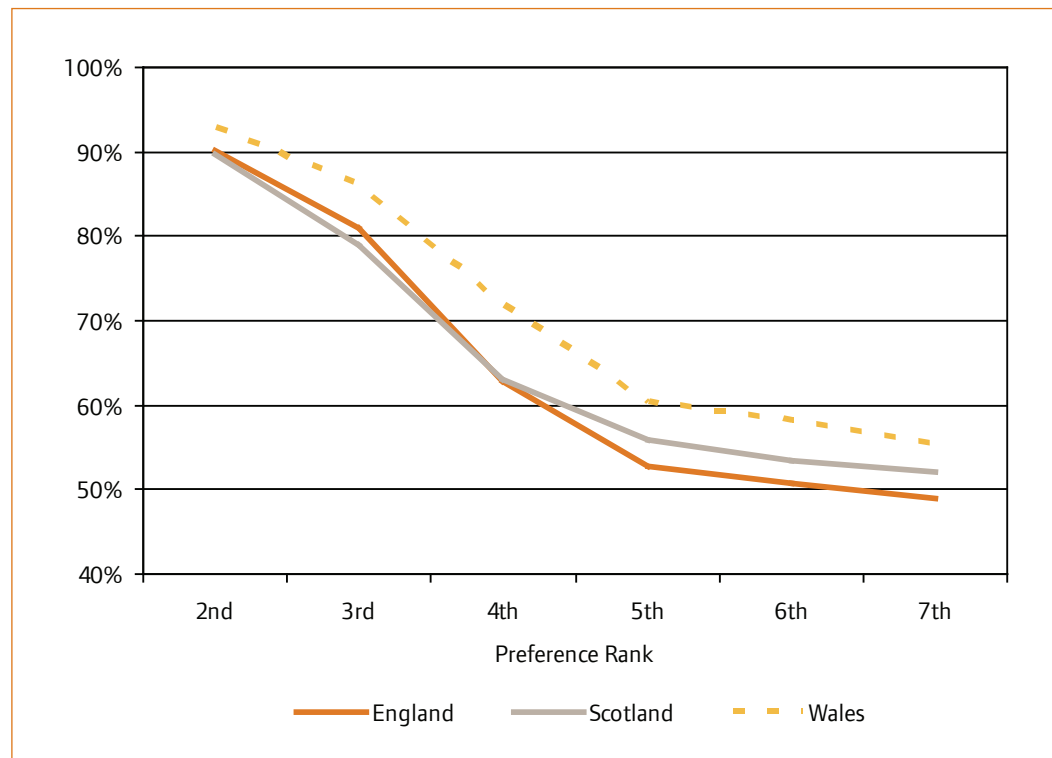
The 2010 BES, via a national panel survey of nearly 13,356 people, asked respondents to take part in a mock AV ballot. Table 2 shows that the overwhelming majority of respondents in England, Scotland and Wales opted to express a first, second and third preference. Figure 3 expresses these results by looking at the propensity of those who declared a first preference to go on to list subsequent preferences: again, it shows a steady decline in the numbers expressing preferences beyond the third or fourth.

Table 2
Number of preferences expressed in response to the AV ballot question, by country (%)

	First pref	Second pref	Third pref	Fourth pref	Fifth pref	Sixth pref	Seventh pref
England	77	72	65	56	42	40	38
Scotland	75	70	61	49	43	41	40
Wales	76	73	67	56	47	45	43

Unweighted N of respondents: England = 11461; Scotland = 1241; Wales = 654
Source: BES 2010. Calculations: Sanders et al (2011)

Figure 3
Ranking capabilities of those who expressed a first preference



Source: BES 2010. Calculations: ippr

The ippr/YouGov poll also asked respondents to take part in a mock AV election: of those who expressed a first preference, 78 per cent ranked a second candidate, and 57 per cent a third.

Table 3
Ranking capabilities of those who expressed a first preference

Second pref	Third pref	Fourth pref	Fifth pref	Sixth pref
78%	57%	37%	31%	28%

Source: ippr/YouGov 2011

Limited data available from Scottish by-elections, which are held under AV, suggests a smaller number of voters express a range of preferences than the figures recorded in the surveys (Curtice 2011). Even so, for those who expressed a first preference between 49.51 and 62.84 per cent have gone on to rank their second preference, and between 32.50 and 49.69 per cent have ranked a third preference (ibid). The Scottish data should probably be treated with some caution, since it draws on a very small sample size (data on preferences is available for only six seats) and because local government by-elections tend to be very low-profile affairs. It is questionable how useful a guide they are to how voters might behave in a UK-wide general election held under AV.

A more reliable indicator is provided by the London mayoral elections held under the Supplementary Vote, under which voters are allowed but not required to express a second preference. In 2008, 70 per cent of Londoners chose to register a second preference, which is more in line with the survey evidence above.

This analysis is relevant to the debate on AV because we believe that a preferential voting system can more effectively accommodate the contemporary British voter, who defines themselves in a multitude of ways and who is comfortable with a more varied and diverse political landscape. AV is better suited to the sort of voter for whom no party is a perfect match and who has some level of support for or allegiance to more than one party.

Crucially, however, we also believe that AV does not discriminate against the more traditional ‘tribal’ voter: under AV, Daniel Kawczynski and others like him who couldn’t dream of voting for another party don’t have to. They can simply rank their favourite candidate, providing a first preference only. The problem with FPTP is that it doesn’t afford this flexibility to the majority of voters who have long abandoned the tribal politics of the past. In fact, as we showed in our previous report *Worst of Both Worlds*, FPTP starts to break down in a multi-party political culture (Lodge and Gottfried 2011). AV, in contrast, by promoting voter choice empowers the electorate in a world defined by declining tribalism.

AV ensures that MPs are elected with broad-based support

A serious weakness of FPTP is that it enables MPs to be elected on a minority of the vote. During the golden age of Britain’s two-party system this deficiency was concealed from public view. In the 1950s, when the vast majority of seats offered voters a straight run-off between Labour and Conservative candidates, almost all MPs were elected with more than 50 per cent of the vote. In the 1951 general election, for example, just 6 per cent of MPs failed to secure a majority of the local vote. However, the rise of third parties contesting seats in the UK – in 2010 there were, on average, seven candidates contesting each constituency (Bogdanor 2011) – has made it much more difficult for an MP to be elected with majority support in their constituency. Table 4 shows how profound the change has been.

Table 4
Seats won with absolute majorities, 1992–2010

Year	Seats	Proportion	Total seats
1992	353	56.21	628
1997	296	47.13	628
2001	311	49.52	628
2005	210	33.44	628
2010	211	33.44	631

Source: BES. Data made available by Pippa Norris at www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm
Note: Figures do not include Northern Ireland

In 2005 and 2010, two-thirds of elected MPs failed to secure majority support from local voters.⁶ Put another way, this means that in two-thirds of seats the majority of voters are represented by a candidate they did not vote for.

Moreover, there is another sting in the FPTP tail: when the vote on the political left or right is split, the ‘wrong winner’ can emerge victorious. This happens when a candidate who is more popular across the electorate as a whole loses to a less popular one because of the presence of another candidate with a similar political outlook. Think of Labour beating the Conservatives where there is

⁶ Given declining turnout in elections, the situation is even more dramatic – if you include all eligible voters then not a single MP in 2010 was returned with a majority.

a strong UKIP (UK Independence Party) presence – or, until recently, a Conservative MP winning on the back of a split Labour and Liberal Democrat vote. In both situations, the winning candidate is in fact the one that most voters are opposed to.

The rise of minority winners raises serious questions about the legitimacy of constituency results obtained under FPTP. What’s more, it’s a problem that is going to get worse. Patrick Dunleavy for one believes that the flourishing of multi-party competition will reach an end point where virtually ‘no MPs have majority support’ (Dunleavy 2010).

AV tackles this head-on by requiring the winner to have an absolute majority, if not on first preferences alone then through the redistribution of lower-order preferences. It does not *guarantee* a majority when preference ranking is optional (as it would be in the UK) because some voters may chose to ‘plump’ for their favourite candidate only, ignoring the others. If this happens in sufficient numbers it will deprive the winner of a majority, because plumped votes are, when the sole favoured candidate is eliminated, lost from the overall count altogether. It is difficult to predict the level of plumping that might occur in the UK and a lot will depend on the way the parties choose to campaign. What we do know is that when given the chance to express multiple preferences the majority of British voters have shown a willingness to do so, which suggests that plumping will happen only at the margins.

Where a candidate wins 50 per cent of support on first preferences and can claim an indisputable mandate AV attracts little controversy. It is when candidates fail to pass this threshold that opinion becomes heavily polarised. Critics of AV raise particular concerns about the **composition** of the majority which results under AV – the fact that it consists of a range of ranked preferences – and about the way the majority is **calculated**, disliking the process of redistributing the preferences of last-placed candidates first.

Winning a majority under AV

What especially frustrates opponents of preferential voting is the idea that a candidate who ‘wins’ on first preferences alone can still be defeated when lower-order preferences are taken into account. Such a scenario occurred in the 2010 Australia federal election for Moreton, Queensland. Here, the Liberal National candidate received the most first preference votes – and so would have won the seat under FPTP – but once the second preferences of the Green candidate (the third to be eliminated) were reallocated (in the fourth round of vote counting), victory was handed to the Labor candidate.

Table 5
Constituency results after each round of counting, Moreton, Queensland, 2010 Australian federal election

Candidate	First round	Second round	Third round	Fourth round
Labor Party	36.01%	36.32%	37.03%	51.13%
Liberal National Party	43.40%	43.69%	45.34%	48.87%
Green Party	15.89%	16.24%	17.63%	
Family First Party	3.44%	3.75%		
Democratic Labor Party	2.49%			

Critics might ask how this can be justified. It is ‘fair’ precisely because the Labor candidate was the most popular among the majority of the local electorate. Had the contest been a two-horse race between the Liberal National and Labor parties then Labor would have won because of the overall strength of its own votes combined with those of Green supporters who broadly align themselves on the same centre-left part of the political spectrum. Green voters overwhelmingly preferred the Labor candidate to the Liberal National one. AV therefore works to correct the deficiency of FPTP identified above, namely that it allows a minority candidate to succeed when the vote for similar parties is split. As the Australian political commentator Antony Green has written, AV performs best in multi-party contests where the leading candidate falls short of a majority because ‘it will work to return a member with greater support in the electorate than the candidate with the simple majority of first preferences’ (Green 2011a). In other words, AV suits the electoral conditions prevalent in Britain today. In stark contrast, FPTP malfunctions under the strain of multi-party politics (Lodge and Gottfried 2011).

AV broadens the definition of what it means to ‘win’, in electoral terms. It substitutes the FPTP view, which defines the winner as the person who gets most votes when just one preference is expressed, with the view that the winner is the person who secures some support from at least

half of all voters. This is a substantial shift and, should AV be adopted, it will no doubt take some getting used to.

This perhaps explains why public opinion is so divided on the question of AV's democratic credentials, as is revealed by the ippr/YouGov poll.

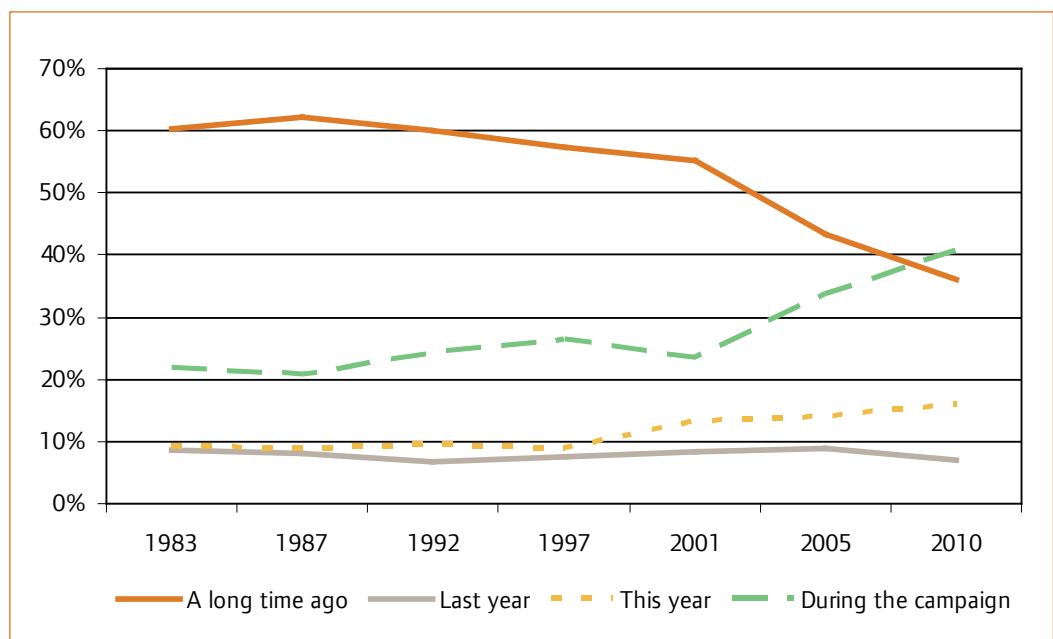
Table 6
Poll results: FPTP,
AV and democracy

Which of these do you think is more democratic?	
For each MP to secure support from at least half of all local voters, so that they are seen to represent a majority of voters locally [†]	45%
For each MP to have more support locally than any other candidate, even if they don't reach the 50 per cent mark [‡]	37%
Don't know	18%
Do you think AV is...	
More democratic than the present system, because it means that the eventual winner has more popular support in some form than any other candidate?	39%
Less democratic than the present system, because the candidate with the most first preferences may sometimes lose once a range of voters' preferences are taken into consideration?	40%
Don't know	21%

[†] The AV view
[‡] The FPTP view

Opponents of AV, in rejecting the idea that a majority can be constructed out of a range of preferences, are making two related claims: that there is something pure and unique about a first preference vote, and that voters attach much less meaning to the lower-order preferences they express. But it is far from clear that this is how the electorate sees things. As described above, British voters are much more promiscuous and far less tribal in the way they vote than they were in the past. To investigate this further, it is possible to look at *when* voters make up their mind who to vote for. It is reasonable to assume that the more indecisive a voter is the less attached they are to the candidate they eventually support. Figure 4 shows that there has been a steady increase in the number of floating or undecided voters: in 2010, 40 per cent of voters had yet to make up their mind as to who they would support at the beginning of the election campaign. By contrast, the number saying they had made up their mind who to support 'a long time ago' fell from 60.20 per cent in 1983 to 36.11 per cent in 2010 (ippr calculations from 2010 BES).⁷

Figure 4
When voters decided who to vote for



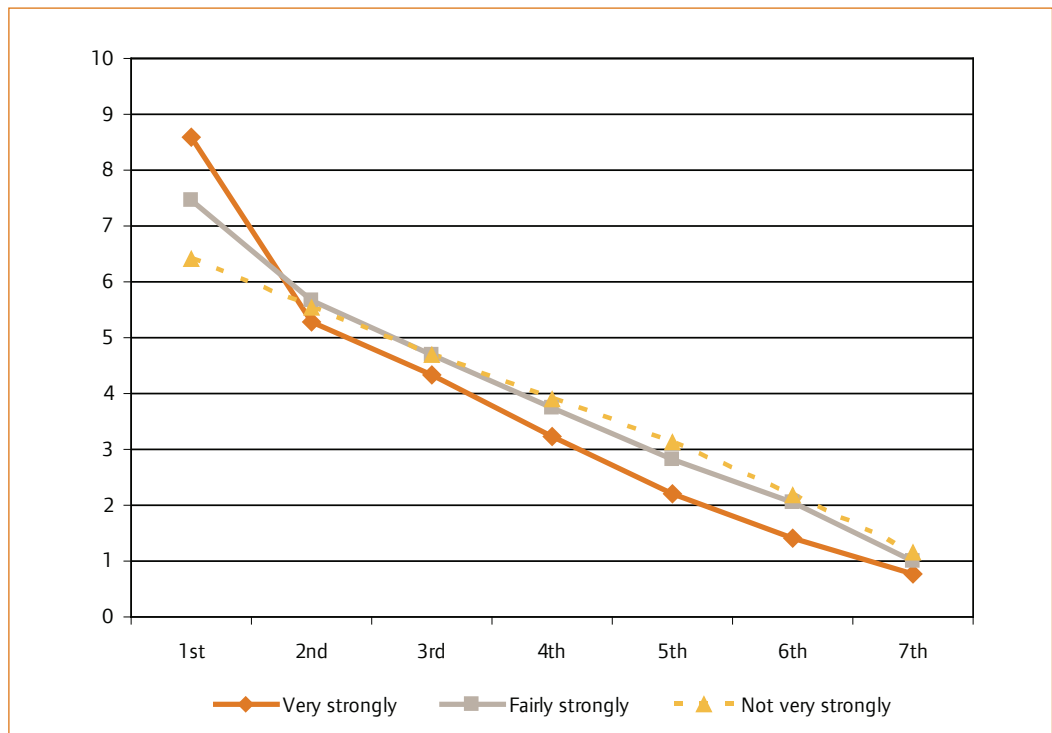
⁷ This includes only those who indicated they were 'very likely to vote', to account for likely non-voters. Therefore, these results are arguably stronger still, as those with stronger party attachment are more likely to vote and to have known prior to the election campaign who they would eventually vote for. These results demonstrate the decline in such voters.

We have demonstrated already that voters appear to be happy to express multiple preferences when given the opportunity to do so. But how attached are they to the candidates/parties they choose to rank? The evidence presented earlier indicates that ranking tends to decline markedly after the third preference, which suggests that this is the point at which preferences become less meaningful. Fortunately, the BES allows us to probe the relative strength of voters' preferences more thoroughly by comparing the parties they ranked with the question 'How strongly do you feel towards each of the parties?', which is measured on a scale of 0–10.

Let us compare the tribal and non-tribal voters. To recap, it is the non-tribal group of voters – those that say they have a 'not very strong' attachment to a particular party – who have ballooned in numbers over the last 40 years: they now account for around 40 per cent of the electorate. In contrast, the number of tribal voters – those who say they have a 'very strong attachment' to a party – has fallen from a peak of just under 50 per cent in the 1960s to less than 20 per cent in 2010. Those who say they have a 'fairly strong' attachment have remained relatively steady and make up just under half of all voters.

Unsurprisingly, tribal voters rate their first preference very strongly – the party they support scores an average of 8.58 on the 10-point 'party feeling' scale, 3.31 points higher than for their second preference (5.27 out of 10). Preference rankings thereafter decline more steadily at an average rate of 0.9 points per preference. The contrast with the non-tribal vote is striking: not only do non-tribal voters rate their first preference much lower (on average, 6.42 out of 10) but the gap between the support for their first and second choice parties (at 5.54 out of 10) is just 0.88 points. There is a smaller gap still between their second and third choice (at 4.68 out of 10). For those with 'fairly strong' party attachment, their first choice scores 7.45 out of 10, their second 5.67 and their third 4.70. So only one in five voters appears to hold a strong and sacrosanct first preference.

Figure 5
 Party feeling
 versus preference,
 by strength of
 party attachment



Note: 'Party feeling' is a 0–10 point scale, 10 being strongest. Mean scores are calculated by rank; discrepancy in n due to missing data for 'party feeling' for some individuals.

Collectively, the analysis presented here suggests that voters are happy to express a range of preferences – certainly up to and including a third choice – and that for the majority of voters, especially the growing numbers of non-tribal voter, their sense of allegiance to their top three parties does not vary substantially. Of course, voters would still rather see their first preference win (see Table 7), but these voting patterns challenge the notion that voters will be left feeling short-changed if their first-placed party loses out to their second choice – and to a lesser extent their third. With their looser sense of party affiliation, today's voters appear more able to simultaneously support a handful of parties that in some way represent their values. For someone on the centre-

left, for instance, this might mean feeling comfortable supporting Labour, Green and Liberal Democrat candidates. AV gives voters the flexibility to express themselves in a way they are denied under FPTP. It empowers the voter locally by enhancing voter choice and ensures candidates are elected with broad-based support.

Table 7
Poll results:
Suppose the
candidate who is
elected MP is your
second or third
choice candidate

Would you...	
Be contented because it would mean my MP is someone about whom I feel reasonably positive	35%
Be discontented because the candidate I really wanted to win was not elected	47%
Not sure	19%

Calculating a majority under AV

There are two arguments used to attack the way AV redistributes lower-order preferences. Firstly, it is said that AV breaches the principle of ‘one person, one vote’ by giving ‘extra votes’ to the supporters of small parties because, by this view, when their first choice is eliminated their subsequent preferences come into play while the second preferences of those who supported the remaining candidates do not.

This critique is flawed and misunderstands the way AV operates. As the Politics Studies Association (PSA) briefing paper reports:

Many supporters of FPTP have argued that AV gives some voters extra votes. This is wrong. Under AV, each voter’s vote has exactly the same value [authors’ emphasis]. In the first round of counting, everyone’s first preference is counted as one vote. In the second round, if your favourite candidate is still in the race, your first preference still counts for one vote. If your favourite candidate was eliminated, your first preference now counts for zero but your second preference counts for one vote. From each ballot paper, only one vote is being counted. This remains true at each stage of the counting process. (Renwick 2011b)

Under AV, all votes are equal. If an inequity arises it is over the relative weighting of preferences – and here lies the second alleged flaw in the way AV calculates a majority. Daniel Finkelstein, for one, asks how it can be right that his fourth preference is given the same weighting as someone else’s first preference (2011). Indeed, his point might be considered to have particular force in light of the evidence presented here showing that voters themselves attach relatively little importance to a fourth preference vote. In fact, preferences are not equally weighted, since first preference votes are counted first, and to stand any chance of winning the seat a candidate needs to receive a substantial number of them. For instance, the Green Party might receive an impressive number of second preference votes, but if they do not do sufficiently well enough on first preferences they will be eliminated. To gain the second preference votes of Labour or the Liberal Democrat supporters – as the party might seek to do – they are, in reality, going to have to beat them in the first round.

There is also a practical point. If the Australian evidence is anything to go by, it will be rare indeed for voters’ fourth, fifth and sixth preferences to come into play. There, the majority of seats are decided by first and second preferences alone, *even* if the count goes into multiple rounds. Lower-order votes often exhaust themselves (they go to eliminated candidates) or they quickly reach their final destination. They tend not, as is often suggested, to get heavily recycled. Table 8 provides details from elections to the New South Wales and Queensland Parliaments, which are relevant to the UK debate since they use the same form of AV being proposed here. The two rows to focus on are those labeled ‘average first preferences distributed’ – which tells us how many first preference votes needed to be distributed to determine the winning candidate – and ‘average ballot papers handled’, which indicates the times a ballot is recycled between candidates across rounds. The fact that the two rows are very similar suggests that most votes reach one of the final two candidates by either their second or third preference.

Table 8
Australian state parliament election results

New South Wales elections									
	1981	1984	1988	1991	1995	1999	2003	2007	2011
Number of contests	99	99	109	99	99	93	93	93	93
Average candidates per contest	2.8	3	3.4	4.4	4.6	7.9	7.1	5.8	5.4
Contests decided on preferences	7	15	47	24	20	47	37	37	43
Contests decided on preferences (%)	7.1	15.2	43.1	24.2	20.2	50.5	39.8	39.8	46.2
Full distribution required	7	11	41	14	13	22	19	26	n.a.
Partial distribution	..	4	6	10	7	25	18	11	n.a.
Preferences changed result	2	1	11	1	4	5	1	2	1
Average first preferences distributed (%)	13.5	13.3	19.2	12.8	15.0	17.8	17.6	19.3	n.a.
Average ballot papers handled (%)	13.7	13.9	20.3	14.3	16.7	19.4	18.7	20.8	n.a.

Queensland elections							
	1992	1995	1998	2001	2004	2006	2009
Number of contests	89	89	89	89	89	89	89
Average candidates per contest	3.6	3.3	4.9	4.1	4	3.7	4.5
Contests decided on preferences	31	25	71	41	32	28	50
Contests decided on preferences (%)	34.8	28.1	79.8	46.1	36.0	31.5	56.2
Full distribution required	26	24	57	33	22	23	39
Partial distribution	5	1	14	8	10	5	11
Preferences changed result	15	4	15	6	2	3	3
Average first preferences distributed (%)	19.1	13.6	23.3	25.7	17.2	13.2	13.9
Average ballot papers handled (%)	20.0	15.0	24.3	27.4	18.1	13.6	14.7

Source: Data compiled and kindly provided by Antony Green, Election Analyst, Australian Broadcasting Corporation

AV reduces the fear of wasted votes and significantly reduces tactical voting

FPTP is widely criticised for the way it undermines political choice by discouraging voters from supporting their preferred candidate if that candidate is bound to lose. Why vote Liberal Democrat in a safe Conservative seat? Why vote for a small party that has no chance of winning at all? In such circumstances, voters may decide not to vote or alternatively they may vote tactically for a party other than their first choice to avoid a 'wasted vote'. AV does away with the fear of the wasted vote, since it allows voters to give their first preference to the candidate they support most, safe in the knowledge that if this candidate is eliminated their vote will be transferred to their second preference (the candidate for whom they would have tactically voted under FPTP). As Vernon Bogdanor writes, AV 'seeks to make every possible vote effective' (2011). But importantly this does not mean that under AV all votes will *count*. Only a proportional system delivers this, and AV is not proportional.

It's important to acknowledge that the opponents of FPTP tend to exaggerate the levels of tactical voting. Estimates vary: the 2010 BES suggests that 16 per cent of the electorate voted tactically in the last election, while our own poll suggests a higher level: 23 per cent of respondents said that they had voted for their second choice candidate at least once.

Table 9
Poll results:
Tactical voting

In the past have you ever engaged in ‘tactical voting’ in a general election - that is, voted for a party not because you liked it, or its candidate, best, but because you felt that your favourite party could not win in your area?	
Yes, I have voted for my second choice party/candidate at least once	23%
No, I have always voted for my favourite party/candidate	68%
Don't know / I have never voted	9%

Of course, it is still possible to vote tactically under AV. To take a very simple example, a Conservative voter might give their first preference to a Liberal Democrat if they thought they stood a better chance of defeating a Labour candidate in the run-off. But tactical voting is much more complicated under AV than under FPTP, and voters would need to be very shrewd indeed to be confident that their vote would have the desired effect. Thus it shouldn't be surprising to learn that ‘fewer than half as many voters vote tactically in Australia (under AV) as in the UK (under FPTP)’ (Renwick 2011b). When asked whether they thought there would be less tactical voting under AV than FPTP, 50 per cent of respondents agreed – just 16 per cent disagreed (ippr/YouGov 2011).

Westminster elections under AV

Speculation as to the likely effects of electoral system change should be treated with caution, as it is difficult to accurately predict how a change to the rules governing an electoral contest will alter the way in which parties and voters approach an election held under those new rules. Electoral systems shape the strategies parties deploy at election time; they also shape the way in which voters translate their beliefs and desires into marks on the ballot paper. It is also likely that any changes evident immediately following any large-scale electoral reform will differ from those which become clear after several electoral cycles, when reforms have had a chance to ‘bed in’.

Nevertheless, with this caveat in mind, it is possible, looking at a series of AV simulations that use survey data to record the direction of travel of respondents’ lower-order preferences, to compare actual UK general election results (produced under FPTP) with those likely to have occurred under AV. The recent PSA paper helpfully collated the results for simulations for the seven elections held between 1983 and 2010 (Renwick 2011b). The results are summarised in the tables below.

Table 10
Simulated AV
election results
compared to actual
results, 1983–2010

	1983			1987			1992		
	Seats: Actual	Seats: AV	Change	Seats: Actual	Seats: AV	Change	Seats: Actual	Seats: AV	Change
Conserv.	397	391	–6	375	381	+6	336	328	–8
Labour	209	190	–19	229	202	–27	271	268	–3
Lib./All.	23	48	+25	22	44	+22	20	31	+11
Others	21	21	0	24	24	0	24	24	0
Majority	144	132	–12	100	112	+12	21	5	–16
	1997			2001			2005		
	Seats: Actual	Seats: AV	Change	Seats: Actual	Seats: AV	Change	Seats: Actual	Seats: AV	Change
Conserv.	165	70	–95	166	140	–26	198	171	–27
Labour	418	445	+27	412	423	+11	355	377	+22
Lib./All.	46	115	+69	52	68	+16	62	68	+6
Others	30	30	0	29	29	0	31	31	0
Majority	179	231	+54	165	187	+22	64	108	+44
	2010								
	Seats: Actual	Seats: AV	Change						
Conserv.	306	284	–22						
Labour	258	248	–10						
Lib./All.	57	89	+32						
Others	29	29	0						
Majority	–	–	–						

Source: Renwick (2011b)

Table 11
Government majorities, simulated results compared to actual results, 1983–2010

Election	Government	Seat majority FPTP	Seat majority under AV
1983	Conservative	144	132
1987	Conservative	102	112
1992	Conservative	21	5
1997	Labour	179	231
2001	Labour	167	187
2005	Labour	66	108
2010	Hung Parliament	–	–

It can be seen that the AV simulations did not produce different overall election results to those held under FPTP. Instead, AV would have shifted the emphasis of the election outcomes in various ways:

- Winning party with smaller majority under AV: 1983, 1992
- Winning party with larger majority under AV: 1987, 1997, 2001, 2005
- Hung parliaments: 2010⁸
- Heavier landslides under AV: 1987, 1997, 2001⁹
- Smaller landslides under AV: 1983
- Labour does better under AV: 1997, 2001, 2005
- Labour does worse under AV: 1983, 1987, 1992, 2010
- Conservatives do better under AV: 1987
- Conservatives do worse under AV: 1983, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010
- Liberal Democrats do better under AV: 1983, 1987, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2005, 2010
- Minor parties under AV: no change

From a party perspective, the Liberal Democrats stand to be the clear winners under AV, increasing their share of seats in all seven elections. This shouldn't surprise anyone: as a centrist party, they are likely to be most people's second preference (as indeed they have proved to be – see Table 12 below). But note that the average number of additional seats the Liberal Democrats gain across the seven elections is 26: a clear improvement from actual results under FPTP but not a radical departure. This explains why even with a boost in the number of seats, the Liberal Democrats would not have been transformed into the permanent king-makers of British politics that some believe they will under AV (Roberts 2011). According to the simulations, the only AV election that would have resulted in a hung parliament is 2010 – which is, of course, exactly what happened under FPTP. However, the 2010 hung parliament might under AV have produced a very different political outcome, since with the Liberal Democrats' extra 32 seats the parliamentary arithmetic would have made a Liberal Democrat–Labour coalition possible.

The critics of AV who warn that it will make 'weak coalition government the norm' (ibid) have not simply exaggerated their claim but have focused on the wrong target altogether: the most important source of indecisive outcomes in the UK will not be a switch to AV or otherwise, but rather the trend towards greater third-party representation, which starves the two main parties of the seats they need to comfortably form a majority government (Curtice 2010). There is nothing inherent in the way AV works that will necessarily result in the need for coalition. Australia has used AV for over 90 years, but because of its strong two-party system it has produced just two hung parliaments, in 1940 and 2010. Canada, which uses FPTP but which has a much more pluralist party system has, by contrast, experienced several hung parliaments in recent years (and 13 in total). British elections held under FPTP have produced hung parliaments in 1910 (January), 1910 (November), 1923, 1929, 1974 (February) and 2010, all of which involved more than two parties competing for power.

8 The Conservative majority in 1992 is estimated to be just five – down from the 21 they actually won under FPTP – and so it might reasonably be argued that this election could have resulted in a hung parliament also (as Dunleavy et al do in their own simulation).

9 AV would have resulted in what some would describe as a landslide in 2005, as it would have given Labour a majority of 108 – 44 more seats than they actually won under FPTP.

Of course it's true that AV might increase the likelihood of hung parliaments in the future if it increased the representation of the Liberal Democrats at the expense of the two main parties. But the effect will be relatively small, especially compared to the overall impact that growing third-party representation is having and will continue to have on the British political landscape, irrespective of whether AV is adopted. Hung parliaments are more likely under both AV and FPTP. Therefore, the more appropriate question to ask is which system is better equipped to deal with a world in which governments cannot expect to form single-party governments and where, consequently, they may increasingly be required to share power. From a citizen's perspective, AV arguably makes the formation of governments in hung parliaments a more transparent process. This is because the need to campaign for second preference votes under AV will force parties to indicate, even if informally, their preferred coalition partner *before* the election takes place. The electorate therefore has a clearer sense of what may happen should the election fail to produce a clear winner and can vote accordingly. FPTP provides few incentives for such openness and leaves politicians free to determine the composition of the government in private post-election negotiations.

FPTP also puts incredible strain on the members of coalitions because parties sharing power also have to fight each other in elections (Bogdanor 2011). Such pressures can easily destabilise coalitions. Under FPTP, the way round this is some form of electoral pact, such as the 'coupon' used in 1918 by Lloyd George for candidates from his Liberal–Conservative coalition, whereby a single coalition candidate was selected to contest on behalf of the coalition, often at the expense of the local party candidate. These are often deeply unpopular with the party membership, who dislike voting either for compromise candidates or for candidates from the other wing of the coalition. Another, more radical option is merger. As Bogdanor argues, AV would remove the need for such devices, since the parties could ask their respective supporters to give their second preferences to the coalition partner. AV might therefore ease the strain of coalition politics, whereas FPTP will exacerbate conflict (Bogdanor 2010).

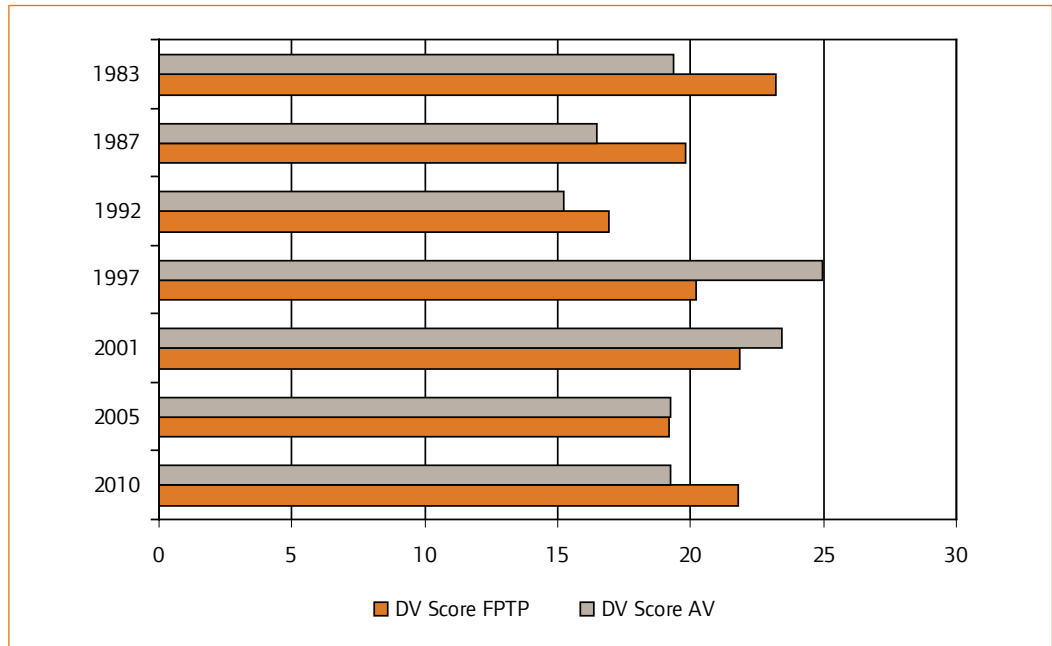
AV is not proportional, but it often produces fairer results

As is well known, FPTP is a highly disproportional voting system, generating huge disparities between the proportion of votes gained and the number of seats secured. The number of seats a party wins depends less on the number of votes it gets than on the geographic distribution of those votes. It penalises parties whose support is evenly spread across the country (Lodge and Gottfried 2011).

AV is *not* a proportional system and makes no attempt to distribute seats in proportion to votes. Indeed, there is ample evidence from Australian elections to show that it is capable of producing disproportional and anomalous results (Farrell and McAllister 2006). But does it fare any better than FPTP?

To gauge the disproportionality of voting systems, political scientists calculate what is known as the 'deviation of proportionality': the higher the DV score, the less representative the parliament is in terms of the relationship between votes and seats. Using the simulation data, Figure 6 (over) compares the DV scores for results under FPTP and AV in all elections since 1983. It shows that in four out of the seven most recent elections – 1983, 1987, 1992 and 2010 – AV would have delivered a more proportional result than actually transpired under FPTP. The 2005 election might be considered a draw, meaning that FPTP produced a more proportional outcome than AV on only two occasions. One reason AV generates slightly more proportional results is because it tends to give the Liberal Democrats a fairer share of the seats than they secure under FPTP. However, AV would do little to improve the position of the smaller parties, who would remain under-represented in the House of Commons (see below).

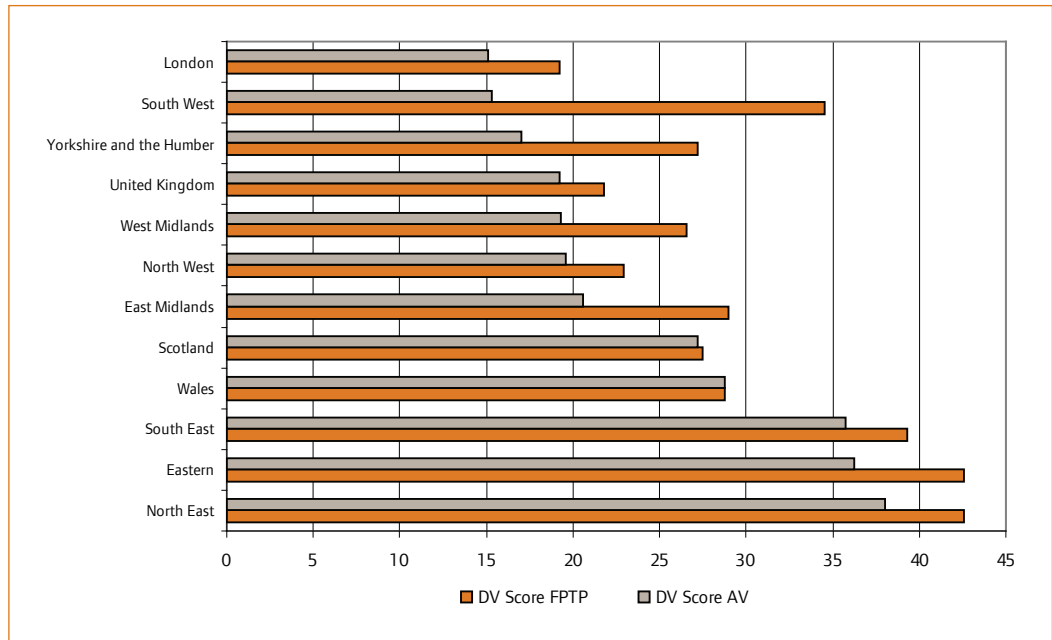
Figure 6
Deviation from proportionality, 1983–2010



Source: Renwick (2011b), BES 2010. Calculations: ippr

To give a more detailed picture of the way FPTP and AV distributes seats by vote share, Figure 7 compares the DV scores for each system across the nations and regions of the UK in the 2010 general election. This reveals that AV would have produced a more proportional result than FPTP in every single region of the UK apart from Wales, where the scores were equal. In some regions – notably the South West, Yorkshire and Humber, and the two Midlands regions – it can be seen that FPTP produced a much more disproportional result than AV would have.

Figure 7
Deviation from proportionality, 2010 general election by region



Source: BES 2010. Calculations: ippr

We should be careful not to exaggerate the merits of AV when it comes to proportionality. While the simulations suggest that AV would produce more proportional results overall, the improvement is not massive and, moreover, AV does have the potential to generate *more* disproportional results than FPTP. Indeed, the Jenkins Commission rejected AV precisely because it can exaggerate the seat share of the first placed party if it has a clear lead over its rival, as it is also likely to pick up a large number of second preferences (White 2011). This was particularly evident in the 1997 election, and to a lesser extent in 2001. Table 11 above suggests that had the 1997 election been

held under AV then Labour's majority of 179 – itself a significantly disproportional result which saw them win 63.4 per cent of the seats on 43.2 per cent of the vote – would have rocketed to 231.

The 1997 result also reveals what can happen under AV when one of the two main parties is exceptionally unpopular with the electorate. AV would have enabled Labour and Liberal Democrat voters to form a formidable anti-Conservative voting bloc, picking up several more seats at the expense of the Conservatives by exchanging their second preference votes with each other. Several Conservative candidates who won on first preferences under FPTP would have lost under AV, as the anti-Conservative vote would not have been split. Peter Kellner has argued that the 1997 result demonstrates a virtue of AV, since the distortion of the result served to 'reinforce the majority wish of the electorate' (1998). Also worth noting is that while Labour's result was heavily distorted in 1997, the Liberal Democrats would have achieved their most proportional result of the seven elections under scrutiny.

In short, when there is a deeply unpopular party AV tends to exaggerate the scale of landslides, because it allows supporters of other parties to gang up on the unpopular one.¹⁰ But such circumstances arise only infrequently – 1997 was not typical – and in more closely fought contests, AV can produce fairer results.

AV will make elections more competitive even if it does not radically reduce the number of safe seats

Under FPTP, election results are effectively determined by the small minority of voters who happen to live in all-important marginal seats. The vast majority of voters who happen to live in safe seats have little ability to shape the outcome of national elections, and consequently are largely shut out of the political process as parties direct most of their campaigning energy into the marginal seats. In this light, it shouldn't come as a surprise that turnout is lower in safe seats. The prevalence of marginal seats make a mockery of the idea of political equality, implying that some votes are 'more equal' than others (Wilks-Hegg 2010).

Is AV any better? AV will not do away with safe seats, as many of its advocates like to claim. Seats held by the one-third of MPs who currently secure 50 per cent of the constituency vote under FPTP are likely to remain safe under AV. And, as the various election simulations have shown, AV will not make a significant difference to the overall election result. In other words, many of the MPs who are currently short of 50 per cent under FPTP are still likely to win by picking up sufficient lower preference votes. Through their simulation, Sanders et al suggest that had the 2010 election been held under AV it would have resulted in 43 seats changing hands, compared with the actual results under FPTP. The evidence from Australia suggests that in the vast majority of cases it is the candidate that leads on the first count that has the best chance of victory, and that it is only where the leading candidate falls well short of a majority that the opportunity for another candidate to win on preferences arises (Green 2011). Of course, this means that under AV many marginal seats – especially where they are three-way contests – will become much more competitive. We can also expect some 'churn' under AV: some safe FPTP seats will become marginal, where the second-placed party can pull in a significantly larger number of second preferences than the first-placed candidate, but some currently marginal seats could become safe under AV. For example, some Liberal Democrat MPs might see their majorities bolstered by the redistributed second preferences of Conservative and Labour voters.

Most research suggests that AV will lead to an overall reduction in the number of safe seats, but it is divided over how great the effect will be. The New Economics Foundation suggests that the number of safe seats¹¹ would fall from 331 to 271 (NEF 2011). A paper by the PSA agrees that there would be fewer safe seats but is careful not to over-state the claim. It argues that one reason why we might expect fewer safe seats under AV is because of its potential to exaggerate landslide results, which would see several more safe seats switching sides than would be the case under FTTP (Renwick 2011b).

10 Data on the history of Liberal Democrat second preferences supports this, as it shows that Liberal Democrat voters tend to reinforce the way the political pendulum swings at any given time. In the 1980s they backed the Conservatives – in the 1990s and 2000s, Labour.

11 For the purposes of their research, the NEF redefines marginal and safe seats according to the likelihood of the seat changing hands.

Much more compelling is the claim that under AV MPs will have to work harder for the vote. By raising the threshold for success, AV would oblige political parties to appeal to a larger section of the electorate to a much greater extent than they do under FPTP. They would be appealing not only to the ‘natural’ supporters of their own party, but also to those whose first preference is another party, in the hopes of receiving their second and third preference votes. This suggests that fewer candidates could take victory for granted. In the 2010 general election, the vast majority of seats were won on the basis of vote shares of between 35 and 55 per cent. Indeed, only 24 (3.8 per cent) winning candidates won over 60 per cent of the vote; 213 (33.8 per cent) won at least 50 per cent, and 519 (82.3 per cent) won at least 40 per cent.¹² Under AV, any candidate polling less than 50 per cent of the vote will automatically need to rely on lower-order preferences to achieve victory.

Table 12 highlights the number of seats where the MP would have fallen short of the 50 per cent and how far away they were from the finishing line. Seats where the winner is furthest from achieving 50 per cent are the ones where the candidate will have to ‘reach out’ to the wider constituency most.

Table 12
Proportion of additional preferences required to win, 2010 general election¹³

	0–5%	5–10%	10–15%	>15%	Total
Marginal seats	24	80	74	20	198
Safe seats	146	72	17	1	236

Note: Does not include 216 seats where the candidate obtained an absolute majority

Note that the table distinguishes between seats categorised as marginal and safe under FPTP. Were the 2010 results distributed under AV rules, the preferences of parties other than the winning party would have been counted in 434 seats (66.2 per cent). In contrast, under FPTP, 438 seats (69.41 per cent) are considered safe. Of course, as we acknowledge above, many of the safe seats listed here would remain safe under AV. Nonetheless, there would still be several MPs representing ‘safe seats’ who would need the second preference votes of others to be elected. Even if AV doesn’t change the incumbent it would change the nature of political competition in many seats.

Another reason why AV might increase the competitiveness of seats is down to the volatility of second preferences. Table 13 charts the history of second preferences for voters of the main three parties since 1983 and reveals a relatively high level of change over time. Historically, Liberal Democrat second preferences tend to reflect broader patterns of political change, favouring the Conservatives in the 1980s and Labour in the 1990s and 2000s. Under AV, a number of seats will be affected by shifts in second preferences in a way that is not really possible under FPTP. This would create further electoral uncertainty, which might be bad for the political parties but it would be good for democracy.

Table 13
Second preferences, by first preference vote, 1983–2010 (%)

Conservative voters	Second Preference				
	Conserv.	Labour	Lib Dem	Nat./Other	None
1983	–	5	76	1	17
1987	–	8	71	2	19
1992	–	8	69	6	17
1997	–	25	54	11	11
2001	–	21	47	12	20
2005	–	21	54	15	10
2010	–	8	41	26	26

¹² These calculations do not include Northern Ireland.

¹³ ‘Marginal seat’ is defined as having a majority less than 10%; ‘safe seat’ is defined as having a majority greater than 10%.

Labour voters	Second Preference				
	Conserv.	Labour	Lib Dem	Nat./Other	None
1983	14	–	60	7	20
1987	17	–	59	8	15
1992	14	–	58	13	16
1997	11	–	65	15	10
2001	15	–	57	13	15
2005	22	–	59	11	8
2010	9	–	70	13	9

Lib Dem/ All. voters	Second Preference				
	Conserv.	Labour	Lib Dem	Nat./Other	None
1983	43	36	–	3	18
1987	52	32	–	4	12
1992	42	36	–	7	15
1997	22	64	–	7	7
2001	19	53	–	11	18
2005	26	54	–	10	8
2010	27	35	–	18	20

Source: Curtice 2011

To see how markedly preferences can change, Table 14 charts the changes that have taken place between May 2010 and April 2011. The number of Labour supporters giving their second preference to the Liberal Democrats has collapsed, falling by 42 per cent. Liberal Democrat voters now favour the Conservatives over Labour. These shifts obviously reflect political circumstances: the Liberal Democrats' decision to join a coalition has alienated many Labour voters. (Interestingly, Conservative supporters are also far less supportive of the Liberal Democrats, which might reflect their frustration with the power-sharing arrangement.)

Table 14
 Change in second preferences May 2010–April 2011 (%)

First preference	Second preference					
	Con	Lab	LD	Green	UKIP	BNP
Con @ May '10	–	7	53	6	29	4
Con @ April '11	–	6	34	4	20	4
Change	–	–1	–19	–2	–9	–
Lab @ May '10	6	–	63	15	8	3
Lab @ April '11	5	–	21	27	12	2
Change	–1	–	–42	+12	+4	–1
LD @ May '10	26	40	–	21	11	1
LD @ April '11	37	26	–	17	7	0
Change	+11	–14	–	–4	–4	–1

Sources: BES May 2010, ippr/YouGov 2011

Will AV boost turnout?

Proponents of constitutional reform are fond of saying that changing the voting system will do much to improve the quality of democracy. They can often overstate their case. This is particularly true when it comes to boosting turnout, which as is well known has been declining in advanced democracies over recent decades. People are motivated to vote for a wide variety of reasons – but research shows that electoral system mechanics tend to have only limited impact at best (Kearney and Rogers 2006).

Could AV lift turnout? By ensuring that a larger number of voters are able to contribute to the outcome of elections we might expect more would be encouraged to vote in AV elections. The trouble is that there is not much evidence to support this claim, not least because in Australia – the most obvious case study for analysing the impact of AV on turnout – voting is compulsory. Our own survey evidence suggests that AV is unlikely to increase turnout. When asked whether they thought they would be more likely to vote under AV because they would be able to express a preference for more than one party, only 26 per cent agreed, while 34 per cent disagreed. A high level of uncertainty is shown by the fact that 39 per cent neither agreed or disagreed, or didn't know. This seems to confirm previous research which shows that voting systems per se have little impact on whether people chose to vote or not (ibid).

AV and minor parties

The election simulations reviewed above suggest that minor parties are going to struggle to win more seats under AV. (We discuss the case of the British National Party (BNP) in particular below.) This is not to say they *couldn't* win: Sanders et al (2010) suggest that Green MP Caroline Lucas would still have won her Brighton Pavilion seat under AV. Evidence from Australia suggests that the Green Party there would have struggled to win its (admittedly very few) seats if it had not been for preferential voting (Green 2011). In the UK, the Green Party is currently a popular destination for second preferences: it received the second-highest number (17 per cent) in the ippr/YouGov survey. This was largely thanks to a boost from Labour supporters disillusioned with Liberal Democrats but, to be clear, for the Greens to benefit from these votes they would need to beat Labour on first preferences. The simple fact is that parties like the Greens and UKIP are only likely to see their representation in parliament increase in line with their share of the vote under a proportional system – as was demonstrated by their success in winning seats in European Parliamentary elections: in 2008, UKIP won 13 seats, the Greens and BNP two seats each).

Even if they struggle to win any more seats under AV, minor – but not extremist – parties would, nonetheless, be likely to be able to exert more *indirect* influence in British politics. It stands to reason that they would receive more first preference votes under AV, since fewer voters will be discouraged by the notion that such a vote is a wasted vote. This might give minor parties more clout in political debate. Moreover, because the major parties will often require a number of second preference votes to get their candidates cross the 50 per cent threshold, they might be inclined to offer some policy concessions to the minor parties in return their supporters' second preference votes.

There is fairly clear evidence of this taking place in Australia. In the 1960s, the National–Liberal government announced policies on government funding to Catholic schools which appealed to voters of the predominantly Catholic Democratic Labor Party, the important third party of the day. In 1990, when the important minor party was the centrist Australian Democrats, and the environment was a salient issue, the Labor Party ran specific advertisements appealing for minor party voters to remember Labor's record on the environment and give their second preference to Labor. It was seen as a critical factor in Labor's victory that year.¹⁴

Below, we highlight the number of seats where the main parties are going to need the support of UKIP and Green voters to get elected: that is, those seats where the UKIP and Green share of the vote exceeds the gap between the first-place candidate's vote share and the 50 per cent threshold. We focus this analysis on what we believe would be the most likely party preference associations – UKIP with the Conservatives, and the Green Party with either Labour or the Liberal Democrats.¹⁵ It combines data from the 2010 election with that from the BES mock AV ballot to allow us to take into consideration the likely impact of UKIP and Green second preferences.

The results show that, after second preferences are taken into account, UKIP is likely to be able to wield considerably more indirect influence than the Greens. This makes sense, as UKIP is already a much stronger political force. Not only did UKIP significantly out-poll the Greens in the 2010 general election – earning 3.1 per cent of the vote, or roughly 900,000 votes altogether, which is the largest share ever polled by a minor party – but they're also the clear second-placed centre-

¹⁴ Email correspondence between authors and Antony Green

¹⁵ Second preferences on the BES mock AV ballot (Sanders et al 2011) help to confirm these associations. 49% of UKIP second preferences went to the Conservatives, while 25% and 52% of Green second preferences went to Labour and the Liberal Democrats respectively in England.

right party, meaning they are going to be more useful to the Conservatives than the Greens would be to any specific party.¹⁶

Conservatives and UKIP (2010/BES)

- The Conservatives won 126 seats with an absolute majority
- 180 Conservative seats were won without an absolute majority
- In 61 seats, the UKIP vote share was larger than that required for the Conservative candidate to reach the 50 per cent threshold (that is, in 19.9 per cent of all Conservative seats and 33.9 per cent of those won without an absolute majority)
- There are 32 seats which the Conservatives could win with UKIP second preference support alone, or 10.5 per cent of all Conservative seats and 17.7 per cent of those won without an absolute majority.

Labour and Green (2010/BES)

- Labour won 75 seats with an absolute majority
- 183 Labour seats were won without an absolute majority
- In five seats, the Green vote share was larger than that required for the Labour candidate to reach the 50 per cent threshold (that is, in 1.9 per cent of all Labour seats and 2.7 per cent of those won without an absolute majority)
- There are only three seats which Labour could win with Green second preference support alone, or 1.2 per cent of all Labour seats and 1.6 per cent of those won without an absolute majority.

Liberal Democrat and Green (2010/BES)

- The Liberal Democrats won 12 seats with an absolute majority
- 45 Liberal Democrat seats were won without an absolute majority
- In two seats, the Green vote share was larger than that required for the Liberal Democrat candidate to reach the 50 per cent threshold (that is, in 3.5 per cent of all Liberal Democrat seats and 4.4 per cent of those won without an absolute majority).
- In these two seats only the Liberal Democrats could win with Green second preference support alone, or 3.5 per cent of all Liberal Democrat seats and 4.4 per cent of those won without an absolute majority.

AV and the BNP

There has been a lot of discussion during the referendum campaign about the likely effect of AV on extremist parties like the BNP. Two issues in particular have arisen:

- Could extremist parties like the BNP prosper under AV?
- Could BNP recycled votes influence election outcomes under AV?

On the first, it is clear that the BNP would find it almost impossible to win a seat under AV because they would fail to win the backing of at least half the electorate. FPTP proves that they would fail to win a majority of first preferences: their highest vote share in 2010 was 14.6 per cent in Barking. Nor would they pick up many second preference votes: the BES mock AV ballot has them winning just 3.2 per cent.

It is also true that the BNP has never won a seat in Westminster elections. However, under FPTP, it is perfectly possible in a multi-party system such as ours to win a seat on a minority share of the vote. This is precisely how the BNP has been able to win seats in local government elections (which are held under FPTP). For instance, in 2008 the BNP candidate won the Hapton with Park ward in Burnley with 38.6 per cent of the vote. (In this case, they were also helped by low voter turnout.) In Australia, by contrast, the example of Pauline Hanson demonstrates the power of AV to block extremists. In 1998, Hanson – the leader of One Nation, an anti-immigration party – won most first

¹⁶ UKIP also had the fourth-largest number of candidates competing in the 2010 general election, with 572 compared to the Green Party's 310 and the BNP's 338.

preference votes (35.97 per cent) in the Blair constituency in Queensland, which meant that under FPTP rules she would have been elected. However, because she was unable to attract sufficient lower-order preference votes, she was eclipsed by the Liberal candidate. Indeed, One Nation has struggled because the two main parties deliberately direct their second preferences against them.

The BNP have also proved they can win under proportional representation – in 2008, they gained two seats in the European Parliament – and under the Additional Member System, through which they won a seat in the 2008 Greater London Assembly elections. Life would be much tougher for the BNP under AV. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to learn that the BNP is strongly opposed to the introduction of AV.

Certainly, the public prefer a voting system such as AV which ‘makes it very hard for extremist parties to win seats in a general or local election unless they have majority local support’, as Table 15 shows.

Table 15:
Poll results:
Extremist parties

Which of these would you prefer?	
A voting system in which extremist parties have a good chance of winning seats in a general or local election if they have the support of around one-third of local voters	18%
A voting system which makes it very hard for extremist parties to win seats in a general or local election unless they have majority local support	64%
Don't know	18%

Source: ippr/YouGov 2011

Those who claim the BNP could exert influence in elections under AV seriously overestimate their chances. It is important to distinguish between two types of influence. The first occurs when second preference votes for the BNP could push a candidate over the finishing line. The second occurs when votes for the BNP could change the outcome of an election. Below, we show that it would fail on both measures.

There are a handful of seats where the second preference votes of BNP supporters could, as a consequence of the BNP candidate being eliminated from the contest, help push a candidate over the winning line. These are the seats where the BNP share of the vote exceeds the gap between the first-place candidate's vote share and the 50 per cent threshold. Looking at the results from the 2010 general election, we can see that there are 56 such seats. Only a very superficial analysis, however, would lead one to conclude that the BNP would be able to decisively influence the outcome in these seats. To make a better analysis, we need to do two things.

First, we need to take into account information about the likely direction of BNP second preferences, since we cannot assume – as some do – that they will all be transferred to the first-place candidate. Using the BES data on second preferences (see Table 16) to determine where BNP votes would be reallocated, the number of seats where BNP voters' second preferences push a winning candidate over the finishing post falls to 25 (see Table 17).

Second, we need to ask whether reallocated BNP votes in these seats would prove decisive in determining the outcome of the seat: do they, in other words, prevent an alternative result in the seat? As Table 17 makes clear, all of the seats in question are those where the first-place candidate is within spitting distance of the finishing line: the average vote share of the first-place candidate is 48.74 per cent, and in 15 of these 25 seats the winner's vote share is above 49 per cent. Moreover, the average gap between the first- and second-placed candidate is 24.52 per cent, which is larger than the share of the vote of any third-placed candidate whose supporters' votes might change the result.

In other words, there is no chance that BNP supporters' second preferences could alter the outcome in any of these seats. In all of them, the winner on first preferences will be the winner once votes have been reallocated in subsequent rounds, irrespective of the role played by the lower-order preferences of BNP voters. This shows that there are no electoral incentives for the parties to adopt dog-whistle strategies in order to attract BNP second preferences. Moreover, parties could badly damage their own brands if they are seen to be associated with extremist parties.

Table 16
BNP voters' second preferences

Labour	Conservative	Lib Dem	Green	UKIP
10%	29%	7%	9%	45%

Source: Sanders et al 2011

Table 17
Seats where BNP vote share could push a candidate over the winning line (%)

	Lab	LD	Con	Green	UKIP	BNP	Other
Barnsley Central	47.26	17.28	17.26	0.00	4.67	8.94	4.59
Barnsley East	47.05	18.16	16.49	0.00	4.51	8.60	5.20
Blackburn	47.81	15.20	26.14	0.00	2.07	4.74	4.03
Blaydon	49.64	29.35	15.94	0.00	0.00	5.07	0.00
Boston and Skegness	20.64	14.77	49.45	0.00	9.46	5.28	0.40
Charnwood	19.68	21.54	49.61	0.00	3.36	5.82	0.00
Coventry North East	49.29	16.62	22.15	0.00	2.98	4.29	4.67
Doncaster North	47.34	14.88	21.04	0.00	4.33	6.79	5.61
Folkestone and Hythe	10.83	30.28	49.45	1.21	4.62	3.15	0.47
Gainsborough	15.64	27.83	49.27	0.00	4.19	3.07	0.00
Greenwich and Woolwich	49.19	18.20	24.54	2.56	0.00	2.79	2.70
Harborough	12.71	31.12	48.95	0.00	2.66	3.12	1.45
Hemel Hempstead	20.81	22.87	49.97	0.00	2.53	3.26	0.55
Hemsworth	46.77	12.93	24.32	0.00	0.00	6.98	9.00
Kettering	29.90	15.84	49.12	0.00	0.00	2.89	2.25
Leeds Central	49.30	20.83	20.17	0.00	0.00	8.20	1.51
Leicestershire South	20.87	21.03	49.47	0.00	3.64	4.99	0.00
Leigh	48.04	18.16	20.94	0.00	3.46	6.14	3.26
Louth and Horncastle	17.35	22.17	49.64	0.00	4.32	4.35	2.16
Makerfield	47.29	16.18	18.76	0.00	0.00	7.38	10.40
Norfolk Mid	17.45	22.19	49.49	2.87	5.52	2.48	0.00
Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford	48.21	16.40	24.47	0.00	0.00	8.36	2.56
Salisbury	7.61	36.91	49.21	1.04	2.87	1.58	0.78
Selby and Ainsty	25.71	17.75	49.42	0.00	3.16	2.66	1.31
Wellington	25.42	17.13	48.23	0.93	3.17	3.09	2.04

Another way of looking at BNP influence is to ask whether there are any seats in which votes for the BNP could change the ‘balance of power’ in individual constituencies, by pushing a second-placed (or third-placed) candidate into first place *and* over the 50 per cent threshold on the back of its transferred votes.

The ‘No to AV’ campaign has published a list of 35 seats in which the BNP’s share of the vote was greater than the winner’s margin of victory and used this to assert that these were seats where ‘BNP second preferences would be the most likely to change the result under AV’.¹⁷ There is a fundamental flaw with this argument, since it fails to acknowledge that to win under AV a candidate needs to pass the 50 per cent threshold. As the 2010 general election results clearly show, there is not a single constituency where the BNP vote share is larger than the margin between 50 per cent and that received by the runner-up. Given the marginality and distance from 50 per cent of both the first- and second-placed candidates, it is true that BNP supporters’ second or third preferences will be counted in the 35 seats listed by the ‘No to AV’ campaign. However, the BNP vote is still very small in each of these seats, with an average vote share of just 4.5 per cent – yet the average distance from the 50 per cent threshold for the winner and runner-up is 11.3 per cent and 14.2 per cent respectively. Even if we assume all BNP lower-order preferences were to go to a single candidate (which they wouldn’t), that candidate would still require more than twice the number of BNP supporters to win under AV on the basis of BNP support alone. BNP voters cannot single-handedly change a result.

17 See <http://votemay5th.otoav.org/documents/how-the-bnp-could-decide-our-elections.pdf>

Table 18
35 seats named
by 'No to AV' (%)

	Lab	LD	Con	Green	UKIP	BNP	Other
Amber Valley	37.45	14.44	38.61	0.00	1.97	6.95	0.58
Ashfield	33.69	33.30	22.20	0.00	1.94	5.77	3.11
Bradford East	32.81	33.71	26.84	0.00	0.00	4.58	2.06
Broxtowe	38.30	16.89	39.04	0.80	2.26	2.70	0.00
Burnley	31.34	35.68	16.61	0.00	2.22	8.95	5.19
Carlisle	37.29	15.56	39.31	1.45	2.30	2.57	1.51
Corby	38.70	14.44	42.20	0.00	0.00	4.66	0.00
Dagenham and Rainham	40.27	8.60	34.33	0.67	3.55	11.20	1.39
Derby North	33.04	28.03	31.68	0.00	1.84	4.44	0.96
Dewsbury	32.17	16.94	34.99	1.57	0.00	6.05	8.28
Dudley North	38.66	10.53	36.98	0.00	8.46	4.92	0.45
Eltham	41.50	12.63	37.54	1.00	2.41	4.16	0.76
Great Grimsby	32.70	22.42	30.54	0.00	6.20	4.60	3.54
Halifax	37.37	19.14	33.99	0.00	1.50	6.34	1.66
Hampstead and Kilburn	32.81	31.22	32.73	1.44	0.77	0.62	0.41
Harrogate and Knaresborough	6.42	43.79	45.74	0.00	1.99	2.06	0.00
Hull North	39.18	37.26	13.11	1.44	4.08	4.33	0.60
Lancaster and Fleetwood	35.29	19.13	36.07	4.42	2.39	2.20	0.50
Lincoln	35.22	20.24	37.54	0.00	2.20	2.99	1.81
Morley and Outwood	37.59	16.76	35.34	0.00	3.08	7.24	0.00
Norwich South	28.71	29.36	22.93	14.92	2.41	1.47	0.21
Nuneaton	36.88	15.33	41.52	0.00	0.00	6.26	0.00
Oldham East and Saddleworth	31.86	31.63	26.44	0.00	3.86	5.72	0.48
Sheffield Central	41.33	40.93	10.14	3.75	1.57	2.18	0.10
Sherwood	38.81	14.88	39.24	0.00	3.04	3.58	0.45
Solihull	8.87	42.87	42.55	0.00	2.18	2.95	0.58
Stockton South	38.27	15.11	38.93	0.00	2.93	3.09	1.67
Swansea West	34.7	33.2	20.8	1.1	2.0	2.6	4.0
Telford	38.67	15.49	36.30	0.00	5.88	3.66	0.00
Thurrock	36.61	10.70	36.81	0.00	7.40	7.90	0.58
Wakefield	39.27	16.33	35.64	1.96	0.00	5.81	0.99
Walsall North	36.99	13.14	34.25	0.00	4.80	8.10	2.72
Warwickshire North	40.10	11.60	40.20	0.00	2.80	4.50	0.00
Weaver Vale	36.29	18.63	38.54	0.77	2.31	2.42	1.05
Wells	7.51	43.96	42.53	1.13	3.06	1.80	0.00

This analysis can be further developed by using data from the BES mock AV ballot to gauge the potential influence of the BNP. Sanders et al identify 43 seats which, under AV, would have produced different results to those which actually occurred under FPTP in the 2010 general election. Of these, only 18 had a BNP candidate running. Even if one was to assume that all BNP supporters' second preferences were to go to the runner-up, Table 19 (over) clearly shows that this would be insufficient to change the outcome of a single seat.

Table 19
BNP vote share
and seats switch
under AV (%)

	Lab	LD	Con	Green	UKIP	BNP	Other
Ashfield	33.69	33.30	22.20	0.00	1.94	5.77	3.11
Brentford and Isleworth	33.60	23.65	37.24	1.46	1.61	1.31	1.13
Bristol South	38.45	28.66	22.92	2.51	2.61	3.59	1.25
Broxtowe	38.30	16.89	39.04	0.80	2.26	2.70	0.00
Colne Valley	26.38	28.22	36.96	1.57	2.10	3.42	1.34
Dudley North	38.66	10.53	36.98	0.00	8.46	4.92	0.45
Durham, City of	44.31	37.68	13.29	0.00	1.85	2.49	0.37
Harrogate and Knaresborough	6.42	43.79	45.74	0.00	1.99	2.06	0.00
Hull North	39.18	37.26	13.11	1.44	4.08	4.33	0.60
Lancaster and Fleetwood	35.29	19.13	36.07	4.42	2.39	2.20	0.50
Newcastle upon Tyne North	40.85	33.08	18.13	0.73	2.92	4.30	0.00
Oldham East and Saddleworth	31.86	31.63	26.44	0.00	3.86	5.72	0.48
Sheffield Central	41.33	40.93	10.14	3.75	1.57	2.18	0.10
Sherwood	38.81	14.88	39.24	0.00	3.04	3.58	0.45
Stockton South	38.27	15.11	38.93	0.00	2.93	3.09	1.67
Watford	26.72	32.36	34.94	1.60	2.17	2.20	0.00
Weston-Super-Mare	10.95	39.20	44.31	0.00	2.67	2.08	0.79
York Outer	17.09	36.07	42.99	0.00	2.06	1.79	0.00

The BES results also allow us to look at the distribution of BNP second preferences for 10 of the 35 seats listed by the 'No to AV' campaign. Table 20 below presents the vote share for each party once the BNP have been eliminated and had their second preferences reallocated (it does not include the second preferences of voters whose first choice candidate may have been knocked out before the BNP). Once again it can be seen that the redistributed BNP votes would not be enough to change the outcome of a single seat: in every case, both the winner and runner-up still have a considerable distance to make up in order to cross the 50 per cent threshold and achieve an AV win.

Table 20
Vote share after
BNP second
preferences
reallocated (%)

Switch	Lab	LD	Con	Green	UKIP	Other	Winner distance to win	Rnnr-up distance to win
Labour to Liberal Democrat								
Ashfield	35.37	34.78	24.64	0.54	4.68	3.21	14.63	15.22
Hull North	39.85	37.79	14.46	1.84	6.07	0.60	10.15	12.21
Oldham East and Saddleworth	32.59	32.19	28.24	0.52	6.47	0.48	17.41	17.81
Sheffield Central	41.59	41.12	10.78	3.95	2.55	0.10	8.41	8.88
Conservative to Liberal Democrat								
Harrogate and Knaresborough	6.63	43.93	46.34	0.19	2.91	0.00	3.66	6.07
Conservative to Labour								
Broxtowe	38.57	17.08	39.82	1.04	3.48	0.00	10.18	11.43
Lancaster and Fleetwood	35.69	19.38	36.90	4.64	3.39	0.50	13.10	14.31
Sherwood	39.34	15.20	40.46	0.32	4.68	0.45	9.54	10.66
Stockton South	39.24	15.59	40.50	0.28	4.39	1.69	9.50	10.76
Labour to Conservative								
Dudley North	39.33	10.93	38.58	0.44	10.73	0.45	10.67	11.42

The constituency in which this comes closest to occurring is Harrogate and Knaresborough. Looking at the results, however, it is easy to see that the vote share most likely to prove decisive in terms of swinging the outcome would be the 6.63 per cent from Labour. Moreover, only 10 per cent of BNP second preferences are likely to go to the Labour Party, so they are less likely to contribute to this swing.

The numbers also show that seats which swung to the Liberal Democrats from Labour were likely decided by Conservative voters, and those that went from the Conservatives to Labour were more than likely determined by Liberal Democrat voters. Whatever the permutation, the major parties are still much more important in determining the outcome.

The constituency in which BNP supporters have their greatest influence is Dudley North, where the Conservatives would have gained a seat at the expense of Labour. UKIP does well in the second round after collecting roughly 45 per cent of the BNP vote, enabling it to draw almost level with the Liberal Democrats. This gain, however, is only 2 per cent of the overall vote, as UKIP enjoyed nearly 8 per cent of the first preferences. The Conservative steal is likely a combination of both UKIP and a handful of conservative Liberal Democrats. The 5 per cent first preference BNP vote share did contribute to this, but only in combination with the larger vote share of UKIP and Liberal Democrat supporters.

We also investigated another three seats where the BNP had strong support in the 2010 general election, to determine if their supporters could either produce a winner or change an outcome.

Table 21
Additional seats with strong BNP support (%)

	Lab	LD	Con	Green	UKIP	BNP	Other
Morley and Outwood	37.59	16.76	35.34	0.00	3.08	7.24	0.00
Barking	54.31	8.20	17.80	0.70	2.87	14.60	1.51
Burnley	31.34	35.68	16.61	0.00	2.22	8.95	5.19

Barking, the constituency in which the BNP had its highest vote share, is a clear safe seat for Labour (with over 50 per cent of all votes) and so is very unlikely to require the counting of the second preferences of any other party. All additional party votes summed – including the Liberal Democrats – would not be enough to elect the Conservative runner-up.

In Morley and Outwood, the BNP lower-order vote preferences would be counted but, as the race is highly marginal – with both the winner and runner-up maintaining vote shares in the mid-30s – the race will be decided by the 16.76 per cent bloc of Liberal Democrat supporters, whose second preferences are more likely to go to Labour than the Conservatives.

Similarly in Burnley, where the race is between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, the BNP lower-order preferences will likely be counted. However, the decisive group will be the 16.61 per cent bloc of Conservative supporters, who strongly favour the Liberal Democrats over Labour. Thus, the seat is likely to stay in Liberal Democrat hands.

AV is not too complicated for UK voters

Opponents of AV don't simply assert that there is little appetite for preferential voting – they also argue that such systems are too complicated for the voter to understand. In a speech in February 2011, the Prime Minister, David Cameron, claimed he did not understand how AV worked. He went on to say 'I don't think we should replace a system that everyone gets with one that's only understood by a handful of elites' (Cameron 2011).

The ippr/YouGov polling data, however, suggests that the Prime Minister should have more faith in the ability of the British public to get their heads round the mechanics of AV. Among respondents, 59% said they found AV either 'fairly' or 'very easy' to understand.¹⁸ Of course, a new voting system will take a bit of getting used to – and we should not discount the fact that almost one in three respondents said they would find voting under AV either 'very difficult' (13 per cent) or 'fairly difficult' (18 per cent) – but UK voters have, in recent years, proved themselves highly adept at using a range of different electoral systems. Should AV be adopted it would be the UK's

¹⁸ The ippr/YouGov poll found a 12-point gap between those saying they will vote 'yes' (45 per cent) and those voting 'no' (33 per cent) in the AV referendum. This we assume is explained by the fact that when people think about the way AV works, which they did in our detailed poll, and are given the chance to express preferences, their support for change grows.

sixth electoral system in operation. The Prime Minister appears to be unaware that UK voters have already demonstrated an ability to use preferential voting systems. The Supplementary Vote, for one, is used in London and local authority mayoral elections – and it will also be used to elect police commissioners, which were recently legislated for by the Coalition government. The Single Transferable Vote, a system which combines proportionality with preferential voting, is used for local government elections in Scotland and Northern Ireland, for Northern Ireland Assembly elections and for European Parliamentary elections in Northern Ireland. There is no compelling evidence that voters have found such systems too complicated to use.

Importantly, the PSA’s recent report on AV declared that it has ‘no clear effect on the number of spoilt ballots’. It is true that Australian elections held under AV generate more spoilt papers than UK general elections (5.6 per cent in the 2010 Australian federal election, compared to 1.0 per cent for the 2010 UK general election) but, as the PSA paper points out, the more likely reason for higher levels of spoilt ballots in Australia is not the use of AV but rather the fact that voting is compulsory and some voters choose to spoil their ballot to register general disapproval (Renwick 2011b).

Table 22
Electoral systems in
the United Kingdom

Institution	Electoral system	Date of introduction
Local authorities – Northern Ireland	Single Transferable Vote	1973*
European Parliament (England, Scotland and Wales)	Party List	1979
European Parliament (Northern Ireland)	Single Transferable Vote	1979
Northern Ireland Assembly	Single Transferable Vote	1998
Scottish Parliament	Additional Member System	1999
Welsh Assembly	Additional Member System	1999
Greater London Assembly	Additional Member System	1999
Mayor of London	Supplementary Vote	1999
Elected mayors (England)	Supplementary Vote	2000
Local authorities – Scotland	Single Transferable Vote	2004

*Reintroduced in 1973 having previously been abolished in 1929.

AV is widely used

There are only three countries in the world that currently use AV to elect their national legislatures: Australia, Papua New Guinea and Fiji. Critics believe this indicates a serious lack of faith in AV (Beckett 2010). But this claim is disingenuous, since it fails to take account of the large number of countries that use some form of preferential voting which shares many of AV’s characteristics. Examples from the UK, as noted above, include the Supplementary Vote for mayoral and police commissioner elections. The other important variant of AV is the ‘run-off’ election, such as the double-ballot that is used to elect the French President and National Assembly. In France, if a candidate fails to win more than half the votes in the first ballot, a second election takes place in which only the top candidates from the first round participate – at which point those voters whose first choice has been knocked out in the previous round vote for their favourite candidate from those left in the race. AV compresses this process into a single election: in effect, voters use their second preference to indicate how they would like their vote to be redirected should their first choice be eliminated. This explains why some call AV an ‘instant run-off’ system. Elections expert Alan Renwick notes that once the different variants of AV are included the number of countries using the system to elect their national legislatures grows to 22 (Renwick 2011a). And when you consider that most countries use AV to elect their presidents – Ireland is an obvious example – we can see that the use of AV is much more widespread than many assume.

Moreover, AV is the voting system of choice for a wide range of national and international bodies. In particular, it is regularly used to elect the leaders of organisations because of its ability to ensure that the winner has secured broad-based majority support. To list just a few examples, AV is used to elect the leader of the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties; chairs of Select Committees; the Speaker in both Houses of Parliament; and the President of the International Olympic Committee. It is also used at the Oscars (Renwick 2011a). Trade unions, professional associations, charities, big

business and student bodies up and down the country use a form of AV for their internal elections. Even the Conservative Party uses a form of multiple run-off to elect its leader. Run-off elections are particularly common outside of politics and are used by millions of people in a number of high profile TV shows, like *The X Factor* and *Strictly Come Dancing*. In these cases, the run-off elections consist of multiple ballots, as viewers are asked to vote each week. If your favourite candidate is 'voted off' in week one you still get to vote for your second favourite the following week. The process continues week by week until there is a final winner. As a result, the chances are good that many of us will have taken part in an election using AV, or something essentially similar, at some point in our lives.

Finally, it's worth noting that FPTP is not exactly the first port of call for electoral reformers: since 1945, only three new democracies have introduced FPTP based on the British model – Albania, Macedonia and Ukraine – and even these countries subsequently decided to switch to a different system (Hix et al 2010).

Conclusion

The simplest and strongest case for AV is that, unlike FPTP, it is well suited to the times we live in. FPTP is a system designed for an age of political tribalism which no longer exists. Voters today have a looser and more dynamic sense of political affiliation than they did in the past – they don't see 'politics in such black and white terms' (Renwick 2011a). FPTP fails to accommodate this change, whereas AV goes with the grain of contemporary British political culture. It promotes voter choice and empowers the electorate in a world defined by stronger political pluralism.

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