

Alternative Vote Referendum

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The referendum to change the voting system for elections to the House of Commons takes place on 5 May. The question is whether to adopt the 'Alternative Vote' system (AV) instead of the traditional 'First Past The Post' system.

However low the turnout, the referendum decision will be binding. If the majority of those voting back AV then that system will be implemented for elections to the House of Commons across the UK. So one way or another, the AV referendum will be decisive. It is therefore important that Christians vote.

Q: Is there a Christian position on AV?

On moral issues the Bible is definite, but a particular voting system cannot claim a scriptural mandate. That said, there are biblical principles that apply (see below) and an obvious question is: could a particular voting system marginalise Christian concerns?

Many say that is precisely what our current First Past The Post system does. Some prominent Christians, such as Tim Farron, President of the Lib Dems,¹ back the change to AV, as do some of those involved in Christian political parties.² Other Christian politicians such as David Burrowes MP (Conservative) and Gavin Shuker MP (Labour) oppose AV.³

Ten bishops have backed change to AV, saying it is a 'fairer voting system'.⁴ One self-selected poll carried out last year has been claimed to show that reform of the voting system was "one of the top three political concerns" of Evangelicals at the time of the last general election.⁵

John Hayward of the Jubilee Centre has thoughtfully considered the claims of AV in his blog.⁶ The think tank *Theos* has questioned the claims of both sides and concluded that how you vote on AV largely depends on whether you like strong government and decisive elections

on the one hand or hung parliaments and co-operation between parties on the other.⁷

Much has been written about the pros and cons of AV in the secular press. In this short Q&A discussion paper, we suggest some key issues in the referendum choice for biblical Christians to consider.

“ Those who see democracy as delivered best by a strong government, a strong opposition and the opportunity to deliver a clear judgment on a government's performance on Election Day are unlikely to see AV as an improvement, or indeed to think that there is any problem at all with the existing system. Even for those who view proportionality as **the** litmus test for electoral legitimacy AV may only seem a small step forward.

Nevertheless, this is not to claim that proponents of change are misguided or simply 'wrong'. Rather, they have a different view of what makes for a good democracy. Thus, the fact that AV will increase the likelihood of hung parliaments is a positive consequence, as a hung parliament is a clearer expression of the public's mood today, shifting as it has from two broadly defined and oppositional alternatives to a more complex and plural party system.⁸ ”

Theos think tank

Q: What is AV?

Currently the British electoral system is based on the First Past The Post system. The voter places a mark on the ballot paper next to the

candidate of their choice. Every voter has one vote, which they cast for one candidate. The candidate with the most votes wins.

With the AV system candidates are ranked numerically in order of preference. To be elected, a prospective MP must gain more than 50% of votes. If no one crosses that threshold on first preference alone, the least popular candidate is eliminated. The second or, if need be, third or fourth preferences of those who voted for eliminated candidates are included with the existing votes until someone reaches the 50% line. It is then deemed that the winner on this basis holds an overall majority in the constituency.⁹

Q: Where else is AV used?

The AV system is in force for national government elections in three countries worldwide – Australia, Fiji and Papua New Guinea.¹⁰

Q: How are votes counted under AV?

The Electoral Reform Society has suggested that in around a third of all seats one candidate will immediately secure 50% of the first choice votes cast.¹¹

For the other cases AV hinges on using the second and third etc preference votes from those who back the least popular candidates. So if in one such constituency voters backed Conservative, Liberal Democrat, Labour and Green candidates in that order on first preference votes, then the Green candidate would be eliminated. The second preference votes on those ballot papers for the eliminated candidate would then be used to top up the votes of the other three.

Second and third etc preference votes are only counted for voters whose first choice candidate is eliminated in each successive round of counting. For many ballot papers, second and third etc preference votes will never be used because their first choice candidate is too popular to be eliminated before a decision is reached. The 50% level for the successful candidate is reached by a combination of first preference votes and whatever second, third etc preference votes are counted.

Supporters of First Past The Post say AV gives many votes to those voting for an unpopular candidate and potentially only one vote to those voting for the most popular. Certainly, some surprising results can emerge depending on how preference votes are used by supporters of the different candidates. It is correct to say that the winning candidate could actually have come third on first preference votes.

After the recent Australian election conducted under AV, incumbent Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard was able to continue in her position by forming a coalition, despite the Liberal-National Coalition receiving more first preference votes.¹²

Q: Are you forced to vote for other candidates you disagree with as a Christian?

No. If you want to vote for only one candidate you still can. You would put a '1' by that candidate's name and leave the rest of the ballot paper blank. But under AV the fewer candidates you rank, the less influence you may have on the outcome.

Q: Will Christians still be able to exercise their conscience in choosing a candidate?

Yes. You are free to make choices based on who the candidates are. Because both AV and First Past The Post retain the link with the constituency they allow people to vote for an individual rather than just choose a party from a list (as with the European Elections).

Under First Past The Post Christians can positively vote for a particular candidate or a particular party. But many Christians tend to vote for who they see as the least worst candidate. If this is your approach, things are more involved under AV. You still vote for your preferred candidate, but to fully use your ballot you may also need to decide on who is the second least worst candidate, the third least worst and so on.

Q: Will Christians be able to exercise their conscience in choosing which manifesto to support for the next government?

Some Christians base their vote on a party rather than a candidate – in doing so they make their choice using a party's policy manifesto. You can still vote in this way under AV but many, including constitutional expert Vernon Bogdanor, believe that AV will lead to more coalition governments.¹³ As *Theos* pointed out, some might consider this to be a good reason to support AV whereas others might prefer to retain the current system. Coalition governments mean that party negotiations conducted after the election will tend to decide what policies are implemented. The AV referendum itself was not

in either the Conservative or Lib Dem manifesto but is the product of the negotiation which took place between the parties. A downside of the inevitable horse trading is that politicians could evade responsibility when the next election comes round again. They can just blame their coalition partners or the compromises needed to form a government.

Q: Is AV simple?

The Electoral Commission has published a booklet to explain how it works.¹⁴

AV is criticised for being complicated, but its supporters claim AV is fairer.

Q: Will AV make it more likely that Christian parties get seats?

No. AV benefits the main parties because the successful candidate needs to reach the 50% threshold (in most cases this is achieved by using redistributed second and third etc preference votes).

Q: Will AV mean that extreme parties like the BNP are more likely to get elected?

No. AV is not proportional representation (PR). Elections to the European Parliament use PR and recently led to the BNP gaining two MEPs.

Q: Which parties and candidates are likely to benefit from AV?

The Leader of the Labour Party, Ed Miliband, believes AV will benefit ‘progressive’ parties.¹⁵ ‘Progressives’ are defined by the BBC as socially liberal,¹⁶ and according to the Oxford English Dictionary they are “liberal” and favour “social reform”. Academic research (albeit based on limited data) seems to suggest that the Lib Dems will do well under AV.¹⁷

Q: Who supports AV?

The Labour leadership, the Lib Dems, the SNP, Plaid Cymru, the Green Party, UKIP, Sinn Fein, the SDLP and the Alliance Party all support AV.¹⁸ Many of these would rather have PR.¹⁹

Prominent people such as Richard Dawkins, Eddie Izzard, Jonathan Ross and Joanna Lumley have lent their support to the ‘Yes’ campaign.²⁰

Many prominent figures in the Labour Party oppose AV, as does the Conservative Party, the DUP, the UUP and the TUV.²¹

Q: Is AV a stepping stone to further electoral reform?

Not necessarily, but it is fair to say that is what many AV supporters hope.

Q: Will AV help candidates with clear moral convictions?

The Electoral Reform Society says AV will lead to candidates being selected who support “broad-

Good politics needs good opposition

AV and First Past The Post devotees debate whether strong government is a good thing. But whatever arguments there may be in favour of more consensual politics, surely all can agree that a crucial element of a democracy is the need for a strong opposition. Professor A.D. Lindsay, Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University in the four years before the Second World War, analysed how our democracy came from Oliver Cromwell and the non-conforming Reformers. Writing in 1929 he argued in his book *The Essentials of Democracy* that:

- i. democracy needs a strong opposition “to make articulate and get expressed different ... points of view”.
- ii. at the heart of democracy is “the principle of liberty of conscience and the repudiation of religious coercion”; and,
- iii. the State should “hinder hindrances” to voluntary organisations like churches that can sustain the good life and a moral order.²³

In our day we see many challenges to religious liberty and to conscience. There have also been many attempts to intervene in the private affairs of churches and Christian organisations. Though the public are concerned, party leaders seem unwilling to speak out. How important it is that we have politicians who speak out on these issues.

church policies²², this being a euphemism for 'middle of the road' policies. Whatever advantages a consensual approach may or may not have, when it comes to moral issues there will certainly be pressure on candidates to fudge or keep quiet about their convictions in order to pick up second and third preference votes. The system may also mean that political parties will tend to select candidates who can also appeal to the supporters of their political opponents.

Q: Do people want to know candidates' views on moral issues?

Fifty years ago people tended to vote consistently for one political party which may have been seen as protecting their interests. Today people often switch the way they vote.

One reason for this is the rise of 'issue voting'. This was noted by the Blair government in an official consultation in 1998 on political balance in the Magistracy. The government quoted research by US academic Ronald Inglehart who argues that over the past 50 years, a fundamental change has occurred in basic value priorities in Western societies. Using surveys based on attitudes towards a variety of issues including sex, homosexuality, education, religion, drugs and single parents, he found that certain groups in Western society, having reached a certain standard of living, have begun to focus less on goals which protect economic well being and more on non-economic concerns.²⁴ The research shows that views on moral issues can change which party people vote for.

At one time the political parties were poles apart on economic issues, but largely agreed on issues of personal morality. Today there is a much greater degree of convergence

between the parties on economic issues, but a widespread divergence of opinion on moral issues both between the parties and between individual candidates within the same party.

It is possible to have a libertarian right-winger and a new Labour candidate who both oppose state support for marriage and are committed to abortion and homosexual rights. A traditional one nation Conservative might have more in common on moral issues with someone from old Labour.²⁵

Whilst there are a variety of moral views within the parties, generally speaking the views of our political parties are much more secular than those of the general public. When Tory politician Chris Grayling spoke out in favour of Christian B&B owners, Labour and Lib Dem politicians demanded that David Cameron take action and require Mr Grayling to recant, which Mr Cameron duly did. Yet B&B owners Mr and Mrs Bull have had huge support amongst the public and in the media. Whilst few MPs have spoken out in favour of the Bulls, it is ironic that some prominent supporters of gay rights such as Michael Portillo and David Starkey have shown no such reluctance to back their case, though disagreeing with their views.

There are many other issues where the public is much less influenced by secularism than our MPs. For example, the public would like to see our abortion law made tighter.²⁶

Q: What scriptural principles are relevant in deciding the mechanism of voting?

The role of government is to restrain evil and promote what is good (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:14). The great blessing of living in a democracy is that the citizens choose the government. This choice acts as a powerful

restraint on government. As Reinhold Niebuhr famously said:

“Man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”²⁷

Governments can legitimately raise taxes and exercise authority. As Christ said: “Render therefore unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s; and unto God the things that are God’s.”²⁸ MPs as well as the Government are ‘Caesar’ since the House of Commons makes legislation and holds the Government to account. But in a democracy, the citizens are also part of ‘Caesar’ since they have power to

dismiss the government and influence public policy in many ways between elections. In a dictatorship this does not arise. Christians believe in accountability. It could be argued that the influence of electors flows from their ultimate power to remove the government. Others would prefer to see a system which requires greater co-operation between political parties. So a key question for Christians in the UK, privileged as we are to live in a democracy, is whether the voting system helps us to do our job in our role as ‘Caesar’. Is AV an improvement so that electors can better exercise their powers to restrain evil and promote good?

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