

Dishonesty of the alternative vote system (AV)

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Under the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 a referendum is to be held on 5 May 2011 on 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?*

It is claimed by its supporters that the alternative vote (AV) system is better than the first past the post system because it ensures that the successful candidate receives at least half the votes cast. I shall now demonstrate that this is not truly so.

Suppose there is a by-election under AV for an imaginary constituency where there are three candidates named Cameron (Conservative), Clegg (Liberal Democrat) and Ed Milliband (Labour). Clegg is declared elected under AV. The votes (that is first preferences) are:

Cameron 10,000
Clegg 9,000
Milliband 8, 000

The total votes are 27,000, so to get at least half of them the winner needs 13,500. As Cameron has less than this, AV swings into action. Milliband is deleted. The voters for Milliband gave Cameron 3,000 2nd preferences and Clegg 5,000 2nd preferences. These are added to their original votes, so that the result is:

Cameron 13,000
Clegg 14,000

Clegg has more than half the votes cast so is declared the winner. Under first past the post (the present system) Cameron would have been the winner. AV has delivered a dishonest result because it has given second preferences an equal value with first preferences. They do not in fact have an equal value because each is a second-best choice. Indeed they do not have any value. Every one of the electors whose second preferences were counted in really wanted some other candidate elected rather than their second preference.

In any situation where a person is to be chosen from three candidates we use the first past the post system because that is the natural one. If a new chairman, chief executive officer or other office holder is to be chosen by a group of people we use that system. It would be unheard of to bother with second preferences and these are never considered. Why start making them of crucial importance just in politics?

References

None