The AV versus FPP debate has become very acrimonious.  Of course it has.  Two-option debates usually do.  Furthermore, the two-option majority votes with which these debates come to an end are often hopelessly inaccurate reflections of the popular will.

In 1978, the people of Guyana  held a referendum to abolish constitutional referendums: 71% voted and 98% said ‘yes’; democrats democratically deciding to be less democratic.  Worse than that: in a 43% turnout in 1804, 99% of the French voted  for Napoleon to be emperor; democrats voting for a dictator.  Then in 1934 in Italy and Germany respectively, 99% of 99% and 93% of  92% approved of fascism and naziism. In extreme cases – examples come from Chile, Haiti, Iraq and Romania – levels of support for the motion put have reached 100%.  Finally, to take another bizarre instance, in three separate referendums, the Iranian electorate supported first Mossadegh’s socialism, then the Shah’s extreme right wing politics, and finally the Islamic Republic: in all three polls, the level of support was 99%.  The outcome of a referendum, then, will not always reflect “the will of the people”.  More often than not, it reflects the will of those who set the question.

The anomaly in our own debate on electoral reform is that, while many politicians have their differences on electoral systems, on decision-making, almost all of them support the most inaccurate measure of collective opinion ever invented: the two-option majority vote.  One exception was Alex Salmond: in 1997, the SNP wanted a three-option referendum.  Now that he is in power, however, now that *he* can set the question, he’s like the rest of them: he supports the two-option vote.

Multi-option questions are often reduced to straight dichotomies, by those who wish to control the agenda.  Thatcher did it over poll tax, so policies like local income tax and land tax were just not allowed.  Even when pluralism is permitted, as was the case in 2003 in debates on reforming the House of Lords, MPs still used majority votes, five of them, (and lost the lot).

Many countries have managed to have multi-option referendums: Benin, Finland, Singapore and Uruguay, for example, had three-option polls; Australia held a four-option ballot; in 1992, on the subject of electoral reform, New Zealand held a five-option referendum; Guam had a six-option vote, with one extra blank option in case someone(s) wanted a different policy; and the record belongs to the North Mariana Islands, which held a nine-option referendum.

In the UK, though, everything is always reduced to a dichotomy.  Newfoundland was allowed a three-option referendum in 1948, but nothing has changed in Westminster.  That politicians should like majority voting comes as no surprise.  What is really odd is the fact that countless academics and journalists, and even activists for electoral reform, do not pause to debate multi-option voting in decision-making.  They support majority rule, which is perhaps fair enough.  What they do not admit, however, is the simple paradox: you cannot *identify* the majority will by means of a majority vote, not least because somebody must have identified it already if it is to be included on the ballot paper!  You can *ratify* perhaps; but you cannot *identify*.

Accordingly, before the advocates of PR and many others bemoan the result of the forthcoming referendum, perhaps thought should be given to the hypothetical question of whether or not a different answer might have been the result if instead a more accurate measure of *vox populi* had been used.  After all, asking a PR supporter if they want AV or FPP is like asking a vegetarian if they would prefer beef or lamb; and the collective measure cannot be accurate if the individual measures are askew.  The answer to the other hypothesis – would the debate have been more civilised? – is an undoubted ‘yes’.