

European
Elections monitorfrom **Corinne Deloy**
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7 days before
the poll

The turnout will be decisive for the referendum on the voting method in the UK on 5th May

On 5th May 46 million Brits are being invited to answer "yes" or "no" to the following question: "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?" Britons will decide by referendum, a rare event in the UK.

First past the post vs. alternative vote

In the first past the post system the candidate who wins the greatest number of votes in a constituency is elected (whether this is 80% or 30% of the vote). The alternative voting system offers the electorate the possibility of ranking the candidates standing in the election by order of preference but still within a single winner constituency. The voter does not have to make this choice however and he/she can also choose to give his/her vote to one candidate only. Counting takes place as follows: voting slips are ranked according to first choices. The candidate who wins an absolute majority of first choices is declared elected. If no candidate manages to win 50% + 1 in terms of the first choice votes the person who has won the lowest number of votes is eliminated and his/her votes are shared out amongst the other candidates according to the number of second choices won by each of them. This operation is continued until a candidate wins an absolute majority of votes and as a consequence is declared elected.

Proponents of a change in the voting method say that the alternative vote would enable a fairer representation of the electorate than the present system in which voters hesitate in giving their vote to a "small" party often believing that this is a "wasted" vote in the first past the post system. Those who defend the upkeep of this system stress that if it is abandoned it will make it harder for a party to achieve an absolute majority and would therefore lead to a multiplication of government coalitions. The first past the post system does indeed

make it possible to keep extremist parties down and to protect the UK from the rise of populism, a phenomenon that is affecting all of Europe. "The alternative vote is not British," declared the present Foreign Minister, William Hague adding, "the rest of the world will think we've gone mad. Our system has been copied by many; including the USA. It would not be logical to change it for a system that is not clear, more expensive and which would lead to many problems," he added.

Finally it seems that the electoral results that come from the alternative vote would not be very different from those obtained in the present system.

A certain amount of confusion

The electoral campaign started in a certain amount of confusion. This referendum is already unusual in that the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats in office have agreed to disagree! Prime Minister David Cameron (Conservative) is defending the "no" to the alternative vote whilst Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg (Lib-Dem) supports the "yes". The head of government sees "no reason to change a system that makes it possible to get rid of governments which do not satisfy the electorate as was the case in 1979 and 1997." He is protesting against an "obscure, unfair, costly" system which allows "a candidate that came third to win the election," and rejects the idea that the alternative vote would restore British confidence in politics again. The Prime Minister has however stood back from criticism of the Liberal-Democrat leader: "I

am not leading the Conservative "no" campaign." Nick Clegg has played all of his cards in the success of the referendum. "The "no" campaign is supported by fascists and extremists," he declared. The British National Party (BNP), just like the Communist Party is against the alternative voting system. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and Sinn Fein (SF) are both in favour of the alternative vote.

Although the Tories and the Lib-Dems disagree over the change in the voting system, Prime Minister David Cameron shared the stage with former Minister and eternal Tory enemy, Lord John Reid (Labour), who are both defending the first past the post system. "John and I do not agree on much but we absolutely agree on one point: the alternative vote would be bad for the country," declared the head of government. "Not only is this system bad but it would be outrageous to change the electoral system to help a party which goes against the citizens' right to an equal vote," added John Reid. "If you lose an election, you have to sit tight and work harder to win the support of the electorate. You can't tell them: ok we're going to change the rules of the game and move the goal posts," he added.

Officially the Labour Party supports the change in the voting method even though it remains divided over the issue. John Prescott, Deputy Prime Minister (1997-2007) and David Blunkett, former Minister are both campaigning for the "no". Hence there is a certain amount of confusion amongst the main opposition party. "This referendum is not a vote on Nick Clegg, on David Cameron or even on myself, it is an opportunity to have better policy in the UK," repeats the Labour leader, Ed Miliband, who is trying dissuade Labour from punishing the Deputy Prime Minister by voting "no". Nick Clegg has indeed been losing ground in the popularity polls since his u-turn on university fees (whilst he had declared that he would oppose their increase, he did in fact support the reform thereby enabling universities to set fees at £9000 per year (10,730€) in compensation for the State's progressive withdrawal from higher education.

The "no" ahead in the polls

Although the polls differ with regard to the final referendum result they do all forecast however a general trend: except if there is last minute change the British

are due to say "no" to the suggested modification to the voting method.

According to the most recent poll by YouGov 44% of the British are about to reject the alternative vote on 5th May whilst 37% say they are in favour of it. Opposition to giving up the first past the post system is even greater when those interviewed were asked again after listening to a detailed explanation of both voting methods: 45% say they support the "no" and 33% support the "yes". Those who want to retain the present system say they are "satisfied with first past the post" and say that this is the main reason behind their vote" (56% of the answers). Proponents of the alternative vote qualify it as being "fairer" (54%). YouGov shows that regional differences in turnout may be decisive for the final result. Finally voting is closely linked to partisan support: Conservative sympathisers are against any change in the voting scheme, those close to the Lib-Dems support it and Labour sympathisers are divided.

The poll by ICM for the daily The Guardian reveals that 58% of the British support the upkeep of the present voting system and that 42% of them want to see the alternative vote replace the first past the post system. 23% of those interviewed have still not decided and do not know whether they will go and vote on 5th May next. The polls shows that three quarters of the Conservatives are about to vote "no" just like a majority of Labour sympathisers. Young people are more in favour of a change in voting method, pensioners want to retain the present system.

"Most of the British are against any change in the voting method but it is not certain that an adequate number will turn out to vote on 5th May to prevent it," said David Cameron who greatly fears low turnout. Indeed this would be advantageous to the "yes" whose proponents quite logically more motivated. The Conservatives are also emphasising the fact that the final decision may belong to the Scots, Welsh and Irish who are also being called to ballot to appoint their regional representatives on 5th May. According to the polls the Scots are amongst the most in favour of the alternative vote: 52% are about to vote "yes" to the change in the voting system and 33% say will reject it.

The Tories point out that the country may experience major constitutional change even though a low number

of Britons turn out to vote. The House of Lords, the Upper Chamber in the British parliament vainly tried to set an obligatory minimum threshold (at least 40% of those registered) for the referendum to be deemed valid.

A victory of the "no" would of course be a failure for Nick Clegg and all the more serious since the Deputy Prime Minister made the change of voting method his party's number one objective and the main reason for his participation in government. The Lib-Dem base may wonder whether it is worth continuing work with the Conservatives if the "no" vote wins. *"Lib-Dem MPs are experiencing a slow-motion car crash. They have two options: either they jump out of the moving car or they snatch the wheel from the driver,"* analyses political science professor at Sussex University, Tim Bale. *"The government coalition is in place for five years,"* repeats Nick Clegg. A "yes" victory would be a setback for the Prime Minister. *"If David Cameron loses*

his wager he will really be forced to accept a voting system that would make it more difficult for the Tories to govern alone," indicates Tim Bale.

A "yes" victory would undoubtedly push the Lib-Dems to ask for more quite rapidly, i.e. the use of the proportional system.

Divided, the Labour Party will not therefore be a total loser on 5th May next. Ed Miliband is standing as a proponent of the "yes" vote, a position which may prove difficult in the end. Labour should however emerge as the victor in the local elections that will take place on the same day as the referendum on the voting method. Most of the seats that are up for election were lost by Labour in the last elections on 3rd May 2007, the latter should therefore improve their results.

If the "yes" vote wins the alternative voting system will enter into force in the next general elections in Britain, planned for 2015.

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