

## Historians brand proposals for AV voting reform 'a threat to democracy'

By [Jason Groves](#)

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Scrapping Britain's first-past-the-post voting system would be 'profoundly un-British' and undermine democracy, leading historians warned yesterday.

In an unprecedented move, 25 of the country's foremost historians cautioned of the dangers of introducing the Alternative Vote system, which will be put to a national referendum on May 5.

The eminent group included the TV historian David Starkey and the bestselling authors Simon Sebag-Montefiore, Niall Ferguson, Amanda Foreman, Andrew Roberts and Antony Beevor.





**Anti-reform: Historian Dr David Starkey, left, and best-selling author Anthony Beevor signed the letter which described AV as 'a threat to democracy'**

Agreement on the AV referendum was a key factor in persuading the Liberal Democrats to join the Coalition last year.

Under Britain's traditional first-past-the-post system, the candidate who receives the most votes is elected. Under AV, voters would have to rank candidates in order of preference.

If no candidate achieved 50 per cent or more of the vote, the one with the fewest votes would be eliminated and their votes redistributed according to second preferences. This process would continue until one candidate achieved 50 per cent.

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The 25 historians who signed the open letter include:

- **Professor Antony Beevor** – writer on 20th century military history and visiting professor at Birkbeck, University of London.
- **David Starkey** – TV presenter and writer on the Tudors, and Honorary Fellow of Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge University.
- **Simon Sebag-Montefiore** – writer on Russian history.
- **Alison Weir** – best-selling writer on Tudor and medieval history.
- **Philip Ziegler** – former diplomat and historical writer.
- **Professor Niall Ferguson** – financial expert, author and professor of history at Harvard University.
- **Dr Andrew Roberts** – military historian and biographer.

Supporters claim the system would ensure that all MPs had been backed by at least half of their constituents.

But critics point out it would also mean that some votes would be counted several times.

Supporters of fringe parties, such as the far-right BNP, are likely to have their second, and perhaps third, preferences counted, while those backing mainstream parties may be counted only once.

In an open letter yesterday historians warned that the proposed changes would undermine 'the principle that each person's vote is equal, regardless of wealth, gender, race or creed... a principle upon which reform of our parliamentary democracy still stands'.

They added: 'For the first time in centuries we face the unfair idea that one citizen's vote might be worth six times that of another. It will be a tragic consequence if those votes belong to supporters of extremist and non-serious parties.'

They pointed out that the last attempt to introduce AV to Britain came in 1931 when it was opposed by Sir Winston Churchill, who argued elections would be determined by 'the most worthless votes given for the most worthless candidate'.

Churchill warned: 'An element of blind chance and accident will enter far more largely into our electoral decisions than even before, and respect for Parliament and Parliamentary processes will decline lower than it is at present.'



Andrew Roberts, biographer of Sir Winston Churchill, said the wartime leader's opposition to AV had been well-founded.

He added: 'When some of the foremost historians in the country and the greatest Prime Minister of the 20th century all agree on something then it would be worthwhile people listening and thinking before they make a profoundly un-British change to the constitution.'

Amanda Foreman, author of *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*, said the introduction of AV would take Britain back to the 18th century, when some people were entitled to many more votes than others, and lead to MPs being selected 'via a weird horsetrading system'.

She added: 'AV is in no way a modern way of voting. It was rejected in 1931 for very good reasons and there is no reason to bring it in now.'

'It is a clapped-out form of voting that is only used in three countries – Australia, Fiji and Papua New Guinea – and from what I understand two of those countries don't like it.'

'It is a non-transparent form of voting – and this country, for 250 years, has been fighting for transparent forms of voting.'

'The idea that one man, one woman can vote and see that vote count is a very powerful form of democracy.'

In a further blow to the AV campaign, the former Social Democratic Party leader David Owen came out against the new system yesterday. Lord Owen said he continued to support proportional representation but warned the AV system could produce 'wildly disproportionate' results.

## **BUT THE BOSSES NO ONE'S HEARD OF CLAIM 'AV' WILL BE GOOD FOR UK**

A group of businessmen claimed in an open letter yesterday that reform of Britain's voting system would be 'good for business'.

But while a rival letter opposing the Alternative Vote was backed by some of Britain's best-known historians, the 11 businessmen in favour of reform were hardly household names.

The best known supporter was James Palumbo, co-founder of London's Ministry of Sound nightclub.

The business letter was organised by the lobbyist Roland Rudd, a close friend of Lord Mandelson.

Other supporters include Sir Stephen Wall, a former adviser on Europe to Tony Blair. The letter claimed AV would 'force politicians to work harder' as they would be required to court constituents who were not natural supporters.

And they said AV would 'give greater legitimacy to MPs' as they would have to achieve the backing of at least half their constituents. At present, some can be elected with the support of just 30 per cent of their constituents.

The 11 businessmen who signed the letter are Lord Aldington, Russell Chambers, Guy Dawson, Terry Duddy, Lord Jay of Ewelme, Patrick O'Sullivan, James Palumbo, Vijay Patel, Roland Rudd, Lord Sharman of Redlynch and Sir Stephen Wall.