

BULLETIN

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The UK Referendum on Electoral Reform

Gareth Chappell

On 5 May, the UK held a national referendum on whether to replace the existing First-Past-The-Post system for electing Members of Parliament to the House of Commons with the Alternative Vote system. The general public voted overwhelmingly in favour of preserving FPTP. The Liberal Democrats are the biggest losers of the “no” vote, particularly party leader, Nick Clegg. The outcome of the referendum is bittersweet for Conservative party leader and incumbent Prime Minister, David Cameron. The result of the referendum is likely to undermine the stability of the coalition government, though it is unlikely to collapse.

The last UK general election, held in May 2010 resulted in a hung Parliament (e.g., one in which no political party has an overall majority) and a coalition government comprising the Conservative party and the Liberal Democrats. Electoral reform was a decisive factor in the coalition negotiations that brought the two political parties to power in the wake of the 2010 vote. The Lib Dems have long since called for a change in the way Members of Parliament are elected to the House of Commons (i.e., the democratically elected lower house of the Parliament). At present, MPs are elected using the First-Past-The-Post system in which a candidate with a relative majority of the votes cast in their constituency is elected to the Commons. The Lib Dems argue that FPTP is not representative and have long since supported a move to a more proportional voting system, preferably the Single Transferable Vote system. Naturally, the Lib Dems would be the biggest winners of such a change. If the 2010 general election would have been held under STV for example, research suggests that the Lib Dems would have gained an additional 105 seats in the Commons, boosting their total to 162 (out of a possible 650) and thus, increasing the likelihood of hung parliaments and their chances of taking office.

After protracted coalition negotiations, the Tories, who have long since supported the preservation of FPTP conceded a legally binding national referendum on electoral reform to the Lib Dems. The referendum was not on whether to replace FPTP with STV however, but rather the Alternative Vote system. Under AV, voters rank candidates in their constituency in order of preference. If a candidate receives an absolute majority of first-preference votes then they are elected to the Commons. If no candidate receives an absolute majority, then the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated, and their supporter's second-preferences are allotted to the remaining candidates. This process continues until a candidate wins an absolute majority. The Tories agreed to AV as it would appear to have little impact on the result of national elections. Further, if they wanted to take office, which they desperately did after over a decade in opposition, they had no choice but to offer a referendum on AV. The Labour Party, with whom the Lib Dems also could have gone into government (although other parties would have had to join them in order to achieve a majority in the Commons), had already pledged a referendum on AV as part of their election manifesto. While AV was certainly not the Lib Dems preferred choice, a “yes” vote to AV was considered a staging post towards a more proportionally representative electoral system.

The Tories and the Lib Dems agreed to disagree on the issue at hand and subsequently, split into opposing camps during the build-up to the vote. The Tories supported the “no” to AV campaign, while the Lib Dems backed the “yes” campaign (Labour was split over the issue with party leader Ed Milliband supporting a change in the electoral system while some senior party members backed

the “no” campaign). The referendum was finally held on 5 May 2011. The UK general public voted 68% to 32% in favour of the “no” to AV campaign and against a change in the electoral system.

The Potential Consequences. While the “no” to AV vote has few consequences for UK elections at a national level, it does have several political repercussions for the two governing parties and the coalition government as a whole. Clearly, the biggest losers of the “no” vote are the Lib Dems, particularly the party’s leader, Nick Clegg. The main justification for the party going into government with the Conservatives was the promise of electoral reform, and with it the prospect of boosting the party’s political power in the long-term. The decision to join forces with the Tories was hugely unpopular among Lib Dem supporters at the time and has remained so since, following agreement on several emotive policies in government. No policy was perhaps more controversial than the party’s apparent U-turn on the issue of university tuition fees. The “no” vote on AV will surely leave the Lib Dems feeling like they have little to show for the sacrifices made. What’s more, a “no” vote may have taken electoral reform off the political agenda for the medium-term and, in turn, undermined the prospects of achieving the party’s principal goal of a more proportionally representative electoral system. Taken together, this may prompt some party members to question Nick Clegg’s leadership. However, a leadership challenge is unlikely in the short-term. There appears to be no obvious successor. The recent actions of Lib Dem Chris Huhne suggest that he may be positioning himself for such a contest. In an apparent attempt to distance himself from both the Conservatives and the coalition, he has been outspoken over the issue of AV, reportedly confronting Tory leader and incumbent Prime Minister, David Cameron during a Cabinet meeting on 3 May. Nonetheless, his leadership credentials are tainted. He is complicit in the coalition government, having brokered the agreement with the Conservatives on behalf of the Lib Dems and subsequently assumed a prominent position in Cabinet. The “no” vote may also lead many in the party to question the value of remaining in the coalition. Still, it is unlikely that the Lib Dems will leave the coalition in the short-term as the party would likely suffer a heavy defeat in the resultant general election. According to YouGov opinion polls, the party’s popularity has plummeted since the May 2010 general election from 23% to just 10%. The results of recent council elections in England and Parliament elections in Scotland serve as a good indication of what could lie in store for the Lib Dems. In England, they lost 695 of their 1790 Councillors up for election and nine of their 19 Councils after 270 of 279 Councils declared. In Scotland, they lost 12 of their 17 seats in the Scottish Parliament. Instead, the Lib Dems are more likely to remain in government, hoping that their efforts may eventually translate into electoral reward, especially if the economy picks up. At the same time, they are likely to adopt a more nuisance approach to the coalition, making sure their grievances with the Tories are well known and well understood by the electorate.

The outcome of the referendum is bittersweet for Tory leader and incumbent Prime Minister David Cameron. On the one hand, the result will have served to consolidate his position as Tory leader as well as reinforced the cohesion of his party as a whole. Many Tory backbenchers (i.e., an MP who does not hold governmental office) believe that he lost the last general election and gave too much away in coalition negotiations with the Lib Dems, including the referendum on electoral reform. Consequently, a “yes” vote to AV may have led many backbenchers to view him as a perennial loser and revolt, especially as in their eyes a “yes” vote may have also undermined the prospect of the party achieving a Commons majority in the future. On the other hand, the “no” vote undermines the stability of his government. As noted above, the Lib Dems may adopt a more nuisance approach to working with their coalition partners, voicing concern when and where appropriate. They may also stall on certain legislation inside the coalition agreement, especially if it is of some importance to the Tories and oppose any new legislation that is not in their interest. The manner in which the referendum was fought is also likely to undermine the working dynamics of the coalition as many Tory and Lib Dem government ministers traded verbal blows in the run-up to the vote. In order to soothe relations within the coalition, the Prime Minister may be forced to make some concessions, although this may be resisted by some Tory backbenchers. He may begin by pushing forward efforts to reform the House of Lords (the upper house of the Parliament, the composition of which is not chosen by democratic election but rather by inheritance, by appointment or by ecclesiastical role within the established church).