

## Grasping AV: The ultimate electoral challenge

By [Tom Rigby](#)

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It's almost over. And by the time this goes to print, it will be. So, in advance, well done to the NO campaign and commiserations to the YES brigade. Never have so few misrepresented so much to so many.

In the last few months, both campaigns have descended into farce. On the YES side, 'ordinary Joes' shout through a megaphone at an understandably bewildered octogenarian, in a TV ad that would patronise a 3 year old. On the NO side, posters suggesting soldiers and new-born babies would die, compounded by images of defeated boxers reigning victorious have condescended to the public with such breathtaking sensationalism as to make the *Daily Mail* cringe.

Actually, that's not strictly true. True to form the DM, paragon of even-handedness and tolerance, produced some fantastically misleading and just plain false anti-AV propaganda. Director of its NO campaign Matthew Elliott revealed that 'Even the Independent Electoral Commission, who are overseeing this referendum, struggle even to explain the alternative vote'. The article also suggested that 'the explanation of the current voting system is achieved in 59 words. By contrast, the passage on AV takes 351'.

Well, let's test that out and see if your tiny brain can grasp this intricately complex concept. First things first, can you count? Excellent. (Don't worry if not, most of the country hasn't been credited with that ability either). Let's begin.

'List as many candidates as you want to vote for in the order of your preference. You can list only one if you wish'.

Well, I make that 24 words. Although, to be fair, I don't have a PhD in Mathematics.

Incidentally, that's exactly what you would need though if David Gower's glib patriotism is anything to go by. The cricket commentator, championing the FPTP system analogously to cricket, explained that he is used to "a system in sport - in cricket specifically - where if you win, you win, and it's as simple as that". Not quite such a simple system if a match is called off for rain though, in which case the Duckworth-Lewis method is applied:  $Z(u,0,\lambda) = ZoF(w) \lambda nF(w)+1 \{1 - exp(-bu/[\lambda nF(w)F(w)])\}$ . "It's as simple as that" with the FPTP system, apparently.

It's this constant reaffirmation that the AV method could only possibly be understood by elite rocket scientists wielding a super-computer that has tarnished the whole campaign for both sides. Cameron's constant rhetoric asserts that FPTP is "fair, simple and decisive". Yet in the last 39 years, parties that have come second in the vote but first in the number of seats have twice come to power. For the best recent example, look no further than the 2000 American presidential elections: despite Al Gore polling one million more votes than Bush, George Dubblya still got in. Hardly a shining example of the fairness of

FPTP...

As for it allowing unpopular parties to be booted out more easily, you need only look at the support for New Labour during their 13-year tenure – it dropped to 35 per cent – to realise it’s just not as “simple” as that. Even better, try watching an animated John Snow on election night with his techni-coloured political swing board, explaining how fractional swings of 1 per cent have massive knock on effects through majorities and hung parliaments. Simple indeed.

Not to be topped though, the YES campaign has done its best to match the outrageously excessive crying-baby-covered-in-placenta ad by going to the opposite end of the heart-string tugging spectrum. Set to a dark and gloomy backing track lifted straight out of an X factor audition, the YES campaign wheels out a WWII veteran who explains in an emotively quivering voice how, despite fighting Nazis for his country, he “may as well have died”. Let’s be very clear here: the man is a hero for fighting in WWII for his country, and has every right to his opinion. But your candidate not winning is not the same as a bullet to the head, and such spectacularly OTT campaigning is no better than the YES campaign’s poster baby. Or the defeated boxer miraculously, and impossible even by tenuous analogy, winning the match. Or the octogenarian politician hamming it up to the point of caricature.

The absurd sensationalism of both campaigns reflects an age where political rhetoric overshadows the truth. Yet (as difficult as it to believe on recent evidence) for every Gillian Duffy in the country, there are far more people who do know where eastern Europeans come from, and who can understand the debate without having it wrapped up in patronizing hyperbole.

The result may be a foregone conclusion, but it may have been very different had both sides of the debate given the public the information, respect and trust to make their own informed choice in the first place.



## One comment

Anon

7 May '11 at 1:42 pm

‘The King is sovereign, and if you disagree we chop of your head’

...takes a single sentence to explain. Much simpler than FPTP. Let’s swap to that.

It’s much cheaper than democracy too; none of these expensive referenda to worry about. No need for an electronic voting system.

Great.

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