

## Notes and Comments

### Constituency Characteristics, Individual Characteristics and Tactical Voting in the 1987 British General Election

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In Britain in recent years the study of tactical voting has become something of a growth industry. Unresolved, however, is a key question: the number of tactical voters. Despite an election-night estimate of 17 per cent,<sup>1</sup> a variety of later analysts have estimated that little more than one in twenty voters behaved tactically in 1987, a surprisingly low figure in the light of the efforts of various groups to encourage tactical voting in order to avoid fragmentation of the anti-Thatcher vote.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, Heath, Curtice and Jowell, in their analysis of the British Election Study survey, report that 'just 6.5% of major party voters indicated in their replies a tactical motivation for their vote'.<sup>3</sup>

In this Note, we argue that a considerably higher proportion – about one in every six voters – had tactical considerations in mind in deciding whom to vote for. Moreover, the proportion of tactical voters rose to very substantial proportions, as high as 35–40 per cent, in the most compelling circumstances and as high as 50–60 per cent among certain categories of respondents in those circumstances. We do not claim that these proportions voted *solely* on the basis of tactical considerations or even that they all voted for their second choice. Yet we think the evidence is strong that British voters

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<sup>1</sup> By the ITN/Harris Exit Poll; cited in Nina Fishman and Andrew Shaw, 'TV87: The Campaign to Make Tactical Voting Make Votes Count', in Ivor Crewe and Martin Harrop, eds, *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1987* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 299.

<sup>2</sup> R. J. Johnston and C. J. Pattie, 'Tactical Voting in Great Britain in 1983 and 1987: An Alternative Approach', *British Journal of Political Science*, 21 (1991), 95–128; John W. Galbraith and Nicol C. Rae, 'A Test of the Importance of Tactical Voting: Great Britain, 1987', *British Journal of Political Science*, 19 (1989), 126–36; John Curtice and Michael Steed, 'Appendix 2', in Butler and Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1987*.

<sup>3</sup> Anthony Heath, John Curtice, Roger Jowell *et al.*, *Understanding Political Change: The British Voter 1964–1987* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1991), p. 54.

'got the message' and that many were attuned to the possibility that casting a meaningful vote was not quite so straightforward as simply registering a preference.

#### THE PROPORTION OF TACTICAL VOTERS

Identifying tactical voters is not a trivial task. Inquiring directly about tactical motivations risks the possibility that the question elicits the desired answer, leading to an overestimate of tactical voting.<sup>4</sup> At the same time, voters may not readily admit to behaviour that sounds suspiciously unethical, leading to an underestimate of its actual frequency.<sup>5</sup> We shall have more to say about measurement questions after observing the results in a variety of circumstances and among various types of individuals. For the moment, however, we accept respondents' answers more or less at face value. There remains, however, the additional matter of which survey question(s) to use. We opt for combining responses to four different questions.

We begin with the most direct question: 'Which comes *closest* to the main reason you voted the way you did? – 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)'. Following Heath *et al.*, we coded as tactical voters those who said that their preferred party had no chance of winning (6.4 per cent), those who volunteered that they had voted tactically (0.2 per cent), and those who said that they voted against a party or candidate (0.5 per cent). After excluding a few inconsistent respondents,<sup>6</sup> these categories totalled 6.8 per cent of all voters.<sup>7,8</sup>

Following a series of intervening questions asking for evaluations of each of the parties, respondents were asked: 'Can you say a bit about why you decided to vote for that party [the one voted for]?' Up to eleven reasons were coded from a list containing several hundred categories. Of course, many of the respondents refer to particular issues or candidates, but some individuals were quite candid about having had tactical motivations, using the very word in saying that they had cast a 'tactical vote for' a particular party or a 'tactical vote against' a party, or by answering that a party had no chance of winning so they did not vote for it.<sup>9</sup> These individuals clearly fall into the tactical category on the basis of our second item.

Other respondents were somewhat less clear and precise in describing their behaviour as tactical. However, those (codes 186, 386, 586) indicating that they 'wanted to vote for a party that could win' (nationally or locally) seem to be saying that their preferred party or at least a party they considered voting for had little chance of winning. One might wish that these respondents (and the codes) had distinguished between the national and local levels; voting for a party that is likely to win nationally may not be very sensible (e.g., if the party has no chance in one's constituency). In addition, the lack

<sup>4</sup> Heath *et al.*, *Understanding Political Change*, p. 60.

<sup>5</sup> Helena Catt, 'Tactical Voting in Britain', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 42 (1989), p. 551.

<sup>6</sup> These are fourteen individuals who claimed to have voted for one of the three reasons indicated in the text but who in response to a follow-up question about their preferred party named the party they said they voted for.

<sup>7</sup> All of our analysis is based on voters only. Eighty-six per cent of the respondents claimed to have voted; the actual turnout rate was 75.3 per cent.

<sup>8</sup> Heath *et al.* give the figure 6.0 per cent in their text (p. 53) and cite a figure of 6.3 per cent (note 2) as the basis for their later analyses.

<sup>9</sup> Question 15B, codes 187, 287–8, 387, 487–8, 587 and 687–8. We did not differentiate between the first to eleventh reasons cited.

of specificity leaves room for the possibility that these respondents were naively interested in 'going with a winner' and had no real strategic calculations in mind. Yet asking for such clarity in response to a general question about why they voted for a particular party is probably more than we should expect. In any event, we considered these respondents as also falling into the tactical category on the basis of the second item.

Still other respondents (codes 189, 289, 389, 489, 589, 689) related their vote choice to the expected size of the parties in Parliament; they wanted to see a particular party have more seats (e.g., 'to be able to pass all their legislation') or fewer seats (e.g., 'not want them to have a large majority'). And a few individuals (codes 286, 486, 686) said that they had voted the way they did because a particular party was 'going to win anyway, did not need my vote'. We coded both of these groups as tactical because respondents described their behaviour as based at least partially on probabilities of winning and gave some suggestion that they may have voted contrary to their preferences on the basis of issues and leaders alone. Altogether, then, 9.6 per cent of the respondents were coded as tactical on the basis of the 'why voted for party' question.

There is, of course, overlap among those coded as tactical on these first two questions. Just over half of those who gave a tactical answer to the 'main reason' question also gave a tactical response to the second item. We interpret this (partial) overlap as simply reflecting the failure of individuals fully and clearly to articulate all of what they are aware of or all of what motivates their decisions.<sup>10</sup> On the basis of this reasoning, we consider probable tactical voters to be those who gave a tactical response to *either* question.<sup>11</sup>

In like fashion we used two additional items that indicate tactical thinking on the part of some respondents. Both were open ended, one asking relevant respondents why they no longer supported a party they had voted for in the past,<sup>12</sup> and the other asking respondents who never supported a party why they chose not to vote for it (variables 18A–J). Responses to both questions were coded using the same series of detailed codes noted above, and we considered the same responses as indicative of tactical voting.

The percentage categorized as tactical voters at each of our four steps is shown in Table 1. Also shown is the overlap among those classified as tactical at each step. Altogether, we regard some 17 per cent of the 1987 electorate as having said that they voted at least partly on the basis of tactical reasoning. About a quarter of these were classified as tactical on the basis of two or more questions.

Our estimate of the proportion of tactical voters thus matches very closely the election night estimate in contrast to more recent figures, especially Heath *et al.*'s estimate based on the same data we are using. Our analysis would be incomplete, however – and

<sup>10</sup> It is well known from studies in psychology that individuals are not able fully to explain their own behaviour or articulate their own thinking. An example from election studies in which people do not explain themselves fully is the failure of many American respondents to use liberal/conservative terminology in response to open-ended questions about the parties and candidates when it is clear from later questions that they recognize and understand such ideological descriptions and can correctly apply them to the parties. See Philip E. Converse, 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics', in David E. Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: Free Press, 1964).

<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Heath *et al.* (p. 54) argue that responses to the second question merely reinforce the results from the first item by showing that a similar proportion cite tactical motivations even when allowed to explain their vote in their own words.

<sup>12</sup> 'You say you have voted (Conservative, Labour, Liberal/SDP/ Alliance) in a general election since 1964. Why do you not support them nowadays?'

**TABLE 1** *Voters Citing Tactical Reasons for Their Vote in the 1987 British Election Survey*

Item	(a) Percentage categorized as tactical	(b) Percentage of tactical voters in (a) also categorized as tactical by at least one other item
Main reason for vote*	6.8	56%
Why voted for party†	9.6	45%
Why not support party now‡	4.5	51%
Why never supported party§	2.5	28%
Total	17.1	

*Note:* Based on voters only.  $N = 3,295$ .

\*'Which comes *closest* to the main reason you voted the way you did?'

†'Can you say a bit about why you decided to vote for that Party [the one voted for]?'

‡'You say you have voted (Conservative, Labour, Liberal/SDP/Alliance) in a general election since 1964. Why do you not support them nowadays?'

§'If never voted (Conservative, Labour, Liberal/SDP/Alliance): 'Why do you not support [party]?''

considerably less well validated – were we to go no further than determine the overall distribution of tactical voters. Tactical voting makes much more sense in some constituencies than in others and more sense for some kinds of respondents than for others. In the next two sections, therefore, we consider the relationship between tactical voting and, respectively, constituency characteristics and individual characteristics. We shall then combine both factors in a multivariate analysis.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSTITUENCY OUTCOME AND TACTICAL VOTING

The incentive for individuals to vote tactically depends crucially on the expected closeness of the election. If, for example, one's most preferred candidate is in third place but the top three candidates are separated by only a few percentage points, it makes little sense to abandon one's first preference. Given the uncertainties involved in predicting the actual result, one's most preferred candidate has about as good a chance of winning as do the top two; voting tactically would simply decrease that chance. In contrast, if one's most preferred candidate is far behind the top two, then sticking with one's favourite makes for a 'wasted vote'. In this circumstance, however, whether one should vote tactically may also depend on the closeness of the race between the top two candidates. If they are separated by a wide margin (i.e., one candidate is well ahead of all others), a tactical vote makes less sense than if they are neck and neck.

Based on these notions, we combined information about individual preferences and closeness of the election to create two variables that one might expect to be related

<sup>13</sup> Another important question is the effect of tactical voting on election outcomes. Although we have no independent estimate, we see no reason to question Curtice and Steed's estimate of perhaps one Labour and seven Alliance and Nationalist victories being partly attributable to tactical voting. We would, however, point out that this is no small thing in proportion to the total number of Alliance and nationalist victories in 1987. See Curtice and Steed, 'Appendix 2', p. 340.

to the frequency of tactical voting.<sup>14</sup> The first, which we call *distance from contention* (DCON), is the percentage difference between the vote for one's most preferred candidate and the vote for the lower of the two top contenders (or zero if one's most preferred candidate was in first or second place).<sup>15</sup> The further one's most preferred candidate is from contention, the more likely an individual should be to switch his or her vote to one of the two primary contenders. Thus, for example, if the result in a given constituency were Conservatives 35 per cent, Labour 33 per cent, Alliance 32 per cent, then  $DCON = 1$  for Alliance supporters and there is little incentive to vote for one of the other parties.<sup>16</sup> However, if the result were Conservatives 45 per cent, Labour 43 per cent, Alliance 12 per cent, then  $DCON = 31$  for Alliance supporters and they have a strong incentive to vote for one of the top two contenders.

The second variable, which we call competition (COMP), measures the closeness of the race between the two top parties in the constituency. To create this variable, we first calculated the difference between the first and second parties in each constituency. For example, if the result were Conservatives 45 per cent, Labour 40 per cent, Alliance 15 per cent, difference = 5; if the result were Conservatives 50 per cent, Labour 30 per cent, Alliance 20 per cent, difference = 20. We then subtracted the difference score in each constituency from its maximum value across the constituencies sampled – i.e., 40 – and assigned a code of zero if one's most preferred party was in first or second place. Hence, a positive relationship would be expected: the higher the difference score, the more likely the individual would be to vote tactically. In the example above,  $COMP = 35$  and 20, respectively.

As it turns out, only one of these constituency variables is related to the frequency of tactical voting, but that relationship is a strong one. Table 2 shows the relationship between distance from contention and the frequency of tactical voting. As expected, tactical voting increases sharply as a voter's most preferred party drops further and further behind the top two contenders. At the extreme, when the most preferred party is more than 24 percentage points out of contention, close to 40 per cent of the voters

<sup>14</sup> Tactical voting is usually thought to be limited to individuals whose most preferred candidate is in third place or lower. In developing expectations relating to constituency characteristics, we shall assume that to be the case.

<sup>15</sup> Ideally one would use individual pre-election expectations or poll results in individual constituencies. Not having such expectations or results, we shall follow the lead of Cain in 'Strategic Voting in Britain', and of Jerome Black, 'The Multicandidate Calculus of Voting: Application to Canadian Federal Elections', *American Journal of Political Science*, 22 (1978), 609–38. These authors use actual election results as a proxy. Cain's (p. 647) perspective on this point is worth quoting: 'proxies for [the expected closeness of the race] are constructed from the actual constituency results on the assumption that they capture with some random measurement error people's expectations of the eventual outcome'. The alternative is to use constituency outcomes from the most recent *past* election. In this case that would mean 1983; not only would people's recollections have dimmed, but the objective situation – even the number of candidates itself – would have changed in some constituencies. In any event, we tried that variant and the results were little different from those shown below in that DCON is strongly related to tactical voting.

<sup>16</sup> Technically, of course, the incentive to vote tactically depends on the utility differentials (relative strengths of preference) for the various candidates. Utilities are sometimes estimated directly from thermometer ratings, which are not available in the 1987 British study; see Cain, 'Strategic Voting in Britain'; Paul R. Abramson, John Aldrich, Phil Paolino and David W. Rohde, "'Sophisticated" Voting in the 1988 Presidential Primaries', *American Political Science Review*, 86 (1992), forthcoming. Later we shall use strength of party identification as a partial indicator of strength of preferences.

claim to have made their decision at least partly on the basis of tactical considerations. The relationship is equally strong for those who cited tactical voting as the main reason for their choice, and over a quarter of the respondents in the most extreme category cited the tactical situation as their primary consideration.

TABLE 2 *Frequency of Tactical Voting by Distance from Contention of Voter's Most Preferred Candidate*

Distance from contention	Percentage tactical (main reason)	Percentage tactical (any reason)	Respondents	
			Number	(%)
0%*	4.4%	14.7%	2,668	(81.0)
0.1–6.0%	10.9%	21.9%	201	(6.1)
6.1–12.0%	16.2%	24.7%	154	(4.7)
12.1–18.0%	19.8%	30.2%	126	(3.8)
18.1–24.0%	20.0%	31.2%	80	(2.4)
Over 24.0%	27.3%	37.9%	66	(2.0)

\*Most preferred party was in first or second place.

The table also shows the distribution of respondents across constituencies when categorized by distance from contention. For fully 80 per cent of the respondents, their most preferred party was the one in first or second place in the final outcome in that constituency. Conversely, the most preferred party was out of contention by more than 12 percentage points for less than 10 per cent of the respondents. Thus, while it is true that in the country as a whole tactical voting occurred with only moderate frequency – more or less so depending on which criterion one employs – where it made sense for the individual, tactical voting was quite frequently considered and, indeed, was often the dominant consideration.<sup>17</sup>

What cannot be explained with the information at hand are individuals who claim to have voted tactically yet are in constituencies in which their most preferred candidate was in first or second place. Perhaps such voters misperceived the situation, thinking that their most preferred candidates would do less well than they in fact did. This explanation seems unlikely (while still being possible) when it is realized that many of these individuals reported that prior to election day they were aware of which party would win the constituency (and correctly named the winning party). Another possibility is that these respondents had in mind something other than our conception when they described their vote as a tactical one; we shall return to this point later. In any event, for the moment, the presence of such voters remains unexplained.

Somewhat surprisingly, the variable measuring the competitiveness of the top two contenders in the constituency is unrelated to the frequency of tactical voting. In fact, if constituencies are grouped by whether the first- and second-place finishers were within 5 percentage points or were 5.1–10 points, 10.1–15 points and over 15 points apart,

<sup>17</sup> Heath *et al.*, *Understanding Political Change*, p. 57, also make the point that tactical voting varies according to circumstances, and they show that 35 per cent of one group of voters claim to have voted tactically. However, their primary emphasis is on the low level of tactical voting, even under the most compelling circumstances.

the lowest proportion of tactical voters (by a small margin) actually occurred among those in the most hotly contested districts.

An explanation for the absence of a relationship between competitiveness and tactical voting may lie in the voters' recognition that few elections are genuine cliffhangers; the probability that an individual vote will be decisive is exceedingly small when the electorate is large.<sup>18</sup> Alternatively, voters in highly marginal seats who once preferred the third party may have voted tactically over the years and finally shifted their preferences to one of the top contenders. Whatever the explanation, the closeness of the race between the top two parties in the constituency was irrelevant to the British electorate in 1987.

#### INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS AND TACTICAL VOTING

Although the number of tactical voters is quite large when the most preferred party is well out of contention, some voters obviously persist in supporting a sure loser. The motivations behind these votes are likely to be quite varied, including for some an orientation towards the future and for others a desire to increase the party's national vote despite a near-certain loss in the constituency. Our interest here is in identifying individual characteristics that strengthen or weaken the tendency to vote tactically.

The strength of one's partisan attachment is likely to affect tactical voting because it is an indicator of the utility one derives from having one's most preferred party win. Strong party identifiers should be relatively disinclined to vote tactically even when their favoured party is in a hopeless situation; weak identifiers should more easily abandon their party when it is unlikely to prevail. As shown in Table 3, this expectation is handsomely supported. Among strong partisans, 11 per cent claim to have voted tactically; among the weakest identifiers, more than double that number cite tactical considerations. When controlling for the tactical situation, the relationship remains strong.

TABLE 3 *Frequency of Tactical Voting by Strength of Partisan Attachment and Distance from Contention*

Distance from contention	Strength of partisan attachment		
	Strong	Fairly strong	Not very strong
0%	9.4% (563)	13.2% (1,163)	21.5% (648)
0.1–6.0%	16.7% (36)	20.7% (82)	26.7% (60)
Over 6.0%	20.6% (63)	36.1% (180)	26.7% (150)
Total†	10.9% (662)	16.6% (1,425)	22.7% (858)

\* Most preferred party was in first or second place.

†  $N = 2,945$ .

The educational level of the respondent is also likely to be related to the level of tactical voting, though for a different reason. Respondents with a high level of education,

<sup>18</sup> William H. Riker and Peter C. Ordeshook, 'A Theory of the Calculus of Voting', *American Political Science Review*, 62 (1968), 25–42.

in part because of their generally greater interest in politics, are more likely to have been aware of the tactical voting campaign in 1987 and to have understood the arguments behind it. Thus, other things being equal, we expect tactical voting to increase with rising levels of education. That this was true is shown in Table 4. The frequency of tactical voting among university-educated respondents was nine percentage points higher than what it was among those who finished their schooling by the age of 14. As with partisanship, the relationship survives a control for the tactical situation, although again, not quite perfectly.<sup>19</sup>

TABLE 4 *Frequency of Tactical Voting by Education and Distance from Contention.*

Distance from contention	Education (age schooling finished)			
	Age 14	Age 15	Age 16	After age 16
0%	11.3% (639)	12.7% (653)	15.2% (638)	19.1% (738)
0.1–6.0%	21.3% (47)	14.0% (57)	27.8% (36)	26.2% (61)
Over 6.0%	21.2% (118)	23.6% (89)	34.0% (97)	38.5% (122)
Total†	13.3% (804)	14.0% (799)	18.2% (771)	22.1% (921)

\*Most preferred party was in first or second place.

†N = 3,295

We also expected tactical voting to be greater among those who accurately perceived the constituency situation. In a post-election poll, it is impossible to measure these perceptions perfectly. None the less, respondents were asked if they remembered on election day which party they thought would win the constituency. Those who recalled that they did (and named the party that actually won) were indeed more likely to report having voted tactically. The difference was small (16 per cent versus 13 per cent) but, as we shall see, it survived in a multivariate test.

A final reason for voting tactically was frequently mentioned during the 1987 campaign: dislike of the leading party. Specifically, dislike of the Conservative party was often given as a reason for choosing whichever of Labour or Alliance was best placed to 'throw the rascals out' in a specific constituency. We implemented this variable quite generally, however, in terms of feelings towards the party in first place in each constituency, whether that was the Conservatives or another party. Increasing dislike was coded with higher values, so that a positive relationship between this variable and tactical voting was expected.<sup>20</sup> The expected connection was in fact found, although the relationship was something of a step-function. Among those most favourable towards the winning party, only 8 per cent voted tactically; this rose to, 18, 17, 23 and 22 per cent among those increasingly hostile to the winner.

<sup>19</sup> Felsenthal and Brichta found that university-educated respondents in Israel claimed to have voted tactically (in some past election) much more frequently than those with only a high school education. See Dan S. Felsenthal and Avraham Brichta, 'Sincere and Strategic Voters: An Israeli Study', *Political Behavior*, 7 (1985), 311–24.

<sup>20</sup> Liking or disliking the parties is given in variables 13A–F.

## A MULTIVARIATE MODEL

In order to determine the joint impact of constituency and individual characteristics on tactical voting, we combined the variables discussed above in a multivariate model. Because the dependent variable is dichotomous and fairly skewed, we used a logit procedure. The results, shown in Table 5, are in accord with the bivariate results and offer further support for the presence of frequent tactical voting in favourable circumstances.

TABLE 5 *A Multivariate Model of Tactical Voting*

Predictor	Coefficient
Intercept	-4.17* (0.28)†
Distance between top two finishers in constituency	0.00 (0.00)
Distance of preferred party from contention	0.05* (0.01)
Strength of partisanship	0.45* (0.08)
Education	0.18* (0.05)
Recalled knowing which party would win in the constituency	0.41* (0.13)
Negative feelings about party winning the constituency	0.18* (0.04)
Number of cases	2,910
-2 log likelihood	2,329.2

\* $p < 0.01$

†Standard errors are in parentheses.

Distance from contention, partisanship, education, knowledge of the constituency outcome and negative feelings about the party winning the constituency, all had a substantial effect on the proportion of tactical voters.<sup>21</sup> For example, a respondent with mean values for all other characteristics<sup>22</sup> had a predicted probability of voting tactically of 9 per cent if he was a strong party identifier, 13 per cent if he was a fairly strong identifier and 19 per cent if he was a weak identifier. Similarly, a respondent with mean values otherwise had a predicted probability of voting tactically of 11 per cent if she left school at age fourteen, but of 12, 14 and 17 per cent if she remained in

<sup>21</sup> If we define the dependent variable by responses to the first three items in Table 1, the coefficients differ little; tactical voting is almost equally frequent under the circumstances described below.

<sup>22</sup> Mean values are: DCON = 2.3; COMP = 8.7; strength of partisanship = 2.1; education = 2.6; recalled winner = 0.8; negative towards winning party = 2.7.

school until successively later ages. A respondent with mean values otherwise who could not recall which party would win in the constituency had a predicted probability of 9 per cent of voting tactically compared to 13 per cent for one who did recall knowing the likely winner. And respondents with mean values otherwise had predicted probabilities of tactical voting varying from 10 to 19 per cent depending on how much they disliked the winning party.<sup>23</sup>

The constituency factor, distance from contention, has a wide range, with correspondingly large differences between respondents in extreme categories. Consistent with the bivariate results, a non-trivial proportion who were otherwise at the mean were estimated to have voted tactically even though their most preferred party was among the top two finishers (12 per cent). However, this changed quickly as distance of their preferred party from contention increased. For example, the estimated probabilities of voting tactically rose to 23 per cent and 38 per cent, respectively, for respondents whose most preferred party was 15 per cent and 30 per cent behind the second-place finisher.

Combining variables, of course, yields still more differentiated results. On the one hand, only 3–5 per cent of strong party identifiers with a poor education and positive feelings about the winning party, whose most preferred party was in first or second place are estimated to have voted tactically. On the other hand, weak identifiers with a relatively high education and strongly negative feelings about the winning party, whose most preferred party was well behind the top two finishers (15–30 per cent), had very substantial probabilities (38–67 per cent) of voting tactically. Of course, in interpreting the extremely high probabilities, it is worth emphasizing that most respondents did not find themselves in such constituencies (see Table 2), let alone have individual characteristics that encouraged them to vote tactically. None the less, it seems clear that under the 'right' circumstances – i.e., when one's favoured party was far from winning, especially when this was true for highly educated and weakly partisan individuals – a large proportion of British voters in 1987 were persuaded to cast a tactical ballot.

## CONCLUSION

Our analysis of the 1987 British general election paints a somewhat different picture of tactical voting than previous studies. In particular, it sharply contradicts an earlier interpretation of the primary survey evidence. By combining answers to a wider set of questions about reasons for one's vote, we found that as many as one in six British voters claimed to have made their decisions at least partly on the basis of tactical considerations. Bringing constituency type and voter characteristics into the picture, we found extreme instances in which a majority were estimated to have voted tactically. Pressure groups apparently did not fail to get the message across and voters were not

<sup>23</sup> Lanoue and Bowler included negative feelings about the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and the Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, as well as a measure of negative feelings for the party winning the constituency. Their results suggest that it may have been anti-Thatcher feelings that prompted tactical votes. See David J. Lanoue and Shaun Bowler, 'The Sources of Tactical Voting in British Parliamentary Elections, 1983–1987' (unpublished paper, University of California, Riverside).

so inattentive to politics that they cast their ballots without regard to the likely consequences.<sup>24</sup>

At the same time, elements of our analysis compel us to recognize the tentativeness of our results. Firstly, we have accepted individuals' responses at face value and, as we noted at the outset, there are reasons to expect both over- and under-reporting of tactical voting. Secondly, the perverse finding that respondents claim to have voted tactically even though their most preferred party finished in first or second place remained stubbornly with us throughout our investigation. Indeed, this was true even when we limited the analysis to those who cited tactical voting as the main reason for their vote choice.

It is possible, of course, that the latter result can be explained away as merely due to perceptual bias – that these respondents *thought* their most preferred party was out of the race. But obvious evidence to support that explanation is lacking. Most especially, recall what happened when we controlled for education. One might expect that in non-tactical situations (i.e., when voters prefer one of the top two finishers) the proportion of tactical voters would *decrease* among the well-educated. But instead the proportion increased (Table 4); educated voters, who presumably better understood the tactical situation, were most likely to claim a tactical vote when they should have voted for their stated preferences.

Alternatively, many voters may think in terms of the national contest and cast what they think of as a tactical vote even though such a choice does not make sense in their particular constituency. However, this possibility again flies in the face of the relationship between education and tactical behaviour. Surely the better educated would be precisely those most likely to be aware that the national situation provides no reason for casting a tactical vote.

In any event, the possibility of response bias, the cryptic nature of some of the responses that we counted as tactical and our perverse finding about nontactical situations, all raise questions about how voters understand and interpret tactical voting and what they have in mind when they tell interviewers they voted tactically.<sup>25</sup> They also raise the more fundamental question of whether one should ask respondents directly about tactical voting instead of identifying tactical voters strictly through a comparison of preferences and votes.

We think there is much to be gained by asking respondents directly about tactical voting. For example, failure to consider a candidate at all because of concerns over viability would not be detected from a comparison of stated preferences and votes, but respondents might articulate such reasoning if asked. At the same time, there are also reasons to think carefully about research design when tactical voting is an issue. We have already mentioned, for example, that some respondents who switch their votes because a candidate has little chance of winning may also change their stated preferences. This might go undetected without a panel design that captured original preferences.

However considered, the growing number of studies documenting its existence indicate

<sup>24</sup> We say that pressure groups 'apparently' got the message across because we lack over-time data; we cannot confidently say that tactical voting *increased* over prior years. Note also that we take no issue with the argument of Heath *et al.*, *Understanding Political Change*, p. 54, that tactical voting was not all directed against one party.

<sup>25</sup> It may be, for example, that some respondents refer to tactical behaviour when they engage in what most political scientists call bandwagon voting.

that tactical voting needs to be taken seriously.<sup>26</sup> What our analysis adds is an appreciation of just how widespread tactical considerations (of some sort) are. Especially when constituency and individual characteristics are most supportive, it appears that tactical thinking is not the province of a small band of political *aficionados*, but is engaged in by a good many otherwise ordinary voters.

<sup>26</sup> In addition to studies cited earlier, see S. L. Fisher, 'The Wasted Vote Thesis: West German Evidence', *Comparative Politics*, 5 (1973), 293–9; Larry Bartels, *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988); André Blais, Richard Johnston, Henry E. Brady and Jean Crête, 'The Dynamics of Horse Race Expectations in the 1988 Canadian Election' (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Victoria, BC, 1990). Tactical voting was also found in a small experimental study of approval voting; see Richard G. Niemi and Larry Bartels, 'The Responsiveness of Approval Voting to Political Circumstances', *PS*, 17 (1984), 571–7.

### **The Hawthorne Effect in Election Studies: The Impact of Survey Participation on Voting**

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Movements of the heavenly bodies are not affected in any discernible way by the fact that there are people on earth recording the apparent movement. Similarly it is almost inconceivable that the planets would alter their orbits because of Kepler's discovery and publication of the laws of planetary motion. The social and behavioural sciences are different in that the objects under investigation may behave differently as a result of the research process.<sup>1</sup> This is particularly true when the method involves naturalistic observation, surveys or experiments. When people behave differently because of being research subjects, this is called a Hawthorne effect.<sup>2</sup>

We could differentiate here between behavioural variations that appear while the

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<sup>1</sup> This is different from the principle of limited measurability identified by Heisenberg in physics. It holds that the position and momentum of an electron cannot be measured simultaneously. This is quite different from asserting that the characteristics or movement of an electron might be affected by the fact that it is being observed.

<sup>2</sup> See John R. P. French Jr, 'Experiments in Field Settings' in L. Festinger and D. Katz, eds, *Research Methods in the Social Sciences* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1953), pp. 98–135; F. J. Roethlisberger and William J. Dickson, *Management and the Worker* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939); John Ross and Perry Smith, 'Orthodox Experimental Designs' in H. Blalock and A. Blalock, eds, *Methodology in Social Research* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1968), pp. 333–89. Exactly what was found in the Hawthorne Western Electric Studies is a matter of continuing controversy in the social sciences. See, for example, R. H. Franke, 'The Hawthorne Experiments: Re-view', *American Sociological Review*, 44 (1979), 861–7; Dana Bramel and Ronald Friend, 'Hawthorne, the Myth of the Docile Worker, and Class Bias in Psychology', *American Psychologist*, 36 (1981), 867–78; H. M. Parsons, 'What Happened at Hawthorne?', *Science*, 183 (1974), 922–32. This issue cannot be pursued here as our interest is only in the general possibility, which nearly everyone would concede, that people may behave differently because of participating in research.