



## **Unite says “NO” to the Alternative Vote**

The country will be asked to decide in a referendum on 5 May about a new voting system for MPs.

The choice is between keeping the current “First past the post” system, in which the candidate with the most votes wins, or the “Alternative Vote” system, in which voters can express their preferences and the winner has to get 50 per cent or more of the vote.

The question on the ballot paper will say, “At present, the UK uses the “first past the post” system to elect MPs to the House of Commons. Should the ‘alternative vote’ system be used instead? Yes or no?”

**Unite is backing a “NO” vote in the referendum and urges you as a Unite member to vote that way.**

All voters who are eligible to vote in a General Election will be eligible to take part.

## **What is the alternative vote?**

The system is designed so an MP should be elected by securing 50 per cent or more support. Voters can rank the candidates on offer in order but you can still vote for just one candidate if that’s what you want. So, instead of just putting one “X” against your preferred candidate you would be able to put “1” by your first preference, “2” against your second and so on.

If, at the initial count, any candidate receives 50 per cent or more first preference votes, he or she is declared the winner. But if no candidate gets more than 50 per cent, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and his or her votes are then reassigned according to the second preferences expressed on the ballot papers. The process goes on until one candidate receives more than 50 per cent of the vote.

However, it may be that voters chose not to rank all the candidates and that no candidate gets more than 50 per cent. In that situation, whoever ends up with the most votes wins.

## **Is AV the same as proportional representation?**

It isn’t. Liberal Democrat Leader Nick Clegg, whose party has long championed “Proportional Representation”, called AV “a miserable little compromise” before the General Election. Political parties could still be in a position to form a government with less than 50 per cent of first choice votes.

## **Where else is AV used?**

Australia, Fiji and Papua New Guinea are the only countries which use AV. Fiji has plans to abandon it.

## **Some of the arguments against AV**

- First past the post is fair. It is based on the principle of one person, one vote. AV is a multiple choice system where a candidate who comes second or third on first preferences can actually be elected.
- Some votes will count more than others. If a voter gives their first preference vote to a mainstream party, then their other preferences may not be counted. But if they vote for a fringe party candidate who gets knocked out, their other preferences will count.
- There is an increased likelihood of more coalitions under AV than First past the post. As we saw after the General Election in 2010 backroom deals were done to create the current Tory-led government and since then we have seen a string of broken election promises from both the Tories and the Liberal Democrats.

## **What do the opinion polls say?**

The polling organisation Populus has released new polling on the Alternative Vote. As in a previous poll done in February they used a split sample, asking half the respondents how they would vote using the bare referendum question but prompting the other half with explanations of the two systems.

In February Populus found a 12 point lead for YES in the unprompted question, but a 14 point lead for NO when people were given an explanation of the two systems.

This month they have repeated the exercise and found significant convergence between the two questions. Now on the bare referendum question Populus found YES on 33 per cent (down 8) and NO on 37 per cent (up 8). On the prompted question there is much less movement – YES is unchanged on 29%, NO is up three on 46%. No still have a much bigger lead when the systems are explained, but the difference is considerably smaller.

## **Unite says**

The AV referendum question is about how we elect MPs. It is not a genuine political debate on electoral systems, such as proportional representation. We should also separate out what seems to be gerrymandering of political boundaries for perceived political gain cloaked in the “clean up politics” claim.

On the issue of AV we remain unconvinced that listing an individual’s main vote and associated preferences, should their candidate or political party not be successful in getting a majority, is the best way of electing MPs. One of our concerns is supporters of those candidates and parties who fail to get a majority then get further opportunities to have their voice heard with AV. In this we are concerned that minority and extremist parties, like the BNP, could hold a disproportionate sway in elections.

Supporters of AV say change is needed to force political parties to engage more across the political spectrum and in local communities. Whatever the strengths or shortcomings of the current system that is exactly what Labour did to win in 1997. It lost in 2010 because it failed to do that not because the voting system was at fault.