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FAQ

**The Alternative
Vote: Questions
Answered**

Introduction

So, what's AV?

The Coalition Government has pledged to hold a referendum on whether to introduce the Alternative Vote (AV) for elections to the House of Commons.

AV represents a simple change to our current First-Past-the-Post (FPTP) voting system. But that change can have a profound, positive impact on how politics works in the UK.

But any change brings questions. The Electoral Reform Society has sought to tackle the myths emerging around the shift to AV. We want to separate the facts from the fiction, and address the legitimate concerns that voters may have as they get ready to make their choice at the coming referendum.

The Society is convinced that AV offers a better deal for British voters. *Come the referendum, that choice is yours.*

If you have any further questions or queries you can contact us at **ers@electoral-reform.org.uk**

Part one

AV: The basics

Q. How does AV work?

A. It's simple. For voters AV just means swapping the 'X' on your ballot paper for a '1, 2, 3...' Voters can rate the candidates how they see fit, and if their favourite doesn't win, they can still have a say.

Q. So what's the point?

A. The principle behind AV is just as simple: An election winner should need the support of a majority of the people. So if no candidate commands 50% support, the last placed candidate drops out and their voters' 2nd preferences come into play. This continues until one candidate has majority support.

Under FPTP you get just one choice. And that has meant that most MPs – 2 out of 3 returned in 2010 - get elected with less than half of voters on their side. With AV successful candidates have to work harder to secure majority support.

Q. Isn't that too confusing?

A. Few people would be confused by this. Voters put a '1' by their first choice, a '2' by their second choice, a '3' by their third choice and so on. The logic's familiar enough to anyone who's ever asked a friend to pop down to the shops for a coke

and said: "If they're out of that I'll have a lemonade."

Q. Isn't it fair that the candidate with the most votes wins?

A. What matters is what's fair for voters. It's a system that produces winning MPs who can speak for the many with support from the few.

AV redresses the balance. With AV when a winner crosses the finish line they've had to bring 50% of voters with them. Divisive and complacent candidates would tend to do badly, which is how it should be.

Q. Doesn't that mean some people get two votes?

A. No. But everyone gets a vote that goes further. Whether you just put a '1' by your favourite candidate, or number every person on the ballot paper, only one of those votes will be counted.

AV would remove the frustration many voters feel that they currently have no vote at all - they support a party that has little real chance of winning under the current system, so they have absolutely no say in who is ultimately elected.

People only have one vote with AV. It's a more valuable vote, giving every-

one a much bigger say, and a greater chance of helping to decide who their next MP will be.

Q. Don't you end up with the Least-Worst Candidate?

A. No. FPTP just lets in winners that most of voters didn't want.

AV ensures a winning candidate has to work harder and go further to secure support from a majority. That's what's needed to be 'best', and may explain why politicians are so keen on AV when electing their own...

When Hollywood recently dumped First-Past-the-Post for AV, they didn't change the wording on the statuette to Academy Award for Least-Worst Picture. They wanted a real winner, a Best Picture that could deliver on that promise.

Q. Do I have to give a 2nd preference if I don't have one?

A. No. You can vote for a few or as many candidates as you like.

AV gives you the freedom to vote sincerely for any number of candidates you feel are up to the job. You aren't forced to vote for any candidate you don't want. If you only want to support one candidate you can.

If they prefer, voters can simply put a '1', or an 'X', by one candidate

as they currently do under FPTP. Similarly, they can rate two or three or all of the candidates – that's completely up to each voter and their vote will still count.

Q. Will my ballot change?

A. Not in the slightest. An AV ballot paper will look exactly the same as it currently does, with a list of candidates' names alongside their parties' names with an empty box by each one.

The difference is simply that instead of just putting an 'X' in just one box, voters will be able to put a '1, 2, 3...' and so on in as many boxes as they please.

Q. Who uses AV?

A. AV is a tried-and-tested system. In Britain millions of people in businesses, unions and charities already use it. Political parties use it to elect their leaders. MPs themselves use it to elect their Speaker and their officials.

When politicians are the voters – when they are electing their own leaders – AV is the system they choose. When you need a real winner who needs to speak for the majority AV is the go-to system.

Part two

AV: The Impact

Q. Who Benefits?

A. The Voters. Millions of us have been taken for granted. AV means making a simple change to the voting system which will make sure your MP will have to work harder to earn and keep your support.

What this change does is make sure that in future, MPs can't be sure of winning or keeping their seats unless they have the backing of over half of their constituents.

Q. Who loses out?

A. Complacent or extremist politicians. AV forces candidates to work for majority support. The big losers are candidates that are either too lazy or too divisive to reach out to the majority of voters – those that can't or won't simply don't have a future.

Our hard working MPs have nothing to fear from AV. It's only those who've taken their constituents for granted that need to worry.

Q. Wouldn't AV mean more hung parliaments?

A. No. Hung parliaments are no more likely with AV – and as you might have noticed FPTP hasn't given Britain any special immunity to them.

Britain has experienced hung parliaments in the 1920s, 1970s, and

in 2010, and had periods in the 1950s, 1960s and 1990s where when a single party has been unable to effectively govern alone. Canada, which also uses First-Past-the-Post, has permanent hung parliaments. Australia, which uses AV, has returned its first hung parliament in 28 elections.

Hung parliaments occur if enough voters support a third party. AV gives voters a greater say over candidates in their constituency. How they vote is up to them.

Q. Wouldn't AV mean more tactical voting?

A. No. AV simply eliminates the need for it. Why should we have to abandon the party we actually support, to prevent the party we least support getting in? The dilemma facing millions of voters is often characterised as the choice between "voting with your head or your heart". AV allows people to do both.

AV offers an honest vote. It gives everyone a chance to vote sincerely for the candidates they really want knowing their vote can go further.

Q. What about the Constituency Link?

A. AV keeps the link and makes it stronger. Politicians like to talk

about their constituency link. And a lot of them seem to enjoy it a lot more than the voters.

Many of our MPs currently have a pretty dodgy link to their constituents. Barely a third of MPs can speak for the majority of their voters. AV strengthens the link by giving people the MPs they actually voted for. AV forces complacent MPs to take heed of the interests of their constituents because their jobs depend on it.

Q. Wouldn't reform help minority parties like the BNP?

A. No. For extremists AV is a brick wall. Currently because MPs can get elected with support from less than 1 in 3 voters, there is always a risk that extremist parties can get in.

The BNP have learnt this lesson, and have used it to scrape wins in town halls across the country. With AV, no-one can get elected unless most people back them. Therefore the risk of extremist parties getting in by the back door is eliminated.

Q. Doesn't the current system let us 'kick the rascals out'?

A. Tell that to voters living in our safe seats. Time-and-again these voters have to put up with MPs guaranteed election on a

fraction of the vote.

Voters can kick the rascals out if they have a stronger say. AV gives them that chance. Complacent MPs can't be sure of winning or keeping their seats unless they have the backing of over half of their constituents.

Q. Won't election night take longer?

A. AV isn't about making life more exciting for political junkies. It's about giving voters more say. A slightly longer wait for election results seems a small price to pay.

Counting the preferences on an AV ballot may take longer than simply counting the Xs on First-Past-the-Post papers. Experience from the last election shows the public and the markets are not going to take fright just because they have to wait a few more hours to know the result.

Q. Will AV boost turnout?

A. A vote that matters is worth turning up for. We can't promise the earth with AV. Millions of voters have plenty of reasons for staying at home on Election Day. But chief among them is the knowledge that their vote won't count, and AV can change that.

AV: The Impact Continued

It's said if you lose a voter at their first election, you've lost them for life. With AV we can give first-time voters a chance to see their vote make a difference.

Q. Will AV change things on the campaign trail?

A. Yes – and for the better. The public are tired of 'Punch and Judy' politics. At election time, politicians spend a lot of their time sniping at the other parties instead of telling voters what their own solutions would be. First-Past-the-Post encourages this type of negative campaigning. Many candidates would prefer supporters of other parties to simply switch off from politics and stay at home on Election Day.

But with AV, candidates know that they won't get elected unless they can reach out to a wide majority of the voters. They need to attract voters who will be giving their first preference to other parties. In this way, AV reduces the current incentive to attack. AV rewards candidates who appeal to voters from other parties, not just their own.

Part three AV: The Referendum

Q. Why a referendum?

A. MPs are used to setting their own rules. This referendum will be the first time ordinary voters have been given a chance to decide the terms of employment for their employees in parliament.

It's right and proper that voters should have the chance to make this decision. And unlike our current elections, every vote will count.

Q. Isn't First-Past-the-Post a British Tradition?

A. Our parliament is not a museum. There has always been evolution in our politics, and AV is a logical next-step.

The secret ballot, votes for women, and votes for working people were all innovations once, and met with opposition. These changes didn't rip up the rule book, but they were necessary to improve the way we do politics.

Voters aren't looking for a revolution. They're looking for a simple change that preserves and improves on what's come before.

Q. Do the public even care about voting reform?

A. Yes, and with good reason. While many British voters are worried about their jobs, First-Past-the-Post

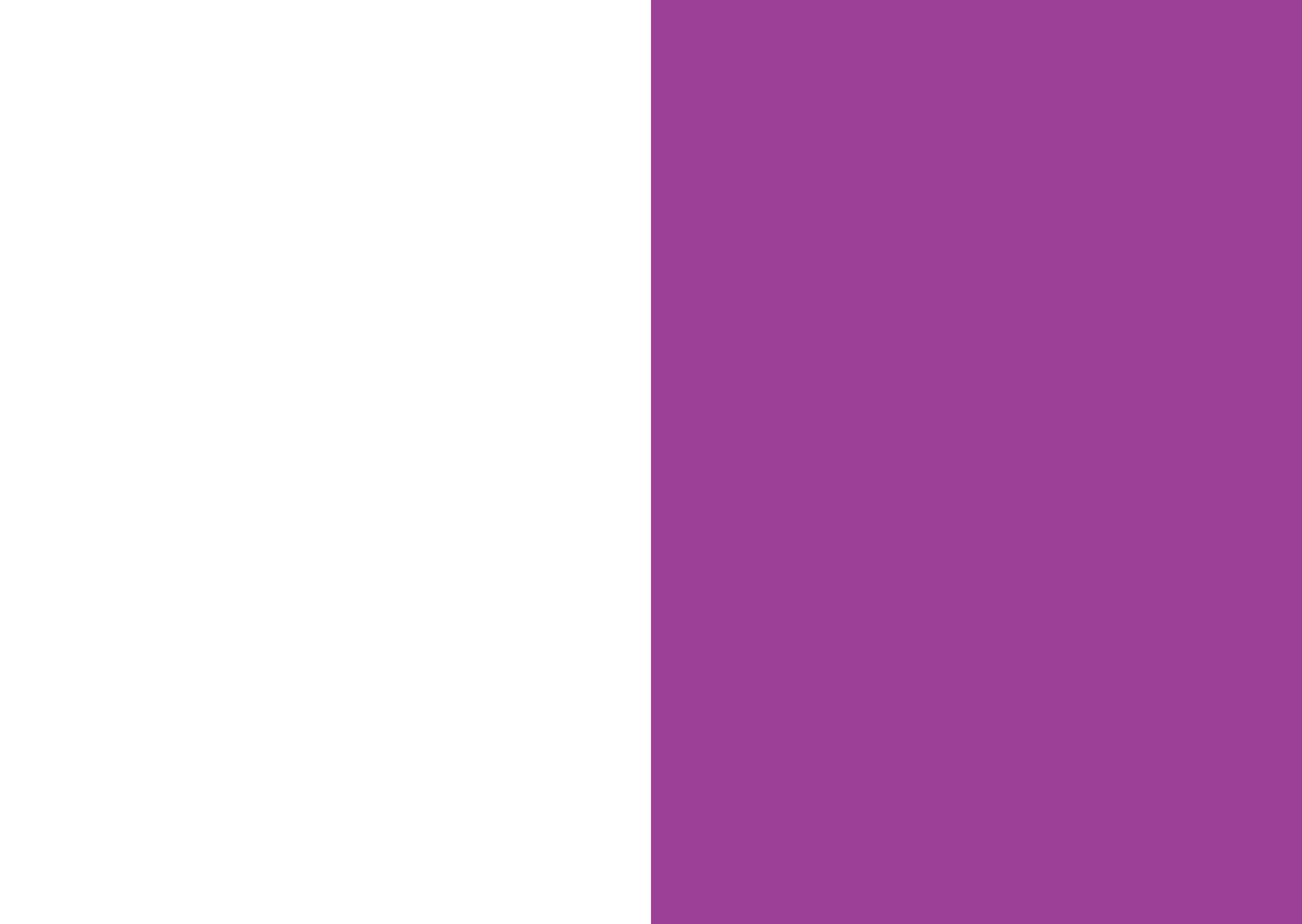
lets many MPs keep their safe seats for life.

Polls have indicated that as many as 8 out of 10 want change. MPs who oppose AV often say that 'they never hear people mention voting reform on the doorstep'. What they don't mention is that they very frequently hear people on the doorstep complain that politicians are not listening, that they ignore local people's wishes and that they are unaccountable – all problems that AV helps to address.

Q. Isn't electoral reform just for Lib-Dems?

A. No. It's for 40 million voters. Supporters of all parties have been taken for granted for too long. Our politicians are all-too-often fixated on how voting reform will affect them and their own parties' prospects.

A referendum on the Alternative Vote was promised in the Labour manifesto and was at the heart of the Liberal-Conservative Coalition agreement. Supporters come from all parties and none.



□ Electoral □ Reform □ Society

The Electoral Reform Society is campaigning to change the way we choose our politicians.

We take our message on fair votes and effective representation to politicians of all parties. *You can help us deliver it.*

Strong Voters We want to increase the power of the public in elections by giving everyone a vote that really counts, and choice and competition on polling day.

Accountable Politicians Voters need a real link with their representatives, and the chance to hold them to account.

Popular Government We want our government elected and supported by the majority of voters, and not the few.

Mature Politics We need politics where debate and cooperation takes the place of confrontation and fake theatre.

www.electoral-reform.org.uk