

Polling and Tactical Voting

Tactical voting advice

If your first priority is to prevent the UK leaving the EU with Johnson's hard Brexit deal, then you will want to defeat the Conservative and Brexit Party candidates in your constituency. This may involve voting tactically, for a party which would not normally be your first choice. For this, you need information on likely outcomes at constituency level, and there are at least 5 websites offering advice on this. At 20th November, four of them agree on 90% of constituencies. Best for Britain disagrees most often, mainly recommending LibDem votes in seats where others recommend Labour.

The reasons for the differences relate to the methods used to predict, especially to how much weight they give to past voting patterns (General Elections in 2010, 2015, and 2017, the EU referendum in 2016, and the European Parliament Election in 2019), to current voting intentions in national opinion polls, and to local intelligence.

The problem of national polls

Most opinion polls tell us about what people across the nation think about an issue. To produce reasonably accurate information at that level, they need the views of at least 1000 people selected to represent the population in terms of region, sex, age group, political affiliation and voting record. However, because our elections are conducted on a constituency basis, and local factors can make a big difference, a national poll is a poor guide to the final result of an election. A constituency with a high proportion of retired voters may vote very differently from one with a high proportion of students. Also, because we vote under the "first past the post" system, a vote for a smaller party is often wasted, while a party with only 20% of the national vote, but concentrated in the right number of areas, can elect a lot of MPs.

Because there are 650 constituencies, a national poll of 1000 people means fewer than 2 in the average constituency, which is obviously far too small to tell us anything about how that constituency might vote. To find that out requires either polling in that specific constituency or a national poll on a very large scale. Both are extremely expensive, and rarely carried out, except sometimes in particularly critical marginal constituencies.

"MRP" an alternative way of polling

To deal with this, pollsters have designed alternative ways of assessing opinion in individual constituencies. The one which has been recently introduced, and is now being widely used is "MRP"¹. The maths is complex, but the principle is simple. It assumes that similar people will vote in similar ways, whatever their constituency. If you know how a particular kind of person votes, and the number of such people there are in a particular constituency, you can predict how they will vote, and you can add all the groups together to produce an estimate of how the constituency will vote.

This is how it works:

1. you conduct a (fairly large) national poll, asking for opinions and identifying all respondents by factors like age, sex, employment, past voting etc.

¹ "Multiple regression and post stratification".

2. you look at how particular groups responded – perhaps you find that 68% of women in social class C1, aged over 65 who voted Labour in 2017 say they will vote Labour again
3. you gather data on all constituencies, finding how many people there are in each group in each constituency – you find that 2% of the population in constituency A are women in social class C1, aged over 65 voted Labour in 2017.
4. you combine the two sets of figures for all the groups in each constituency, to produce an estimate of opinion in that constituency.

In the 2017 election, this proved much more accurate than conventional national polling. However, it is important to understand its limitations:

- it depends on the accuracy of your original poll. In general, the larger the sample the better, but only if that sample is really representative. For example, different polling companies make different assumptions about how likely people are to vote.
- It depends on the factors that included when defining groups (has it taken account of all the things which distinguish groups?). In the Brexit referendum, for example, it was clear that retired people with lower levels of qualification were much more likely to vote Leave than employed people with degrees. In that situation, a poll which had failed to include retirement or employment status in the calculation, might get the result wrong.
- Recommendations will change over time. As the national polling shows changes in voting intention, the figures feeding into the formula will change. So it is important to use the most up to date recommendations.
- Postal voting affects results. About one in five voters do so by post, they are more likely to vote and they are very unevenly distributed across constituencies (ranging from 1% in Belfast to 44% in Newcastle North in 2017). Postal ballots go out a fortnight before polling day. Many postal voters vote immediately, and their votes will not reflect any changes in opinion in the last fortnight of the campaign

Tactical Voting websites

There are five tactical voting websites offering advice on how to maximise a remain/people's vote result (and one advising on how to maximise the Brexit vote). There are also two sites which gather information from all five in one place. The two comparison sites are:

Compare the Tacticals, at

<https://www.livefrombrexit.com/tacticals/?fbclid=IwAR3oYgCGKFltotHY1u0huwvt0BTDoipKl1LQ1L8Q58EeCH4sZu7BNU3G6g4>

Don't split the remain vote, at <https://dontsplittheremainvote.com/>

The individual sites are:

Best for Britain: <https://getvoting.org/>

People's Vote/Open Britain: <https://tactical-vote.uk/>

Remain United: <https://www.remainunited.org/>

tactical.vote: <https://tactical.vote/>

tacticalvote.co.uk (Stop the Tories): <https://tacticalvote.co.uk/>

Tactical.vote provides the most information about methodology

Proportional Representation

Most democratic countries vote on some form of proportional basis so the number of MPs elected roughly matches the number of votes cast. There are a variety of ways of doing this.

Our first past the post electoral system is relatively unusual². In its favour, it is often claimed that it produces clear results and strong governments, while proportional systems result in many small parties, and complex inter-party negotiations to form coalition governments. However, our system has failed to produce a clear result in the last three elections: the last clear result was in 2005.

There are two clear weaknesses in our system:

- Voters are largely ignored in the majority of constituencies, because most seats are “safe” for one party or another. Some have elected the same party in every election since 1945. Voters for other parties in those constituencies never stand a chance of winning. This means that during elections parties concentrate on the 100 or so marginal seats, and ignore the rest.
- Because party support is not evenly distributed, the results rarely match overall voting patterns. In 2015 a quarter of votes went to smaller parties, but they elected only 10 MPs between them. In England in 2017 Conservatives won 56% of seats with 46% of the votes, while LibDems won 1.5% of seats with 8% of the votes.
- The number of votes required to elect an MP varies enormously. Large numbers spread evenly across the country can produce no MPs, while the same number concentrated in a small number of constituencies can produce a lot. In 2017 the average Conservative MP was elected by 43,000 voters, while 594,000 UKIP voters got no MPs at all.
- A government can be elected with less than 40% of the votes (happened in 2005 and 2015). The more candidates in a constituency the greater likelihood of electing an MP opposed by more than half the voters. The extreme case was in 2015 when the winner won less than a quarter of the votes.

² The exceptions are mainly former British colonies which inherited British electoral systems.