

New Labour, New Tactical Voting?

The Causes and Consequences of Tactical Voting in the 1997 British General Election

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Abstract

In the 1997 election Labour secured a landslide and the Liberal Democrats a revival, in terms of seats, but not in votes. One reason appears to have been an increased incidence of anti-Conservative tactical voting. This paper examines both the election results and British Election Study survey data to estimate how much tactical voting increased in 1997 and why. The two sources both suggest that there was a small but significant increase in anti-Conservative tactical voting. This happened primarily because of changes in the appeal of the parties to voters and the impact of this in particular on Liberal Democrats. Compared with five years previously, Liberal Democrats were more likely to favour Labour and dislike the Conservatives; as a result they were more willing to lend tactical support to Labour.

Introduction

The outcome of the 1997 election broke a number of records. More Labour MPs (419) were elected than ever before, surpassing even the party's victory in 1945. More Liberal Democrat MPs (46) were elected than at any time since 1929, more than doubling their numbers compared with 1992 and giving the party the kind of breakthrough of which the former SDP/Liberal Alliance had dreamed. Meanwhile the Conservatives were left with fewer seats (165) than at any time since the Liberal landslide of 1906.

Yet if we look at the outcome in terms of votes neither Labour's nor the Liberal Democrats' performance was at all historic. At 44.4%, Labour's share of the vote was lower than at any election between 1945 and 1966. Its lead over the Conservatives was less than that secured by the Conservatives themselves over Labour in 1983. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats suffered their third successive drop in support. At 17.2% their performance was the second worst since the party resumed fighting elections on a nation-wide basis in 1974.

Evidently the Labour landslide and Liberal Democrat revival of 1997 were as much a product of the operation of the single member plurality electoral system as an indicator of the strength of their electoral support. Indeed, if the movement of votes since 1992 had been uniform across the country as a whole, Labour would have secured a majority of 131 rather than 179. The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, would have won just 28 seats rather than 46, leaving the Conservatives with no less 208 seats rather than 165. One reason for this divergence appears to have been the degree of tactical (otherwise known as strategic) voting. A significant number of voters appear to

have been willing to support whichever of the main opposition parties was best able to defeat the local Conservative.

Tactical voting between Labour and the Liberal Democrats is central then to understanding and explaining the outcome of the 1997 general election. Never before has new tactical voting appeared to have had such a substantial impact on the outcome. Moreover, the analysis of tactical voting has significant implications for our understanding of theories of voter choice and party strategy, in Britain and elsewhere. This paper therefore sets about two tasks. First, it establishes whether there was any change in tactical voting between 1992 and 1997 by examining both the pattern of constituency election results and individual-level survey data from the 1997 British Election Study. In particular, we assess whether these two very different sources confirm that there was an increase in the amount of tactical switching between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Second, we consider what might account for any observed changes by evaluating the plausibility of several theories of tactical voting, theories which emphasise the importance of changes in the motivation of voters, party mobilisation, the information environment, and party competition respectively. We conclude by considering briefly some of the implications of our results.

Data

This paper draws on two distinct sources of information. The first is analysis of the aggregate election results at constituency-level, which allows us to assess the possible consequences of tactical voting in the context of the variable electoral geography of Britain. The second is analysis of individual-level survey data from the 1997 British Election Cross-section Study, which allows

us to examine tactical motivations directly rather than inferring their presence from constituency level effects. This survey is the largest and most representative of the various studies conducted as part of the 1997 British Election Study and is therefore best-suited for examining a relatively rare phenomenon (see Galbraith and Rae 1989; Heath *et al.* 1991; Johnston and Pattie 1991; Evans 1994) such as tactical voting.

The British Election Cross-section Study involved face-to-face computer-assisted personal interviews with a random British sample of approximately 3,000 adults (plus an extra boosted sample in Scotland). The interview length was one hour, conducted face-to-face using computer-assisted interviewing; 85% of respondents also returned a self-completion supplement. Approximately 90% of the fieldwork was completed within six weeks or so of the election. Of the 6,540 issued addresses taken from the Postal Address Files, 5,814 were found to contain a person who was eligible for interview (selected via a Kish grid), and 62% of these were successfully interviewed. A total of 882 of these respondents were in Scotland. The final achieved sample after weighting for within household selection probability and the Scottish over-sample was 3615.

The Incidence of Tactical Voting in 1997

The first indication that we examine of the incidence of tactical voting in 1997 is the pattern of the constituency results.¹ Table 1, which analyses the average change in party support between 1992 and 1997 according to the tactical situation in a constituency², strongly suggests that anti-Conservative tactical voting at least occurred on a significant scale. The table distinguishes six situations:-

1. *Lab-Con Safe Seats*: Those seats where Labour were first and the Conservatives second in 1992, but where the Conservatives won at least a third of the vote. This is in effect our control group against which we compare what happened in other situations. Given both the outcome in these seats in 1992 and the evidence of the opinion polls that Labour was well ahead nationally, there is little reason why people should vote tactically in these seats as the outcome locally did not appear to be in doubt. We exclude those seats where the Conservatives won less than a third of the vote in 1992 because Conservative support systematically fell by less than the national average where they were previously weaker (Curtice and Steed, 1997).

2. *Con-Lab Seats*: Constituencies where the Conservatives were first and Labour second in 1992. These are seats where voters who were concerned to ensure the defeat of the local Conservative would have reason to support Labour rather than the Liberal Democrats.

3. *LibDem-Con Seats*: Constituencies where the Liberal Democrats were first and the Conservatives were second in 1992, and where the Conservatives won more than a third of the vote. Although already in Liberal Democrat hands, given that the polls put Liberal Democrat support nationally lower than it was in 1992, Labour supporters in these seats might feel they needed to vote Liberal Democrat in order to keep the Conservatives out.

4. *Con-LibDem Marginals*: Seats where the Conservatives were first and the Liberal Democrats second in 1992, and where the Liberal Democrats were both more than 6% ahead of Labour and less than 30% behind the Conservatives.

5. *Con-LibDem Safe Seats*: Seats where the Conservatives were first and the Liberal Democrats second in 1992, but where the Liberal Democrats were more than 30% behind the Conservatives.

6. *Three-way Marginals*: Seats where the Conservatives were first and the Liberal Democrats second in 1992, but where Labour were less than 6% behind the Liberal Democrats and less than 36% behind the Conservatives. These were in effect ‘three-way marginals’ where both opposition parties might claim to be best able to defeat the Conservatives.

We therefore make three distinctions amongst those seats where the Conservatives were first and the Liberal Democrats second in 1992. Given the position of Labour and the Liberal Democrats in the polls, people in these constituencies may not always have been convinced that a vote for the Liberal Democrats was an effective means of defeating the Conservatives, and this is reflected in our classification.

These different tactical situations exhibited very different patterns of party performance. Consider, first of all those seats where the Conservatives started off first and Labour second. Labour’s vote rose on average by over three points more in these seats than in those seats where they were already first. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrat vote fell by nearly three points more. It would appear that in seats where Labour started second to the Conservatives, around 3% of those who turned out to vote opted for Labour rather than the Liberal Democrats because they wanted to try and ensure the defeat of the local Conservative.

TABLE 1: TACTICAL VOTING IN THE RESULTS

Change in % voting

Tactical Situation	Con	Lab	LibDem
Lab seats; Con > 33.3%	-12.6	+ 9.6	- 0.3 (107)
Con/Lab seats	-12.6	+13.0	- 3.0 (181)
LibDem seats; Con > 33.3%	-10.6	+ 9.6	+1.6 (8)
Con/LibDem; Con lead < 30%	-11.8	+ 6.5	+1.9 (80)
Con/LibDem; Con lead > 30%	-13.5	+10.0	- 0.8 (60)
Three-way marginals	-11.6	+10.9	- 2.3 (18)

Source: Curtice and Steed (1997)

Meanwhile we see the very opposite pattern in those seats where the Liberal Democrats were second to the Conservatives and less than 30% behind. Here the Liberal Democrat vote rose by two points against the national trend, while Labour's vote rose by three points less than where it started first. It looks as though in these seats around 2-3% of voters opted for the Liberal Democrats rather than Labour in order to try and defeat the Conservatives. This was most evident where the Liberal Democrats started off less than 15% behind the Conservatives; in these seats the Liberal Democrat vote rose almost everywhere. But where the lead was between 15% and 30% their performance was more patchy. And where the Liberal Democrats were even further behind or where Labour were also in close contention, voters evidently did not see much reason to make a tactical switch to the Liberal Democrats. Indeed in a number of three-way marginals Labour seem to have been the beneficiaries of tactical switching. Overall, it looks as though voters needed rather more persuasion about the value of making a tactical switch to the Liberal Democrats than simply the claim that they were in second place last time.

Because it looks at how votes changed between 1992 and 1997, this form of analysis can only hope to identify new tactical voting, that is the decisions of voters to vote tactically who did not do so at the previous election. Of course there may also be voters who voted tactically in 1992, or even earlier, and who continued to do so in 1997. Even so, this analysis suggests that there was only a relatively small increase in tactical voting in 1997. Even within those constituencies where conditions evidently facilitated tactical voting we have found that only 2-3% of voters acted anew strategically. And these constituencies themselves constitute less than half the total number (see the entries in brackets in Table 1). The results thus suggest that perhaps little more than 1% of voters voted tactically in 1997 after having not done so in 1992. In addition, we should remember that some of the switching from Liberal Democrat to Labour in Con/Lab seats in Table 1 may

arise from the decisions of Labour supporters to stop casting a tactical vote for the Liberal Democrats because their preferred party had regained second place in 1992. The only significant net increase in tactical voting that seems necessarily to be implied by Table 1 is in switching from Liberal Democrat to Labour.

Was a similar pattern evident at individual-level in our survey results? Here our estimates of tactical voting will include those who may already have voted tactically in 1992 and decided to continue doing so in 1997. So, in order to establish whether they confirm our expectations from Table 1 we need to be able to compare the results obtained by the 1997 cross-section Survey with similar figures obtained in 1992. The main indicator of tactical voting in the BES series is a reasons-for-voting question which has been asked as part of the cross-section election study at each of the last four elections. It runs as follows:-

'Which one of the reasons on this card comes closest to the main reason you voted for the Party you chose?

I always vote that way.

I thought it was the best party.

I really preferred another Party but it had no chance of winning in this constituency.

Other (Please specify).'

Voters are classified as 'tactical' if they choose the response - *'I really preferred another Party but it had no chance of winning in this constituency'*. They were then asked which party they 'really preferred', allowing us along with information on how they actually voted to identify the direction of their tactical switch. Using this measure of tactical voting we find that in 1997 approximately 10.0% of voters can be coded as tactical, compared with 9.0% in 1992.³

In addition to this small increase in the overall level of tactical voting there is also evidence that the *pattern* of tactical voting changed over this period. Table 2 shows the proportion of our sample in the 1997 Campaign Study and the 1992 British Election Study who said that they had voted tactically, broken down by the kind of switch that they made.⁴ There are two noticeable changes: in 1997 1.3% of voters said that they had voted Conservative when they had really preferred the Liberal Democrats, compared with the 1.8% who did so in 1992. Conversely, in 1992 only 1.5% said that they had switched from Liberal Democrat to Labour, whereas in 1997 2.2% did so. This is precisely the kind of tactical voting that the aggregate data analysis indicated had been substantially more common in 1997. It is accompanied, as also anticipated, by a somewhat smaller rise in Labour to Liberal Democrat switching of 0.5%. Altogether there is a rise of 1.2% in reported tactical switching between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, well in line with our aggregate data estimate, and more than sufficient to account for small increase in tactical voting as a whole.⁵ Thus our two very different sources of evidence evidently agree that there was a small but important rise in anti-Conservative tactical voting in 1997 compared with 1992 and a small reduction in Conservative tactical voting by Liberal Democrat supporters.

TABLE 2: REPORTED TACTICAL VOTING IN 1992 AND 1997

(a) Preferred party and actual votes of tactical voters 1992
(percentages of voters)

	Actual Vote				All
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Other	
Preferred Party					
Conservative	-	*	0.7	*	1.3
Labour	*	-	2.0	*	2.3
Liberal Democrat	1.8	1.5	-	*	3.4
Other	*	*	*	-	0.8
All	2.1	2.3	2.9	0.4	7.7

(b) Preferred party and actual votes of tactical voters 1997
(percentages of voters)

	Actual Vote				All
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Other	
Preferred Party					
Conservative	-	*	0.5	*	1.0
Labour	*	-	2.5	*	2.8
Liberal Democrat	1.3	2.2	-	*	3.5
Other	*	0.9	*	-	1.4
All	1.8	3.4	3.2	0.3	8.7

Small though these changes were, their impact was substantial. Curtice and Steed (1997) estimate that at least 25 and perhaps as many as 35 seats were lost by the Conservatives as a result of new tactical voting. Using a different method of estimation Norris (1997a) suggests a very similar figure of 24. The two estimates are not only close to each other, but are far higher than those that have been made for the impact of tactical voting in previous general elections (see Curtice and Steed, 1992; Crewe, Norris and Waller 1992). Without tactical voting Labour would clearly still have won a decisive majority, but the strength of the Liberal Democrat parliamentary party would have been much reduced, and the Conservatives would have been significantly stronger. (Ironically, as Table 2 shows, the Conservatives continued to be net beneficiaries of tactical voting in terms of votes; but thanks to its geographical distribution they were clearly losers in terms of seats.) The 1997 British election clearly demonstrates how under the single member plurality system, tactical switching by a very small number of strategically placed voters can have a very big impact on the outcome in seats. How can we best account for this important development in British electoral behaviour?

Explaining the Rise of Tactical Voting

Changes in Voters? First of all, how well can we account for the changes in tactical voting in 1997 by suggesting that voters have simply become more willing to vote tactically? If people vote tactically, it suggests they are concerned instrumentally about the outcome in seats, and are willing and able to engage in a rational calculus to ascertain what might be the best way of achieving the outcome they desire (Cain 1978; Cox 1997). Thus an increase in the incidence of tactical voting has been interpreted as evidence that people have become more rational and less

influenced by partisan loyalties than they were in the days of *The American Voter* (Campbell *et al.* 1960) or *Political Change in Britain* (Butler and Stokes, 1974). Why should this be so? The usual candidates have been rising levels of education and the expansion of mass communications, which have supposedly lead to the growth of an informed, participant citizenry (Dalton 1996; Inglehart 1997). Such citizens are thought to be more willing and better able to make the calculations needed to act strategically.

If this process accounted for changes since 1992, however, then we should expect to find a general increase in tactical voting *of all kinds* - from Liberal Democrat to Conservative as well as from Liberal Democrat to Labour. But as we have seen this was not what happened. Only a very specific form of tactical voting was more prevalent in 1997, that is switching between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. It looks then as though we need to look at the context in which voters made their decision in 1997 rather than the motivations that they brought to the ballot box.

Changes in the Information Environment? Alternatively, what may have altered in 1997 is the information which was available to voters about the strategic situation in their constituency. One potentially important piece of information provided by the media consists of the results of opinion polls. The 1980s saw national opinion polling reach saturation levels, while polls conducted in individual constituencies also became common. But, thanks to doubts about the accuracy of opinion polls, especially after the debacle of the 1992 election (Market Research Society, 1994), fewer polls were commissioned in 1997 than previously. Despite the campaign being a record six weeks in length, only 43 national polls were published compared with 57 in 1992 (Crewe, 1997). Moreover these polls were given less prominence when they were reported. Meanwhile, the publication of local opinion polls had already peaked in 1987 when at least 78 single constituency

polls in 52 seats were commissioned. In 1997 in contrast only about 29 single constituency polls were conducted in 26 seats. There is then little reason to believe that voters were better informed by the opinion polls in 1997 than previously. ⁶

Increased Mobilisation? But we should remember that political parties can also try to inform voters of the local tactical situation in their campaigning. And recent academic research has suggested that constituency campaigning may have a greater influence on electoral outcomes than had hitherto been appreciated (Denver and Hands, 1997; Pattie *et al*, 1994; Pattie *et al*, 1995). There is evidence that in the 1997 campaign, more than ever before, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats prioritised, professionalized and centralised their strategic attempts to gain swing voters in marginal seats. For two years before polling day a Labour task force was designed to switch 5,000 voters in each of 90 target marginal seats. Those identified as potential Labour converts were contacted by teams of volunteers on the doorstep and by canvassing run from twenty telephone banks around the country, co-ordinated by Millbank Tower. The Liberal Democrats also concentrated their campaigning resources on their target seats to a greater extent than previously (Norris 1997b). One of the features of this targeted campaigning was the highlighting in campaign literature and elsewhere of claims about the likely outcome for different parties. Thus we might anticipate that certain forms of tactical voting might have become more common in 1997 because parties themselves had made greater attempts to stimulate it. If the efforts associated with Labour and Liberal Democrat targeting proved effective, we would anticipate that more people should have vote tactically in the targeted constituencies than elsewhere. The evidence is decidedly mixed.

So far as the Liberal Democrats are concerned, targeting does appear to have encouraged tactical voting. Amongst those seats where the Liberal Democrats started within 30% of the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrat vote rose by 4.0% in those seats which it targeted, but fell by 2.3% where it did not. Labour's vote meanwhile rose by only 4.4% in seats that the Liberal Democrats targeted compared with 11.0% elsewhere⁷.

But in Labour's case targeting does not appear to have stimulated a higher level of tactical voting - or indeed had any discernible impact at all. Table 3 compares Labour's performance in those of its target seats where the party started off second to the Conservatives with its performance in those places where it started off second but which it did not target. The analysis is undertaken separately for London, the rest of the South East and the remainder of the country in order to take account of the generally higher swing against the Conservative government in London and the South East. As can be seen, Labour's performance in its target seats was little different from what happened in non-targeted seats. Voters apparently did not need mobilising locally to be persuaded to vote tactically for Labour.

TABLE 3: THE NON-IMPACT OF LABOUR TARGETING

	Change in % voting Labour in	
	Target Seats	Non-Target Seats
London	+15.9 (7)	+14.6 (26)
Rest of South East	+13.7 (12)	+14.2 (29)
Elsewhere	+11.8 (53)	+12.3 (54)

Note: Table confined to those seats where Conservative were 1st. and Labour 2nd.

Source: Curtice and Steed (1997)

Moreover, if access to information was important in explaining the incidence of tactical voting in 1997, one might anticipate that more voters would have been inclined to vote tactically at the end of the election campaign than at the beginning. After all, election campaigns are the time above all when parties attempt to impart information to voters. Yet an analysis of the Campaign Panel Study shows the proportion of the panel saying that they were likely to vote tactically when first interviewed during the election campaign was, at 9.7%, almost exactly the same proportion who eventually did so. Equally, there is no sign either of any increase during the course of the campaign in the willingness of Liberal Democrat voters in particular to make a tactical switch to Labour.

Changes in Party Competition? Our final possible explanation is that the rise in anti-Conservative tactical voting reflects changes in the appeal of the parties, reflecting changes in their ideological positioning or their perceived competence. Previous research has suggested that people are most inclined to vote tactically if they strongly dislike one party while being relatively indifferent between the remainder (Heath *et al.*, 1991; Niemi, *et al.*, 1992). This suggests that tactical voting might become more common either because electors become heavily disillusioned with one party or else if they come to believe that there is little to choose between the remainder. In this respect there is good reason to believe that the situation in 1997 was different from previous elections. The outgoing Conservative government had, after all, been the most unpopular government in the history of opinion polling in Britain and it entered the election still in the electoral doldrums (Norris 1997a). Meanwhile the two main opposition parties had moved closer together ideologically. Under the leadership of John Smith and Tony Blair, 'New Labour' shifted towards the centre on many social and economic issues (Smith and Spear 1992; Norris 1997c). The

Labour party had abandoned Clause 4, nationalization, and much else. Perhaps most notably the party ruled out any increase in income tax rates to finance increased social spending. Indeed such a policy arguably put them to the right of the Liberal Democrats who, as in 1992, advocated increasing income tax in order to spend more on education. In addition, by the time of the 1997 manifesto Labour had come to endorse a wide range of constitutional changes, many of which had been long-standing Liberal Democrat policy. Ashdown also moved his party from an official position of 'equidistance' between Conservative and Labour to one which ruled out the possibility of supporting a minority Conservative government but which left open the possibility of a deal with Labour. Indeed just before the election Labour and the Liberal Democrats concluded a formal agreement on how best to implement in the new parliament the wide range of constitutional changes they both favoured. In short, voters may well have come to the conclusion that there was little to choose between the two opposition parties, but that there was an awful lot to choose between either of them and the Conservatives.⁸

So what then of voters' perceptions of the parties, of the similarity between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, and of their feelings towards the Conservative Party? Were voters more likely to be indifferent between Labour and the Liberal Democrats? And were they more likely to be disenchanted towards the Conservatives? In both 1992 and 1997 we asked our respondents how much they were in favour or against each of the parties. As we can see from Table 4, the results in 1997 were very different from those obtained five years earlier.

TABLE 4: FEELINGS SCALES BY PARTY PREFERENCE IN 1992 AND 1997

Rating of

		Conservative Party	Labour Party	Liberal Democrat Party
Conservative Supporters	1992	4.30	1.86	2.94
	1997	4.00	2.56	2.92
Labour Supporters	1992	1.94	4.30	3.06
	1997	1.90	4.40	3.38
Lib-Dem Supporters	1992	2.74	2.61	4.18
	1997	2.37	3.28	4.19
ALL	1992	3.07	2.90	3.15
	1997	2.60	3.62	3.38

This table shows the average score given to the party named at the top of each column on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly against) to 5 (strongly in favour).

The most striking observation to be made from table 4 is that by 1997 Liberal Democrat supporters were much more likely to say they were in favour of the Labour party (up 0.67) than they were to say the same of the Conservatives (down 0.37). In 1992 in contrast Liberal Democrat supporters regarded the two parties more or less equally. Between 1992 and 1997 their opinion of the Conservatives declined while their attitude towards Labour became markedly more positive. Conservative supporters similarly became more positive towards Labour (up 0.70) and less so to their own party (down 0.30), while Labour supporters, although generally more constant over time, expressed a more positive view of the Liberal Democrats in 1997 than in 1992 (up 0.32).

Here then appears to be the most fruitful line of explanation of the rise in anti-Conservative tactical voting in 1992. As a result of the closer ideological proximity between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, or the isolation and perceived incompetence of the Conservatives (or more likely both), more Liberal Democrat supporters were relatively indifferent between their own party and Labour, while positively disliking the Conservatives. Labour supporters also showed some signs of increased approval of the Liberal Democrats. As previous research has shown (Heath *et al*, 1991: 56) these are precisely the conditions under which tactical voting is most likely to occur. And as we might expect, in 1997 Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters who voted tactically tended to be relatively indifferent between Labour and the Liberal Democrats but disliked the Tories. Thus among those Liberal Democrat supporters who voted tactically for Labour, there was an 'approval gap' of only 0.4 between the Liberal Democrats and Labour, while the Conservatives were extremely disliked (a gap of 2.76). Among Liberal Democrat supporters who voted tactically for the Conservatives, there was an 'approval gap' of only 0.33 between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, while Labour were distinctly less popular

(a gap of 1.34). A similar pattern can be seen for Liberal Democrat tactical voting by Labour supporters. In each case, attitudes towards the party voted for tactically were very near to the levels obtained for the preferred party, while being far removed from those for the opposing party.

The question then to address is whether these changes between 1992 and 1997 in the distribution of attitudes towards the parties can themselves explain the different pattern of Labour and Liberal Democrat tactical voting. This can be done fairly straight-forwardly by calculating the proportion of voters who display attitudes to the main parties that are conducive to Labour/Liberal Democrat tactical voting in the two elections and then seeing if among voters with these sorts of attitudes levels of tactical voting are similar in the two surveys. If changing attitudes to the parties do account for changing levels of tactical voting then we would expect an increase in the proportion of voters with attitudes conducive to Labour/Liberal Democrat tactical voting, but no change in the relative tendency to vote tactically among voters with such attitudes. This is indeed what we find.

For example, voters with similarly positive attitudes towards Labour and the Liberal Democrats (a score of 4 or 5) and negative attitudes towards the Tories (a score of 1 or 2) formed only 9.2% of the sample of voters in 1992. In 1997 this rose markedly to 22.3%. (Other ways of estimating such attitudes come to the same conclusions.) Among voters with such attitudes in 1992, 18.6% voted tactically for the Labour or Liberal Democrats (among other voters this figure was only 2.0%), in 1997 this figure was 14.9% (1.7%). Clearly, among voters with attitudes that were conducive to tactical voting there no greater tendency to vote tactically for Labour or the Liberal Democrats in 1997. We can conclude with confidence that the change is accountable by the

changing positions and images of the parties – as reflected in voters’ evaluations - rather than anything about voters’ psychological motivations *per se*.⁹

Conclusion

The usual academic disclaimers apply with full force to this article. This is only a preliminary analysis which has had access to only some of the resources which will eventually be capable of being applied to its subject matter. Moreover, even the 1997 cross-section survey with its substantial number of respondents is not well-suited to the task of dissecting the motives of the relatively rare breed of tactical voters. None the less, we hope to have provided considerable support for two propositions. First, in 1997 more people voted tactically in order to try to defeat their local Conservative candidate than did so in 1992. Second, this happened not because voters brought different motivations to the ballot box than five years previously, or because they were more informed or more effectively mobilized, but rather because they believed that the parties had changed.

There are a number of implications that flow from these conclusions. We will briefly consider two, one political, and one theoretical. Firstly, in the forthcoming debate about the future of the single member plurality electoral system that has been promised by the new Labour government, it might be asked whether it is desirable that the outcome of an election can be influenced to such an extent by the strategic manipulation of the few. Of course, we cannot assume that such patterns of tactical voting will necessarily be repeated in future; if the parties change by 2002 then so also presumably will the behaviour of voters. But the potential at least has clearly been illustrated.

Secondly, there is a tendency in the study of electoral behaviour to make inferences about the motivations of voters on the basis of evidence of changes in their behaviour. Thus, for example, voters may be deemed less willing to be loyal to a political party because they change their voting behaviour more often. Here, hopefully, we have demonstrated why such reasoning is potentially misleading. The act of voting is not simply the result of what the voter brings to the ballot box; rather it is the product of an interaction between parties and voters. With changing party images (whether based in different policy programmes or simply different presentational strategies) comes a changing set of tactical choices, therefore we should hardly be surprised to find that ‘New Labour’ has brought with it ‘New Tactical Voting’.

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Footnotes

¹ We focus in this paper only on tactical voting for Conservative, Labour and the Liberal Democrats, since tactical voting for nationalists in Scotland and in Wales operates under a different pattern of party competition. The British Election Study does not extend to Northern Ireland.

² The 1997 election was of course fought on new constituency boundaries. Our analysis relies on the estimates made by Rallings and Thrasher (1995) of what would have happened if the 1992 election had been fought on the 1997 boundaries.

³ These figures include respondents who did not choose this answer but volunteered other, apparently tactical, motivations for their vote. Such responses occurred in 0.3% of cases in 1992 and 0.4% in 1997. These respondents were not asked for their preferred party and are not included in the analyses which follow. People who reported voting against a candidate (0.7% in 1992 and 1.2% in 1997) are not here counted as tactical.

⁴ These estimates do not include respondents who refused to say who they had voted for, or give the name of their preferred party, or reported having voted for their preferred party despite giving a tactical answer to the 'reasons for voting' question.

⁵ These observations – and others that follow - are also confirmed by an analysis of the 1997 British Election Campaign Panel Study.

⁶ True, the well publicised *Observer/Scotland on Sunday* poll in 16 constituencies undertaken the weekend before polling day may have had a significant impact in a handful of constituencies, most notably in Hastings & Rye and in St. Albans where, in contrast to the 1992 result, it suggested Labour was better placed than the Liberal Democrats to defeat the Conservatives. But there were

simply too few polls in too few constituencies for this to provide any general explanation of the rise in tactical voting.

⁷ The Conservative performance in contrast was almost identical in seats the Liberal Democrats did target and in those they did not.

⁸ We have already noted that, compared with 1992, fewer Labour supporters were living in constituencies where their party was starting off third, while in contrast more Liberal Democrats were in that situation. But while this might help account for some of the increase in tactical switching from Liberal Democrat to Labour, it should have been accompanied by a reduction in tactical switching from Labour to the Liberal Democrats. As we have seen that did not happen. Moreover, the election results themselves suggest that Liberal Democrats living in constituencies where their preferred party started off third in 1992 as well as in 1997 were still more willing to vote tactically this time around.

⁹ Ideally, in more detailed analyses we would also control for differences in respondents' constituency situations which might affect their propensity to vote tactically over and above their feelings towards the parties. It is unlikely, however, that any further analysis of that sort would change, to any important degree, the general conclusions drawn here.