

# NEW POLITICS

Tactical voting and how the left should deal with the governing coalition

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## Introduction

In the run up to the 2010 general election considerable polling showed support moving away from the Labour Party in favour of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

With Election Day fast-approaching, on 23 April the Compass Management Committee balloted all members on whether to support a policy of tactical voting in order to help deprive the Conservative Party of a majority government in the general election. With the biggest return Compass has had in an internal ballot, 72% (467) of members backed the call for tactical voting with only 14% (93) against.<sup>1</sup>

We know that some in the Labour Party opposed and continue to be critical of this move, but it is important not for the past but for the future that the issue is fully aired and discussed. Tactical voting matters as, just that, a tactic. But the practice of it and the context in which it takes place tell us a lot about the future of our political culture, how we make change happen and of course now the realignment of British politics on the centre-right.

The harsh electoral arithmetic of the next election is this: in this election the Tories got roughly 11 million votes, Labour 9 million and the Lib Dems 7 million. A 16 million versus 10 million strong centre-left alliance has been turned into an 18 million centre-right versus 9 million centre-left battle. Somehow Labour has to peel away millions of Lib Dem voters to have any remote chance of winning next time. Those Liberal Democrat voters are going to have to be persuaded to vote tactically. To make that happen successfully Labour has to start to change not just its policies but also and more problematically its culture.

## The new age of pluralism

To understand why Compass took on the tactical vote issue it is helpful to step back and look at the twin cultures that pervade Labour. Put crudely, the emerging divide in Labour's ranks is between tribalists and pluralists. Tribalists see the strength of the monolithic party. If the party gains power then it rules supreme and can dictate the terms of reform with no need

to compromise with anyone outside Labour's ranks who are viewed with varying degrees of suspicion. Socialism, to the tribalist, is largely seen as what a Labour government does. If it is not said or done by Labour, then it is unlikely to be viewed as progressive. Pluralists on the other hand see power as more diffuse; there are many competing centres of power that have to be recognised, respected and dealt with through dialogue, cooperation and competition. For the pluralist, engagement with others is felt to be a positive process through which we learn, adapt and build coalitions. Pluralism and tribalism are thus very different ways of trying to make change happen.

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That is the shorthand theory; in reality no one is pure tribalist or pluralist and both cultures have their strengths and weaknesses. Most of us exhibit both tendencies. But the emphasis we give to one political culture over the other matters and Compass is continually trying to develop and extend the politics of pluralism, for a whole mix of reasons that mainly rest on the assumption that a more progressive future will be negotiated rather than ordained from above. To Compass, means are everything, not least because they have a habit of shaping ends. The good society is more akin to the good journey, the process through which we democratically engage, build and hold to account centres of power. On this journey, being fair, open and democratic are crucial traits because how we behave shapes the nature of our world. Nothing can justify anti-democratic or intolerant behaviour.

Because of new technology, the end of deference and the growing complexity of society, the future is much more likely to be negotiated. Pluralism will have to become the dominant culture of the party inside and out. That doesn't mean we

should no longer have discipline and certainly not that there should be an end to our core beliefs of equality, sustainability and democracy. Instead it means the difficult mix of a politics of leading and listening. Socialism is about people creating their own world, not having it done for them. It is the politics of doing things ‘with’ not ‘to’ people. Again it is not absolute. Sometimes the strong central state is critical – but the overall emphasis should switch more to change through negotiation and alliance building.

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If that is the case outside Labour it should certainly be the case within the party. Socialism is a mix of ideologies, notably liberalism and Marxism, plus a range of ethical beliefs, such as Methodism, political strategies like Fabianism and Leninism, plus a set of vested interests, most importantly the organised working class. Up until the early 1990s the Party was a broad movement with two wings – the left and the right. They fought, sometimes bitterly, but they gave the party balance. In the words of Harold Wilson, ‘the Labour Party needs two wings to fly’. New Labour rejected such balance – there was only one way. The party desperately needs to return to an internal politics of respect and, yes, pluralism.

### Compass and political strategy

This broadly pluralist approach can then be linked into the political strategy of Compass, summed up by the phrase, ‘a transformed Labour Party is a necessary but insufficient vehicle for our politics’. Let’s deconstruct that. ‘Our politics’ is the belief in a more equal, sustainable and democratic world. A ‘transformed Labour Party’ is one that believes in and wills the means for such a world. The ‘insufficient vehicle’ part alludes to the fact that we know that electing majority governments, even of the transformed kind as described just now, is not enough. Outside parliament is a huge

and powerful array of conservative forces – in the media, the business and idea-creating world – which successfully act to stifle any radical intent of a Labour government and reverse any gains made. Against these ‘forces of conservatism’ the left needs its own counter movement of organisations, institutions and individuals who will act as outriders and backstops for progressive politics. In short, the left needs a movement to counter the movement for the right.

Historically this was the role played by the unions. But their cultural and organisational strength has slipped. Trade unions are still critical but wider forces are needed as part of a progressive movement for change. London Citizens give us a flavour of this through its mobilisation of faith and community groups – but it has to be wider. If there is an interlinked crisis of inequality, sustainability and democracy, then solutions must involve every group and individual involved in these historic causes. In this broad coalition we can also include the defenders and promoters of public services and civil liberties. This is a broad progressive coalition that will only be mobilised through dialogue, trust and consensus building. If Labour thinks it can just assume this leadership mantle after its chequered 13 years in office, it needs to think again. Labour, if it is to help build a successful coalition, must stop claiming that it has a monopoly of wisdom. If we want to play a leading role, then we must first listen to people in other movements and other parties. All of this requires a party that is open, porous and humble, but firm in its belief of what the good society entails, and will build any bridge and coalition that gets us closer to that goal.

### Tactical voting

Set against this background tactical voting is not just a matter of electoral expediency but opens up a space for progressives who cut across party lines to support each other. It was never really acknowledged because that isn’t what tribalists do, but tactical voting helped give Labour its majorities in 1997, 2001 and 2005. New Labour showed how attached it was to tribalism by declaring it ‘won as New Labour and would govern as New Labour’. The truth is it won as not being the Tories and attracted a great deal of

cross party and no party support. In 1997 it had the potential to become a progressive alliance. But it ruled like a narrow and elite tribe and by 2010 had shed almost 5 million voters and over half its members.

But despite New Labour, tactical voting to stop the Tories still endured. The facts show that in 2010 tactical voting stopped the Tories getting an outright majority and if practised more widely could have produced a genuinely progressive government. At the next election tactical voting will again decide the outcome. Millions of Liberal Democrat voters are there to be won over to vote Labour either tactically or permanently.

Of course the crunch point was the call to ask some Labour voters to back Liberal Democrats where Labour had no hope. This did and does rile some people in Labours ranks. But why? Given the context it was an honest and logical step. How could anyone ask Liberal Democrats to back Labour against the Tories because of shared values and policies but not acknowledge the quid pro quo of far fewer Labour voters doing the same? So it was a matter of principle. But it was also a matter of good practice for Labour. The vast majority of Tory target seats were Labour held, so tactical voting was about an overwhelming increase in the Labour vote. There is one important thing about tactical voting – it has to be tactical: it cannot be an indiscriminate act, but must be a very disciplined and focused act that requires prompting and information. Compass helped provide both and so added to the total number of Labour votes and seats.

The danger of the Liberal Democrat surge was that progressively minded voters would switch votes from Labour to Liberal Democrats in all constituencies in a uniform way and allow Conservative MPs to be elected through the middle. Compass felt it was important to put out a message to say that progressives should vote Labour. Opposition within Labour to this came from people who thought Labour was in a neck and neck race to come first. Its fears were groundless, in part because the election became a contest about not whether Labour could win, but whether the Tories could be stopped. The Labour vote firmed up not least because of tactical support from many Liberal Democrats.

We were not alone in the call for tactical voting. Andrew Adonis, Alan Johnson and Douglas

Alexander all called for it. Gordon Brown called for a progressive alliance of voters – we know what he meant. Peter Hain came close to calling for Labour supporters to vote Liberal Democrat in certain seats and Ed Balls went even further, using the example of Norfolk North and Lib Dem MP Norman Lamb, whom he suggested Labour voters should back. At the very least Ed Balls knew that his seat was under threat if Liberal Democrats didn't vote Labour to stop the Tories. It was the politics of self-survival and it worked for him and in many other Labour seats.

The problem was not too much tactical voting but too little. Fighting against a party that lost its way and had become too arrogant – trying to get Lib Dem voters over to Labour – was a tough call. To be honest the Labour leadership had long treated the Liberal Democrat leadership with contempt. Labour attacked their policies on not renewing Trident, replacing tuition fees, civil liberties, earned regularisation of immigrants, the Mansion House tax and more. But despite everything Lib Dem voters still much preferred Labour to the Conservatives. If the mood music had been better the possibility of a Labour–Lib Dem coalition would have been far greater.

Compass conducted a poll of Lib Dem voters in the aftermath of the election and the results are published here for the first time. When asked before the election which party they expected Nick Clegg to collaborate with in the event of a hung parliament, 50% of Lib Dem voters thought he would do a deal with Labour and 27% thought he would do a deal with the Tories. Somehow we let this potential progressive consensus slip through our fingers and instead of a centre-left government we have a governing coalition of the centre right.

As history now shows, the maths of the actual result would not have allowed a progressive coalition to work. But it is more than just arithmetic. What has happened to the Liberal Democrat party mirrors in large part what happened to New Labour: a small, neo-liberal-inclined elite had grabbed power to make decisions against the wishes of the vast majority of the party membership. Those with an Orange Book tendency took their opportunity and presented the party with a fait accompli. Many Liberal Democrats, we know, are hugely uneasy about the gigantic step in the wrong direction its party has taken. But like many

in Labour ranks during the process of New Labour modernisation they feel there is no alternative and nowhere else to go. We must show them there is an alternative and they do have somewhere else to go. But that will not be easy. Many Lib Dem voters do not see Labour as a progressive party – in the coming months and years we must do everything we can to prove that view wrong. Our poll also shows the potential of Clegg's calamitous decisions to join the Tories. When asked if a deal with Cameron would affect their vote at the next election, 33% said it would make them less likely to vote Lib Dem and only 18% would be more likely to do so. The division between the Liberal Democrat leadership and its members and supporters now needs to be opened up.

Those critical of tactical voting will argue that voting Lib Dem resulted in a Conservative government led by David Cameron. There are two responses to this. First, if more people had voted tactically the arithmetic would have worked for a progressive alliance – Labour and the Lib Dems would be in office. A 20-seat majority would have been adequate for a time limited government to start to address the economic challenges in a fairer way and commit to real electoral reform. It would also have been an opportunity to have cancelled Trident and the ID card database, and enact other progressive policies the Liberal Democrats were pushing for.

Second, isn't it better to have a more liberal and progressive coalition party than a majority Conservative administration in which Cameron would be pulled to the right? It is better for two reasons: because it means the most regressive Conservative policies may be tempered, and it shows that the centre of gravity of British politics is shifting to the left with the majority of the British public taking more radical views than all three main parties on many issues. For example, a recent poll found that 71% of people thought government should do more, and just 22% think this is a time to depend more on the markets.<sup>2</sup>

Alternatively, some may perceive it as a good thing that the Conservative-led government acts as regressively as possible, so that ordinary people really suffer and out of that agony Labour can with one more heave get back into office. That is not a position any progressive should support. Instead we should enter a progressive race with this coalition – to outpace them on

constitutional reform, civil liberties and equality, to bank what they do and press them for more, to show up the contradictions and represent the progressive majority.

Compass would rather not have to advocate tactical voting at all. We would rather have a proportional voting system in which your first choice vote counts. But the votes of the vast majority of the electorate don't count. The outcome of elections is still in the hands of a few swing voters in a few swing seats who can't decide which party they back. Until we change that reality people are going to have to decide to vote on the basis of who they are against, not just who they are for.

Compass would also rather have seen a programme that got more core Labour voters out by highlighting more progressive elements of the manifesto. There are a host of popular and progressive policies which could have formed the basis of a positive election campaign, as we outlined in our publication *Winning on the Doorstep*. This would have implemented policies like introducing a living wage, breaking up the banks and prioritising progressive tax increases over spending cuts.

Like it or not we are going to have to get used to hung parliaments and minority government. Before 1979 minority parties got around 20 seats. Now they get over 70. In 1951 98% voted for the two main parties, by 2010 only 65% did. The old duopoly is over and the chances of forming majority governments may be a thing of the past. If we are not prepared for that fate then there is only the wilderness.

The situation at the next election may well be a lot clearer if the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats enter into an electoral pact. This would mean that tactical voting would just be one way: persuading thousands if not millions of Lib Dem voters to back Labour to break up the coalition. But whatever the context, while we have a non-proportional voting system people are going to have to vote tactically if Labour is to stand any chance of governing again.

## Election facts

At the time of the Compass tactical voting ballot the Conservatives were averaging 33% in the polls, Liberal Democrats 29% and Labour

Table 1. Seats gained and lost by political parties in the 2010 general election

Party	Seats	Gain	Loss	Net	Votes	%	+/-%
Conservative	306	100	3	97	10,706,647	36.1	3.8
Labour	258	3	94	-91	8,604,258	29.0	-6.2
Lib Dem	57	8	13	-5	6,827,938	23.0	1.0

28%.<sup>3</sup> This was a trend of around 7% away from the Labour Party (based on the 2005 result): the Tories were up 1% and the Lib Dems up 7%.<sup>4</sup>

Even the most optimistic reading of the polls at that time suggested that Labour would struggle to win an outright majority on 6 May.

With just over a week to go there were two key tasks:

1. Maximise the Labour vote and Labour seats
2. Minimise the chances of a majority Conservative administration.

The bottom line was that gaining 116 seats – and not losing any currently held – would have given the Conservative Party an overall majority in the House of Commons.

Of those 116 key seats (based on notional results):

- 89 (76 %) of those seats were held by a Labour Party incumbent
- 24 of those seats (20%) were held by a Liberal Democrat incumbent.

Anti-Conservative tactical voting in these seats would therefore benefit Labour disproportionately in both votes and seats.

The result<sup>5</sup> was that there was an overall swing of 5% from Labour to Conservative, as shown in table 1.

Two notable trends are visible when comparing regional and national swings with marginal seats:

- Trend 1: The Labour vote held up better in marginal seats.
- Trend 2: In Liberal–Conservative marginal seats the Labour vote reduced at a higher rate than regional and national trends.

These two trends suggest that considerable anti-Conservative tactical voting took place.

In the 19 Tory target constituencies listed below, the Conservative candidate failed to win the seat probably as a result of tactical voting. The figures

in brackets are the changes in the parties' vote shares. Although the Lib Dem vote rose in each region, in all the constituencies where Labour held on the Lib Dems' vote share plummeted.

#### East of England (LD +2.2%)

LAB hold: Luton North (LD -4.48%)

#### North West (LD +0.3%)

LAB hold: Barrow-in-Furness (LD -7.76%)

LAB hold: Bolton North East (LD -3.11%)

LAB hold: Bolton West (LD -1.75%)

LAB hold: Copeland (LD -3.74%)

LAB hold: Hyndburn (LD -2.56%)

LAB hold: Wirral South (LD -5.03%)

#### London (Lab -2.3%, LD +0.2%)

LAB hold: Eltham (LD -4.75%)

LAB hold: Hammersmith (LD -3.04%)

LAB hold: Harrow West (LD -2.50%)

LAB hold: Poplar & Limehouse (LD -2.79%)

LAB hold: Tooting (LD -4.76%)

LAB hold: Westminster North (LD -5.74%)

#### South East (Lab -8.1%)

LD hold: Eastleigh (Lab -11.47%)

#### South West (Lab -7.4%, LD +2.2%)

LD hold: Chippenham (Lab -9.89%)

LD hold: Cornwall North (Lab -8.32%)

LAB hold: Plymouth Moor View (LD -2.08%)

LD hold: Torbay (Lab -7.89%)

LD hold: Wells (Lab -8.13%)

There was also considerable evidence of tactical voting taking place in Scotland, with increased majorities for Labour and Scottish nationalist candidates in a series of key Tory target seats.<sup>6</sup>

#### Did tactical voting make a difference?

Dr Stephen Fisher from Oxford University estimates that up to 9% of voters (over 2 million

<sup>3</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/interactive/2010/apr/06/general-election-2010-polling](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/interactive/2010/apr/06/general-election-2010-polling)

<sup>4</sup> [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/vote\\_2005/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005/default.stm)

<sup>5</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/>

<sup>6</sup> [www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/07/scotland-tactical-voting-conservatives-mandate](http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/may/07/scotland-tactical-voting-conservatives-mandate)

voters at this general election) mark their ballot papers tactically, influencing the results of up to 45 seats.<sup>7</sup>

**“These surprise results, which bucked regional and national trends, further suggest there was widespread tactical voting in marginal seats”**

The Labour and Lib Dem vote held up well in their respective strongholds. Labour did better than could have been expected in Scotland and the northwest of England, the latter being decisive in denying the Tories a majority government. Likewise, in the southwest of England, the Lib Dem vote held up consistently.<sup>8</sup>

There were 80 seats where Labour increased its share of the vote but also massive swings away from Labour of up to –24%, for example

in Barnsley East. Similarly there were 36 seats that had a swing from Labour to Conservative of over 10%. These surprise results, which bucked regional and national trends, further suggest there was widespread tactical voting in marginal seats.

Analysis by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher shows that just 19,000 votes in 19 marginal constituencies deprived the Conservative Party of a majority government, so tactical voting could well have deprived the Conservative Party of an overall majority.<sup>9</sup>

Tactical voting now plays a large part in British general elections under the first past the post electoral system. Yet in this election tactical voting is likely to have played a decisive role, depriving the Conservatives of a majority government. Evidence suggests there was an anti-Tory tactical vote outside safe Conservative constituencies. By extension it would suggest that tactical voting both helped increase the Labour vote and deprived the Conservatives of a majority government.

<sup>7</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/>

<sup>8</sup> [www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/stuart-wilks-heeg/tactical-voting-works-at-last](http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/stuart-wilks-heeg/tactical-voting-works-at-last)

<sup>9</sup> [www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7120733.ece](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/politics/article7120733.ece)



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Southbank House, Black Prince Road, London SE1 7SJ  
T: +44 (0) 20 7463 0632 | [joe@compassonline.org.uk](mailto:joe@compassonline.org.uk)  
[www.compassonline.org.uk](http://www.compassonline.org.uk)