

Thinking About Voting

by Moshé Machover

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Dear Comrade,

This letter to you is based on three assumptions. First and foremost, that you are a socialist. If you are not, then you received this letter by mistake, for which I apologize. You need read no further.

Second, that you consider seriously voting in the forthcoming general elections. If you are one of those socialists who think that we should confine ourselves to extra-parliamentary activity and that voting in bourgeois parliamentary elections is a waste of time – or, worse, a dangerous delusional diversion from ‘real’ politics – then stop reading at this point.

Third, that you are prepared to think rationally about how you ought to vote. Most people, including many socialists, cast their vote either out of habit or from an unthinking incoherent mixture of motives. I hope to persuade you to think analytically about this issue.

I do not presume to tell you whom you should vote for: this must depend on your motive for voting, about which you alone can decide. As I hope to explain, there are at least three different sorts of motive for voting. All three are reasonable. What I hope to explain is how each of these motives points rationally to a specific voting behaviour. Once you have clarified to yourself your main motive for voting, then – if you are persuaded by the rationality of my argument – you will be in a position to decide for whom you should cast your vote.

1. Sincere voting: Standing up to be counted

Ostensibly (and according to the prevailing ideology), the sole aim of voting is to help to determine who will represent – or, more likely, misrepresent – you in parliament; and, at the same time, which party will be in office for the next few years.¹

But a little reflection will convince you that this is a very naïve view. In a safe constituency, your chance of having any effect on who gets elected is virtually zilch: the safe candidate will win whichever way you vote. Nevertheless, lots of people do vote in such constituencies.

¹ Most of what I shall say in this letter applies equally to other countries, such as the US, where the legislature is elected by plurality vote (‘first past the post’). However the present point is an exception: in the US voting for the executive (the President) and the legislature are separate.

Also, in all constituencies (including marginal ones) millions of people vote for candidates who have no hope of winning. By no means all these voters are irrational or ill-informed.²

In fact, a very common motive for voting is the desire to be counted, albeit supposedly anonymously,³ as a supporter of a given party or a given political view. A voter may simply wish to make a point: ‘win or lose, I am (say) a revolutionary socialist’.⁴

If this is your main motivation for voting – and it is a perfectly reasonable and honourable one – then it follows that you ought to vote *sincerely*: vote for that candidate whose political position is not seriously objectionable and is closest to yours, irrespective of that candidate’s likelihood of winning. If you feel that all candidates in your constituency are politically objectionable, then the right thing to do is to cast a blank ballot paper.⁵

In almost all constituencies, a socialist voting sincerely (in the sense just described) would be voting for a no-hoper, or actively abstaining.

2. Tactical voting: Choosing the lesser evil

Many socialists prefer to use their vote for trying to influence the composition of the next parliament, and thereby that of the government that will emerge out of it. Since all major parties are at present pro-capitalist, the best that such use of the vote can hope for is a lesser evil. This use of the vote is *tactical* voting.

Although the political differences between New Labour and the Conservative Party are not very great, it is clear that a Conservative government, during its term in office, would be worse for the working class and more reactionary than the alternative.⁶ Therefore the primary aim of tactical voting (as far as socialists are concerned) is to keep the Tories out of office.

If your aim in voting is to help to elect the least evil parliament, and the Tory candidate in your constituency has a realistic prospect of being elected, then you ought to vote for whichever candidate, standing to the left of the Tory, has the best chance of winning. If your

² While opinion polls are often inaccurate, they nevertheless enable us to determine – even allowing for any realistically possible polling error – which candidates are virtually certain to win, and which have no hope of winning.

³ Contrary to credulous belief, elections in this country are not strictly secret. The ballot paper you are given at the polling station bears a number. The same number appears on the counterfoil, on which the clerk who issues the paper to you writes also your registration number, copied from the electoral register. Officially, this arrangement is only used to check for errors or fraud. But in practice it can be, and has been, used by the secret services to trace voters for ‘suspect’ candidates. See correspondence on this in ‘Notes & Queries’, *The Guardian* 23.03.92, 30.03.92 and 27.04.92.

⁴ However, in the literature on voting there is evidence that some people treat elections as a sort of horse-race, and vote for a likely winner in order to have the satisfaction of having ‘backed a winner’. It is a moot question whether such ‘bandwagon voting’ can be regarded as rational or socio-psychopathological.

⁵ This is *active* abstention. It makes a clear political statement – unlike *passive* abstention (failure to vote), which may well be interpreted as mere indifference.

⁶ This is certainly true in most respects. However, it is arguable that there are some reactionary items of legislation passed under the Blair government, that the Conservatives would not wish or dare to enact.

constituency is one of those where there is no realistic Tory candidate, then the best use of your vote will be for the most left-wing (or least right-wing) of those candidates who do have some realistic prospect of winning.

A more sophisticated version of lesser-evil tactics is based on the idea that a large New Labour majority in parliament, while less bad than a Tory majority, is less good than a small New Labour majority, which is therefore the least evil. Tactical voting designed to achieve this result is of course possible; but it is somewhat risky. This is because opinion polls are much more reliable in predicting which party will win than the size of its majority. Tactical voting aimed at achieving a small New Labour majority may well overshoot and produce an undesired outcome.

Be that as it may, it is clear that a lesser-evil tactics, in either version, implies that in most constituencies socialists should vote for New Labour.

3. Strategic voting: Looking beyond the next parliament

Most people (including most experts) tend to believe that the two options discussed so far – sincere voting and tactical voting – exhaust all rational possibilities. This is false.

The point about tactical voting is that it focuses entirely on the composition of the next parliament and government. This can, and does, lead to unintended but predictable longer-term consequences.

The New Labour leaders are, as you know, absolutely cynical: they have junked all true commitment to progressive – let alone socialist – values and ideals. They are interested in one thing only: being in office, and staying in office, with as large a majority as possible.⁷ Their policies are designed to achieve this result: to maximize their share of the vote, especially in marginal constituencies. What is their strategy for achieving this?

They realize that they have little hope of gaining votes from hard-core Tory voters. This means that they have to stay near the centre of the political spectrum, slightly to the left of the Tories.

How slightly? Very slightly indeed; as slightly as they dare, without seriously risking losing too many votes on the left.

These cynics know that they have little hope of getting the votes of those socialists who vote sincerely. The only exceptions to this rule are those sincerely voting socialists whose sitting MP is one of the diminishing band of genuine Labour leftists.

Therefore those socialist voters who habitually vote sincerely have been discounted in advance by the cynics, and so have little or no effect on New Labour policies.

On the other hand, the New Labour cynics also know that they are certain to get the votes of most tactically-voting socialists, provided the latter are persuaded that the Tories are even worse.

Therefore the New Labour policies are designed to go as far to the right as possible, in order to capture as many votes as possible in the centre and moderate right of centre of the

⁷ I say ‘office’ rather than ‘power’, because in this society real power is held by capital – whichever party is in office.

spectrum; but at the same time to leave a very slight distance between New Labour and the Tories, in order to guarantee the votes of most socialist tactical voters.

Strategically speaking, the tactical socialist voters are playing a mug's game, according to the script written for them by the New Labour cynics.

Their tactical votes may help to keep the Tories out, but they allow New Labour – and with it the whole parliamentary spectrum – to move further and further to the right.

If you don't want to play this mug's game, but do wish your vote to have some influence on the political scene, you ought to start *thinking strategically*; this means thinking about the longer term, beyond the next parliament.

The only realistic chance of foiling New Labour's cynical strategy and stopping or even slowing its career to the right is a realization by those cynics that this loses them more votes on the left than they gain on the right. If you want to help to achieve this, you ought to consider *voting strategically*.

This means not voting for any Labour candidate, except in a constituency in which that candidate is a sitting MP with well-proven leftist record. (The promises of an ostensibly leftist Labour candidate who is not an incumbent must be taken with a large pinch of salt: the New Labour benches, including the front one, are crowded with such people who have been whipped into betrayal.)

In most other constituencies, socialist strategic voting should be identical with sincere voting.

The exceptions are constituencies in which a sitting Labour leftist MP is not running, but there is a realistic candidate belonging to one of the left or left-of-centre parties (including the Lib Dems). A socialist strategic vote should be cast for the most realistic such candidate.

As a socialist, you may demur at voting for the Lib Dems, a bourgeois party. But strategically this makes good sense, provided such a candidate has a realistic chance of winning.

On most issues, the Lib Dems are to the left of New Labour. However, you may object that on some issues the former are to the right of the latter. This may or may not be true. But it is certainly true that the Lib Dems are not to the right of the Tories on any issue, and well to their left on most.

Therefore the best thing that can happen to UK parliamentary politics in the medium term is for the Lib Dems to replace the Tories as the second major party. This would shift the entire spectrum of UK parliamentary politics massively to the left. Just imagine New Labour having to compete for votes with the Lib Dems rather than with the Tories! I must admit that this is not very likely; but it is not beyond the realm of possibility. By voting strategically for a realistic Lib Dem candidate, you may help to bring about this happy outcome.

This is why in the next general election I shall be voting for the sitting MP of my constituency, Sarah Teather (Lib Dem, Brent East). By the way, she has a good voting record, including on matters concerning Palestine – an issue dear to my heart.

I cannot deny that voting strategically involves a risk: it may possibly result in a parliament with a Tory majority. But, as every chess player knows, a good strategy may dictate making tactical sacrifices. If you think strategically, such sacrifices may well be worth risking.