RESULTS OF THE TCS/YOUGOV POLL ON ALTERNATIVE VOTING AND THE REFERENDUM

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September 2010
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http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
1 Introduction: Asking the wrong question?

1.1 A series of YouGov polls on voting intentions in the referendum have found that a majority of voters are so far unconvinced of the merits of the Alternative Vote.\(^1\)

1.2 The Constitution Society (TCS) commissioned YouGov to carry out an on-line poll to gauge public opinion on a broader range of issues around electoral reform and the government’s referendum proposal.

1.3 The poll questioned not only how respondents would vote in the proposed referendum but also why they would make that choice.\(^3\)

1.4 Significant findings of the poll include:

− A difference of opinion between the Government and the public over the policy areas which most warrant a referendum.

− A lack of support for the government position that electoral reform merits a referendum more than constituency boundary revision and the reduction in the number of MPs.

− A majority of respondents would like the referendum to include a wider choice of voting systems.

− Only a small minority think that Parliament should decide what options are offered in a referendum on the electoral system.

− Most respondents do not fully understand AV.

− The ‘yes’ and ‘no’ vote is evenly balanced but exposure to information about AV increases the ‘no’.

− The same arguments are commonly used to justify votes both for and against AV.

− There are a number of widespread misconceptions about AV

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\(^1\) [http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/YG-Archives-Pol-Trackers-AVReferendum-200910.pdf](http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/YG-Archives-Pol-Trackers-AVReferendum-200910.pdf)

\(^2\) The poll was conducted on 31\(^{st}\) August and 1\(^{st}\) September 2010, the week before the 2\(^{nd}\) reading of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Bill, using a nationally representative sample of 2,548 respondents. Full results can be found [here.](http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/YG-Archives-Pol-Trackers-AVReferendum-200910.pdf)

\(^3\) Full verbal responses in favour of AV and against AV. [http://www.re-constitution.org.uk](http://www.re-constitution.org.uk)
2 RESULTS

2.1 SUBJECT OF THE REFERENDUM

Which constitutional issue would you most like to have a referendum on?

2.1.1 Britain's membership of the EU was the most popular choice (43%), followed by the voting system (33%) and a reduction in the number of MPs (28%).

2.1.2 Responses varied dramatically according to party allegiance: Conservatives favoured a referendum on EU membership (64%), Lib Dems on the voting system (63%).

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
Should the referendum cover boundary revision?

2.1.3 Respondents were asked whether the referendum should only be about AV or about both sets of proposals in the Parliamentary Voting Systems and Constituencies Bill, namely:

(1) AV referendum
(2) Equalise size of parliamentary constituencies and reduce number of MPs

2.1.4 A majority thought the referendum should be about both proposals (52% against 29% only AV). Opinion was consistent across different political allegiances and across respondents intending to vote both ‘yes’ and ‘no’.

2.1.5 The public does not support the government position that voting system reform requires a referendum but a reduction in the number of MPs and constituency boundary review does not.
Should the referendum offer a wider choice of voting systems?

2.1.6 There was substantial support for wider choice and, by implication, proportional representation (40%).

2.1.7 A majority of those in favour of AV wanted a wider choice (59%). This suggests that a vote to change from FPTP is not necessarily a vote in favour of AV.

Results by party allegiance:

2.1.8 A majority of Lib Dem supporters wanted a wider choice (53%) while a significant number of Conservatives opposed a widening of the question (46%).

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
2.2 PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF VOTING SYSTEMS

What do you know about voting systems?

2.2.1 A substantial majority of respondents (65%) claim to understand how FPTP works.

2.2.2 Only a third of respondents claim to understand how AV works and 32% have never heard of it.

2.2.3 A surprising number of respondents (17%) have never even heard of the voting system currently in use.

2.2.4 Understanding of proportional representation systems is very limited. A significant majority of respondents have never heard of AMS (68%) or Party list (64%), and almost 50% have never heard of STV.

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
How well do you understand the electoral system we currently use?

2.2.5 A substantial majority of respondents (68%) report that they understand FPTP either fairly or very well.

2.2.6 A significant minority (28%) believe that they do not understand the system well, despite its use in the UK for generations.

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
What are the most important features of an electoral system?

2.2.7 Respondents were asked to say how important they consider each of the given features of electoral systems.

2.2.8 A substantial majority (68%) thought simplicity was a ‘very important’ feature of electoral systems. Legitimacy was also considered ‘very important’ by a majority.

2.2.9 Proportionality received the least ‘very important’ responses out of all of the features.

2.2.10 None of the features was considered ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ unimportant by a significant number of respondents.

“FPTP is straightforward - the candidate who gets the most votes becomes the Member of Parliament”

A substantial majority (64%) found this statement either ‘fairly’ or ‘very’ convincing, making ‘simplicity’ a crucial tool for the ‘no’ campaign.
Important features; ‘very important’ responses by party allegiance:

2.2.11 Proportionality received ‘very important’ responses from a majority of respondents only amongst Liberal Democrat supporters (51%).

2.2.12 More Liberal Democrat supporters consider simplicity (61%) and legitimacy (68%) to be ‘very important’ than proportionality (51%).

2.2.13 Of the three main parties, Liberal Democrat supporters are the only ones to consider legitimacy more important than simplicity. This echoes the party's support for PR over majoritarian systems.

2.2.14 No group of party supporters considers constituency link to be ‘very important’ in the majority, despite this being advanced as one of the major advantages of AV.

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
2.3 WHO SHOULD SET THE QUESTION?

Who should decide what the options are in the referendum?

2.3.1 The independent commission and citizens' jury got equally high support from respondents intending to vote both ‘yes’ and ‘no’ and across political allegiances.

2.3.2 Only a small minority of respondents thought that Parliament should make the decision. This is perhaps indicative of the low esteem in which the public holds Parliament generally, or of a belief that the referendum question lacks legitimacy (given it was in neither of the Coalition parties’ manifestos).

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
2.4 TURNOUT AND TIMING

On a scale of 1 to 10 how certain are you to vote in a referendum on AV?

2.4.1 Despite reservations about the subject matter of the referendum, most respondents said that they intend to vote.
Should the referendum be on the same day as elections in Scotland and Wales?

2.4.2 Parliamentary opponents to the referendum have stressed that holding it on the same day as local and devolved elections will lead to greater turnout in regions where a ‘yes’ vote is more likely. This concern is not reflected by the ‘no’ voters amongst the wider public.

2.4.3 All groups in the sample were broadly evenly divided on the question.
2.4.4 In most regions respondents were broadly evenly divided on the appropriate timing of the referendum.

2.4.5 Scotland is the exception. A significant majority (57%) of respondents here thought that the referendum should not be held to coincide with regional and local elections. This reflects a concern that the referendum would distract politicians, the public and the media from regional issues.

2.4.6 In most regions there was marginally more support for the referendum to be held on the same day as local and regional elections than not. Only in the North and Scotland did more respondents think that the referendum should not be on the same day.

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
2.5 VOTING INTENTIONS

2.5.1 Respondents were asked how they would vote if a referendum were held tomorrow both at the beginning and at the end of the survey.

2.5.2 The survey contained factual information about how AV works and a neutral presentation of arguments that have been advanced for and against the system.\(^4\)

**How would you vote in a referendum on AV? (Before and after being given information)**

2.5.3 Before being exposed to information, responses were evenly balanced between ‘yes’ (32%) and ‘no’ (33%). After receiving factual information, the ‘no’ vote increased to 38%, suggesting that exposure to information about AV tends to convince undecided voters against it.

2.5.4 Exposure to factual information decreased the ‘would not vote’ count by 3%. This suggests that people are more likely to vote when they feel better informed.

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\(^4\) See annex A for full text of survey.

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
Voting Intentions; results by party allegiance:

2.5.5 Receiving information about AV made more respondents intend to vote against it, irrespective of party allegiance.

2.5.6 Conservative and Labour supporters showed the most substantial increases in numbers deciding to vote against AV (7% each).

2.5.7 Liberal Democrat supporters followed the same trend (4% increase in 'no' votes). However, they were anomalous (when compared to total respondents and to other party supporters) in also showing an increase in intentions to vote 'yes' (2%).

2.5.8 The increased ‘no’ vote is not necessarily an increase in support for FPTP, only an increased rejection of AV.

http://www.reconstitution.org.uk
2.6 WHAT VOTERS MEAN BY “YES” AND “NO”

2.6.1 After stating how they intend to vote in the referendum, respondents were asked to explain their choice. 1683 people (66% of the total sample) responded.

2.6.2 There were significant overlaps in the responses given for and against AV:

- Avoiding coalition government was used as an argument both in favour of AV (2% of verbal responses from those intending to vote ‘yes’) and in favour of the status quo (9% of verbal responses from those intending to vote ‘no’).

Sample comments:

AV is “less likely to produce bad coalition governments”

AV “will almost always lead to a coalition”

“AV would increase the chances of hung Parliaments, horse-trading between parties and weak coalition governments”.

In response to this statement there was a balance between respondents ‘very’ and ‘fairly’ convinced (41%) and those unconvinced (33%).

- Better representation of minority parties informed choices both in favour of AV (3%) and against it (4%).

Sample comments:

“T’m worried about the BNP winning seat”

AV “would give smaller parties a bigger voice”

- 73% of verbal responses given in favour of AV said that it was ‘fairer’ or ‘more democratic’. 10% of verbal responses against AV also cited ‘fairness’.

Sample comments:

“The current one is unfair”

“The FPTP system is fairer”

2.6.3 A vote in favour of AV is not necessarily an endorsement of AV.

- 7% of responses in favour of AV saw it only as a better alternative to no reform at all.

Sample comment:

AV “seems like the only alternative the Tories will accept”

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
2.6.4 A vote against adopting AV is not necessarily a vote in favour of FPTP:
- 48% of verbal responses against AV were content with the status quo.

Sample comment:
“FPTP tends to yield strong governments”
- 18% favoured reform but rejected the proposal for AV.

Sample comments:
“I believe in a more proportional system. AV is NOT PR”
“AV is too complicated”
- 17% rejected reform because it is too complex and expensive, not on the merits of FPTP

Sample comment:
“The timing and cost at this critical financial time”

2.6.5 Some widespread misconceptions about AV were highlighted:
- It always produces weaker governments, coalitions or hung parliaments (9% of verbal responses against AV)

Sample comment:
AV “produces weak government”
- It will prevent tactical voting (1% of verbal responses in favour of AV)

Sample comment:
AV “prevents the need for tactical voting”
- It means the winner necessarily receives 50% of the vote (3% of verbal responses in favour of AV)

Sample comment:
AV “prevents a candidate winning with less than 50% of the votes”
- It is proportional or a step towards proportional representation (5% of verbal responses in favour of AV)

Sample comment:
AV “is on its way towards a PR system”

“FPTP is unfair and unproportional. Adopting AV, although not proportional, would be a step towards a fully proportional electoral system”.

39% of respondents were either ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ convinced by this statement.
ANNEX A: Full survey text

If there were a general election held tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

- Conservative
- Labour
- Liberal Democrat
- Scottish National Party (SNP)/ Plaid Cymru
- Some other party
- Would not vote
- Don't know

Below are a number of constitutional changes that have been suggested. Which, if any, of these would you most like to have a referendum on? Please tick up to three.

- Britain’s membership of the EU
- Abolishing the monarchy
- Changing the voting system for electing MPs
- Replacing the House of Lords with an elected (or partially elected) chamber
- Setting up an English Parliament
- Scottish independence
- Fixed term Parliaments
- Equalising the size of Parliamentary constituencies
- Reducing the number of MPs
- None of these
- Don't know

How well would you say you understand the electoral system we currently use to elect MPs to Parliament?

- Very well
- Fairly well
- Not very well
- Not at all well
- Don't know

Below is a list of electoral systems that are used in various countries to elect politicians, for each one please say whether you have heard of it and whether you understand broadly how it works.

- First Past the Post (FPTP)
- Alternative Vote (AV)
- Single transferable vote (STV)
- Additional Member System (AMS)

[Options for each system: Have heard of and have a broad idea of how it works/ Have heard of, but am not sure how it works/ Have never heard of]

**The system Britain currently uses to elect Members of Parliament is called “First Past The Post” (FPTP), where voters select ONE candidate, and the one with the most votes wins.**

**It has been suggested that this system should be replaced by the Alternative Vote (AV). Voters would RANK a number of candidates from a list in order of preference. If a candidate wins more than half of the '1st preference' votes, a winner is declared. If not, the least popular candidates are progressively eliminated from the contest, and their supporters' 2nd and subsequent preferences counted and shared accordingly among the remaining candidates in successive rounds of voting. This process continues until an outright winner is declared. Electors won’t have to rank all candidates if they don’t want to and the winner won’t necessarily get more than 50% of all votes cast.**

Do you think it is a good idea to hold a referendum on whether to change the voting system?

- Good idea - the issue matters and needs to be decided one way or the other
- Bad idea - it’s a distraction from much more important issues
- Not sure

If a referendum were held tomorrow and the question was "Do you want the United Kingdom to adopt the 'alternative vote' system instead of the current 'first past the post' system for electing Members of Parliament to the House of Commons?", how would you vote?

- I would vote in favour of adopting the Alternative Vote instead of FPTP.
- I would vote against adopting the Alternative Vote instead of FPTP.
- I wouldn't vote
- Don't know

In the previous question you said you would vote in favour of AV, why is that? / In the previous question you said you would vote against AV, why is that?

And on a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being certain not to vote and 10 being very certain to vote, how likely would you be to vote in a referendum on whether Britain should adopt the Alternative Vote?

1 - Certain not to vote ..2, 3... 10 - Certain to vote, Don't know

**The coalition government are planning to hold a referendum on Britain adopting the Alternative Vote on the 5th May 2011, the same day as the local elections and elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly.**
Some people have said that holding the referendum on the same day as the Scottish, Welsh and local elections is a bad idea, as it would make some parts of the country more likely to participate than others, and would mean there would not be a chance to properly debate all the different issues. Others have said that holding the referendum on the same day as other elections would save a lot of money, as polling station staff would not need to be paid twice.

Do you think the referendum on AV should or should not be held on the same day as the local, Scottish and Welsh elections?

- Should be held on the same day
- Should not be held on the same day
- Don't know

As well as the referendum on the Alternative Vote, the government is also planning to reduce the number of MPs and equalise the size of constituencies, so all MPs represent roughly the same number of electors. Do you think the referendum should or should not also ask about these changes?

- Should – these are important issues that should also be decided by referendum
- Should not – these are not as important as the change to the method of voting, and would unnecessarily complicate the referendum
- Don’t know

AV is not a proportional system and some people have suggested that the referendum should offer more choices of electoral system, giving the option of a proportional representation system such as the Single Transferable Vote alongside FPTP and AV. Do you think the referendum should offer more options?

- Yes, it should offer a wider range of systems
- No, there should be a straight choice between AV and FPTP
- Don’t know

Who do you think should decide what options are offered in the referendum?

- Parliament
- A independent commission
- A ‘citizens’ jury’ drawn from a cross-section of voters
- Don’t know

If there was a referendum offering the choice of FPTP, AV or Proportional Representation, how would you vote?

- I would vote in favour of switching to the Alternative Vote
- I would vote in favour of keeping first-past-the-post
- I would vote in favour of switching to Proportional Representation
- I wouldn't vote
- Don't know

Here are some things that people have said an electoral system should deliver, please look at the list and say how important, if at all, you consider each factor to be.

- Proportionality - the number of MPs each party wins should be in proportion to the total vote they get in the country
- Decisiveness - a electoral system should tend to give the most popular party an overall majority of MPs so they can form a strong government
- Constituency link - an electoral system should be based around single-member constituencies, so each area has its own local MP for people to turn to
- Simplicity - an electoral system should be simple and straightforward so everyone can understand it
- Political empathy – the system should be built on larger, multi-member constituencies, so that most voters could turn for help to an MP from the party they support
- Responsiveness - an electoral system should give people the chance to kick an unpopular government out of office
- Legitimacy – an electoral system should produce results that the voter can see are logical and not open to question.

[Options for each feature: Very important/ Fairly important/ Fairly unimportant / Very unimportant/ Don't know]

Below are some arguments that people have made in favour or against switching to the alternative vote. For each one, please say how convincing an argument you find it.

- The Alternative Vote would make it more likely that every MP had the support of 50% of people expressing a valid preference
- FPTP is an outdated system built for a country with just two political parties, we need to update our system to reflect the multi-party system we now have
- FPTP is unfair and unproportional. Adopting AV, although not proportional, would be a step towards a fully proportional electoral system
- First Past the post is straightforward - the candidate who gets the most votes becomes the Member of Parliament
- The referendum and the change to the electoral system would be expensive and unnecessary when the government should be concentrating on the state of the economy
- The Alternative Vote would allow people to cast their first preference for the party they really supported without wasting their vote
- Under AV, someone's third or fourth preference could count just as much as someone else’s first preference.
- AV would increase the chances of hung Parliaments, horsetrading between parties and weak coalition governments

http://www.re-constitution.org.uk
• AV is not a proper proportional system, and sometimes can be even less proportional than FPTP
• Unlike most fully proportional systems, AV would retain constituencies so people would still have a local MP
• AV would increase the chances of a hung Parliament and therefore make parties more likely to work together for the good of the country
• AV is a complicated system that can produce strange results – under AV there are even some cases where voting for a rival party would increase your own party’s chance of winning

[Options for each statement: Very convincing/ Fairly convincing/ Not very convincing/ Not convincing at all/ Don’t know]

**Most experts expect the Liberal Democrats to win more seats under the Alternative Vote system. Some people have predicted that AV would also help the Labour party, as they would get the second preferences of Liberal Democrat voters. Other people think AV may help the Conservative party, as supporters of the coalition parties give second preferences to their coalition partner.**

From what you know and anything you have read or seen, which parties do you think would do better under the Alternative Vote system?

• It would usually help Labour and the Liberal Democrats
• It would usually help the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats
• It would usually only help the Liberal Democrats
• None of these
• Don’t know

Now, taking into account all the arguments you have read and the issues discussed in this survey, how do you think you would vote in a referendum tomorrow on the question of "Do you want the United Kingdom to adopt the 'alternative vote' system instead of the current 'first past the post' system for electing Members of Parliament to the House of Commons?"

• I would vote in favour of switching to the Alternative Vote
• I would vote in favour of keeping first-past-the-post
• I wouldn't vote
• Don’t know