

BREACHING THE BLUE WALL: COULD TACTICAL VOTING HELP ENGLAND'S 'PROGRESSIVE' PARTIES DEFEAT THE CONSERVATIVES?

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ABSTRACT

The Conservatives won a big majority in 2019 despite winning the support of fewer than half the electorate, so it's not surprising that the idea of a 'progressive alliance' on the centre-left continues to provoke discussion. Assuming the likelihood of an electoral pact between the Liberal Democrats and Labour is close to zero, we look instead at the potential impact of anti-Conservative tactical voting – especially in some of the seats in southern England that have come to be known as the 'blue wall'. We argue there are gains to be made, but they aren't huge – unless, that is, a whole bunch of Tory voters can be converted too.

The Conservative Party won an eighty-seat majority in 2019 with the support of considerably less than half the country's voters. It is easy to see why, therefore, some supporters of opposition parties are tempted to talk of an anti-Tory electoral alliance capable of converting what they see as a 'progressive majority' of voters into a progressive majority at Westminster. After all, opposition parties committed to a second EU referendum – Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, SNP and Plaid Cymru – won 52% of the vote across Great Britain in 2019, but only secured 42% of seats.

Such an alliance, however, is a pipe-dream – at least in any formal sense. It may be possible, as the 'Unite to Remain' initiative in 2019 demonstrated, to persuade relatively minor opposition parties in some places to do stand-down deals with each other. But the Labour Party seems unlikely ever to propose or to agree to some kind of explicit pre-electoral pact. The SNP's participation in such a pact – or unionist parties' cooperation with a party calling for the break-up of the UK – appears unlikelier still.

Consequently, a more realistic prospect is for the nation's 'progressive' parties to identify those seats where tactical voting – perhaps tacitly, perhaps actively encouraged – may allow them to beat the Conservatives. This may be particularly relevant in England, where the lack of unionist versus nationalist politics may facilitate stronger anti-Conservative tactical voting. In this working paper, we examine where and how much that could make a difference – with a primary (though not entirely exclusive) focus on those Southern English seats long thought to be fairly safe for the Conservatives but which the Liberal Democrats in particular may stand a chance of taking.

RED WALLS, BLUE WALLS AND YELLOW HALOS

In the summer of 2019, the political analyst James Kanagasooriam identified the 'red wall' – a bunch of constituencies which, despite demographics that favoured the Tories, were by dint of their geography and political history Labour-held; as such, they were vulnerable to a Brexit-sparked Conservative surge.¹ This analysis turned out to be prescient, as dozens of seats that

¹ J. Kanagasooriam. '@JamesKanag' *Twitter*, 14 August 2019. Available at: <https://twitter.com/jameskanag/status/1161639307536457730?lang=en>

fit this criteria were captured by Boris Johnson later that year.

Yet what occurred represented only a partial realignment of British politics: the Conservative Party advanced in pro-Brexit territory; but it suffered hardly any losses – even in those Conservative seats whose population mix meant they were less likely to be convinced by Boris Johnson’s promise to ‘Get Brexit Done’. In effect, Johnson was indeed able to ‘have his cake and eat it’.

Digging deeper into those results, our research in the summer of 2020 found what we called a ‘yellow halo’ of support for the Liberal Democrats.² Despite what had been a truly disastrous decade for the party, it had made significant progress in parts of London, Surrey, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, Hampshire and Cambridgeshire – areas that make up a good part of what has recently come to be known as the ‘blue wall’, namely traditional Tory strongholds in southern England (typically wealthier, Remain-supporting and often suburban) which risk, at least in the long term, slipping out of the Conservatives’ hands.

Research has demonstrated, however, that this blue wall has stronger foundations than its red equivalent: the majorities chalked up by Conservative MPs in these ‘blue wall’ constituencies are more robust than those on which their Labour ‘red wall’ counterparts had been able to rely prior to 2019 – so much so that, earlier this year, YouGov saw little chance of many of them being lost anytime soon, despite an 8 point drop in support for the Conservatives since December 2019.³

But what YouGov’s research could not do, however, was simulate whether – and if so where – tactical voting among anti-Conservative voters could potentially turn what is currently more of a theoretical problem for the government into a genuine headache. Our constituency-level analysis, however, is able to explore the extent to which tactical voting could be a decisive factor, and one that, by helping the Lib Dems, might in turn help the Labour Party.

² T. Bale, A. Cheung and A. Wager. (2020) ‘Where next for the Liberal Democrats?’ *UK in a Changing Europe*, 29 July 2020. Available at: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/partner-reports/where-next-for-the-liberal-democrats/>; see also further discussion at G. Stamp (2020) ‘Liberal Democrats: Is targeting the ‘yellow halo’ key to party’s success?’ *BBC News*, 30 July 2020. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-53579258>

³ P. English ‘Conservative vote share down 8pts in ‘Blue Wall’, with party potentially losing up to 16 seats’ *YouGov*, 30 July 2021. Available at: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2021/07/30/conservative-vote-share-down-8pts-blue-wall-party->

Sadly, for both those parties, we find that, while the demographics and electoral geography of ‘tactical voting’ look reasonably favourable for the UK’s ‘third party’ (the Lib Dems) tactical voting is unlikely – in and of itself – to afford much of a boost to Her Majesty’s Opposition (Labour). Consequently, making the ‘progressive vote’ more efficient is likely to get opposition political parties keen for a change of government only some of the way to their objective. This makes for an unenviable decision for Keir Starmer. Should he, in the hope that it makes him marginally more likely to become Prime Minister, embrace tactical voting that is likely to disproportionately benefit the Liberal Democrats in the ‘blue wall’ yet does little to help him regain the ‘red wall’?

WHY IS ‘PROGRESSIVE’ TACTICAL VOTING RISING UP THE AGENDA?

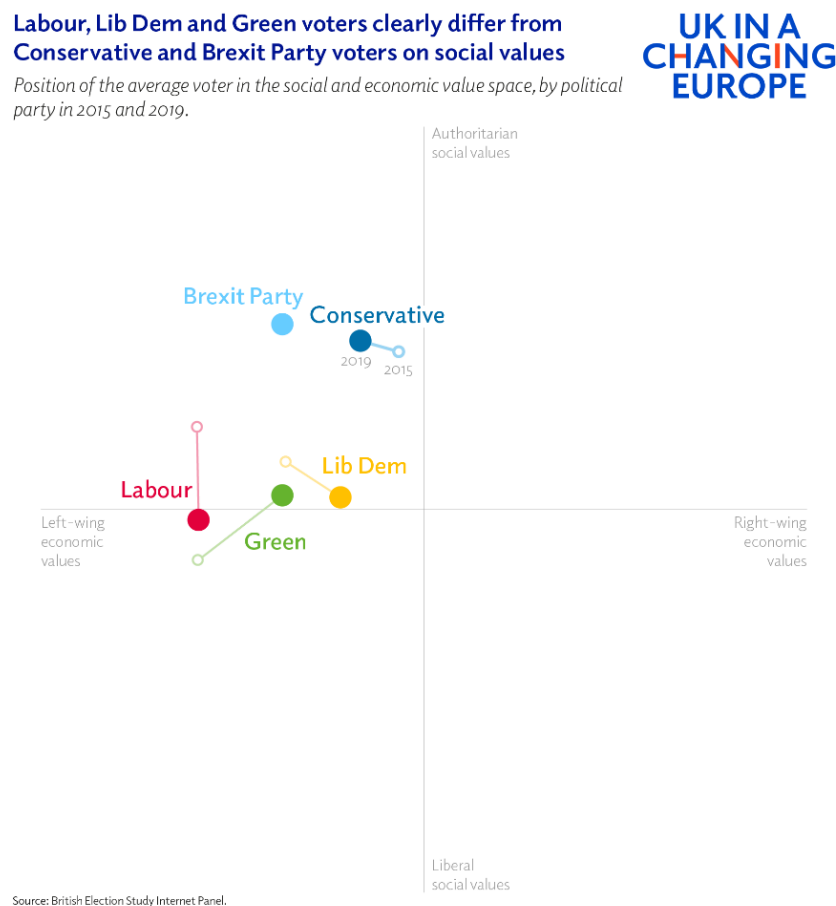
By-elections in England this year have provided some encouragement for anti-Tory activists who advocate implicit or explicit forms of co-operation between opposition parties to increase the amount of tactical voting. Hartlepool showed the red wall could fall further. A 16% swing towards the government in one of the 14 seats where a split pro-Brexit vote had allowed a Labour MP to retain the seat in December 2019 demonstrated the value to the Tories of no competition to the right of Boris Johnson.⁴ No wonder, then, that it received a lot of media attention. By way of contrast, before the shock defeat it produced for the government, the Chesham and Amersham by-election – a bullseye in the middle of the ‘yellow halo’ we identified a year ago – had flown under the radar of the political media: no national UK broadcaster was at the count as a stunning 25% swing to the Lib Dems was announced. Yet it demonstrated that the next development in the British party system might even up the realignment that, so far anyway, has most benefitted the Conservative Party.

Taking a step back, it is not just this changing electoral geography of England that makes talk of tactical voting – and implicit or explicit electoral alliances – increasingly common. After 11 years of Conservative or Conservative-led government, the Tories still appear hegemonic and have increased their share of the vote in every election since 1997. Yet they are now, as John Curtice has noted, ‘uncoalitionable’: the fact that no other party (apart perhaps from an

⁴ M. Bevington, A. Cheung and A. Wager. ‘General election in five charts: how Remain lost and Leave won’ UK in a Changing Europe, 19 December 2019. Available at: <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/five-charts-that-explain-how-leave-won-and-remain-lost/>

utterly masochistic DUP) is likely to work with them in their current form, means that any result short of an overall Conservative majority is likely to see them ejected from Downing Street.⁵

For the sake of understanding how a government might be formed after the next election, then, it makes sense to think of British politics as two blocs: the Conservatives as an (extremely effective and efficient under first past the post) right-wing party bloc composed of just one party; and the opposition as a more disparate centre-left bloc which hopes it has enough in common (as well as enough support) to win a ‘progressive’ majority in England and therefore not have to rely on parliamentary support from the SNP. True, Lib Dem and Labour voters differ on socio-economic questions. But, as the figure below from Paula Surridge shows, they have converged on what the political science jargon calls the ‘liberal-authoritarian’ axis since 2015.



⁵ See this argument made in favour of a ‘Progressive Alliance’ in e.g. N. Lawson ‘All you need to know about a progressive alliance’ *Compass*, June 2021. Available at: <https://www.compassonline.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/All-You-Need-to-Know-about-a-Progressive-Alliance.pdf>

This raises the question of whether – in the absence of a relatively polarising leader in Jeremy Corbyn, and with the costs of governing accruing for Boris Johnson – a sustained push towards tactical voting is more likely than ever to succeed.

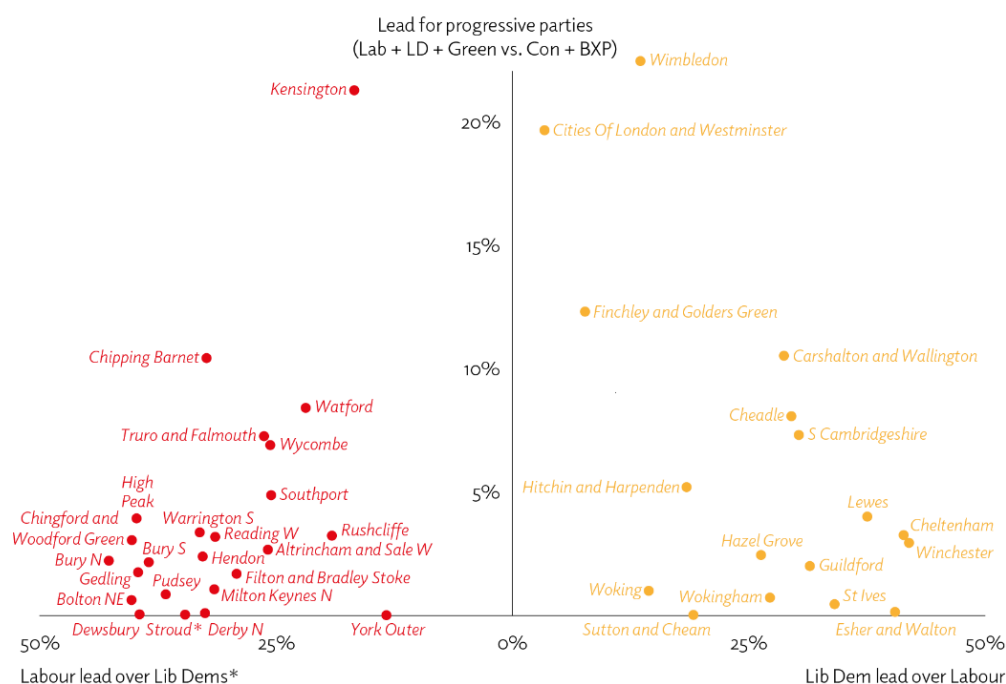
IN THEORY, WHERE COULD ‘PERFECT’ TACTICAL VOTING HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE IN DECEMBER 2019?

In the 2019 general election, 41 English constituencies were won by the Conservatives despite Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens having a higher combined vote share than the Conservatives and the Brexit Party. Theoretically, if all ‘progressive’ voters in each of these seats were to line up behind the strongest ‘progressive’ candidate in the seat next time, Labour would notionally gain 24 seats and the Liberal Democrats 17. This loss of 41 seats would almost be enough to deny the Conservatives their working majority, although it should be noted that tactical voting on the other side – among Conservative and Brexit Party supporters – could result in 11 Conservative gains and two Brexit Party (now Reform UK) gains at Labour’s expense.

Tactical voting by progressive voters could deny the Conservatives 41 seats in England

English constituencies won by the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election, where progressive parties have a higher vote share.

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Source: House of Commons Library.

* The Lib Dems stood aside for the Greens in Stroud in 2019, and the Labour lead over the Greens is shown.

Looking at the chart above, two things stand out: the empty middle of the chart, and the clustering on either side of the horizontal (or x) axis. This suggests there are very few seats with promising 'progressive' numbers for the Lib Dems and Labour where the two parties are in obvious competition. Indeed, there is only one of these constituencies with a 'progressive majority' (York Outer) where Labour is the main challenger and the Lib Dems are within 15 per cent; and only four (Cities of London and Westminster, Finchley and Golders Green, Wimbledon and Woking) where the Lib Dems have the best shot at winning based on 2019 results, but where the Labour Party is less than 15 per cent behind. Seats like Kensington and Cities of London and Westminster were obvious examples of how attempts at cross-party co-ordination spectacularly failed at the last election. Now, however, there is the possibility for much clearer delineation of responsibility – if, unlike in December 2019, parties were able to work on a 'non-aggression' basis, using the previous results as a co-ordination guide.

There are two ways to interpret this. On the one hand, there is a clear frontrunner in most constituencies for the anti-Conservative vote to converge behind, providing 'progressive' voters open to voting tactically with a clear signal as to which party they should vote for. The 2019 general election showed how a Liberal Democrat second place was used as a cue for significant levels of co-ordination among voters. In St Albans, for example, the Liberal Democrats secured second place in 2017, having come third behind Labour in the previous election. In the subsequent 2019 election, the Liberal Democrats used their position as the main challenger to the Conservatives to squeeze the Labour vote down from 23% in 2017 to 8.7% in 2019, gaining 50.1% of the vote and taking the seat from the Conservatives. Similar dynamics could be seen in other constituencies, such as Guildford, Hazel Grove, or Winchester, where the Liberal Democrats used their position as the main challenger to the Conservatives to squeeze Labour's vote share. In effect, there was a big anti-Conservative vote to harvest, and Lib Dems sitting in second place were very successful in doing so despite, when it came to the national picture, barely advancing at all.

However, an alternative explanation is that the voters who are willing to vote tactically have already converged behind the strongest anti-Conservative party in most of these constituencies. This would mean that easy gains from tactical voting have already been exhausted, and any further consolidation of the progressive vote would be challenging

because it would require persuading voters who have until now resisted voting tactically to do just that.

A key problem for Labour and the Liberal Democrats in these seats is that voters are less clued-up about the electoral history of their constituency than the best-placed party might like – particularly when it comes to knowing who finished second last time. Jon Mellon of the British Election Study found that while 69 per cent of the electorate can name the party who won in their constituency, knowledge of who finished in second place is much lower at 29 per cent.⁶ The slightly better news for challenger parties is that this varies substantially by how safe the seat is: nearly half of those eligible to vote (and likely a higher percentage of those that actually vote) know which party finished second in the most marginal constituencies, compared with fewer than a quarter in the safest seats. The constituencies discussed above have become more marginal over time and will be heavily contested at the next election – accordingly, awareness of who is in second place may well have risen by then.

Of course, a further problem for the opposition parties is that tactical voting would never be this simple. Firstly, not all voters will vote tactically. For example, some Liberal Democrat voters might choose the Conservatives over Labour if their constituency appears to be a two-horse race between those parties. Equally, many voters might vote for their first-choice party come what may, even if that party has no chance of winning in the constituency. Some voters might also choose to stay home if their preferred party appears not to be in with a chance.

Data from voters' second preferences in the May 2021 elections illustrates this point. In mayoral elections, Liberal Democrats and Green Labour voters cast second ballots that showed a clear preference for the Labour candidate: in the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and West of England metro mayor contests, Lib Dem second ballots favoured the Labour candidate over the Conservative by a rate of nearly four to one.⁷ However, in the Police and Crime Commissioner contests where there was no independent candidate and no 50% first round majority – and therefore where we can cleanly measure the movement of Liberal Democrat and Green second preferences – the average margin (discounting those who

⁶ J. Mellon (2021) 'Tactical Voting and Electoral Pacts in the 2019 UK General Election' *Political Studies Review* OnlineFirst 1-13

⁷ E. Uberoi 'Combined authority mayoral elections in May 2021' *House of Commons Library*, 25 May 2021. Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9237/CBP-9237.pdf>

registered no second preference) was ‘only’ two-to-one in favour of Labour over the Conservatives.

For this reason, on paper the most promising constituencies for tactical voting are those where the combined ‘progressive’ share of the vote is significantly higher than the Conservative vote share – seats that are higher up the chart in Figure 2. Wimbledon is the prime example of such a constituency. In 2019, the Conservatives won the constituency with 38% of the vote, ahead of the Liberal Democrats on 37% and Labour on 24%. This means that in the next election, only a small portion of 2019 Labour voters would need to vote tactically for the Liberal Democrats to gain the seat from the Conservatives. Taking this into account, the prospects for progressive tactical voting seem more limited. In only six Conservative-held seats – all in London – is the combined vote for progressive parties at least 10 percentage points higher than the Conservative vote share. In another six seats, the combined progressive vote share is five percentage points above the Conservatives, while the difference is less than five percentage points in the remaining 29 seats.

WHAT DIFFERENCE COULD A CLEAR ‘PROGRESSIVE CHOICE’, AND A SWING AWAY FROM THE CONSERVATIVES, MAKE IN THE ‘BLUE WALL’?

When thinking about the effectiveness of tactical voting, the historical evidence shows two things make a difference. If there is a clear party or candidate to get behind, then there are fewer ‘wasted’ votes for opposition parties.⁸ And, perhaps more obviously, if support drains from the Conservative Party, then more constituencies become vulnerable to whichever challenger lies in wait. Figure 3 shows how these two dynamics would play out in seats where the Liberal Democrats are the closest challengers to the Conservative Party.

As shown below, if a near equivalent number of votes are shared around among progressive parties in a slightly more efficient way then this is unlikely to cause the Conservatives too many sleepless nights. The bigger threat to Boris Johnson would come from 2019 Conservative voters choosing to back other parties. Take the example of the Chesham and Amersham by-

⁸ T. Nicholls and R. Hayton (2021) Splitting the Tactical Vote? Coordination Problems with Polling Model-Driven Tactical Voting Websites. *The Political Quarterly*, 91 (1). 61-69

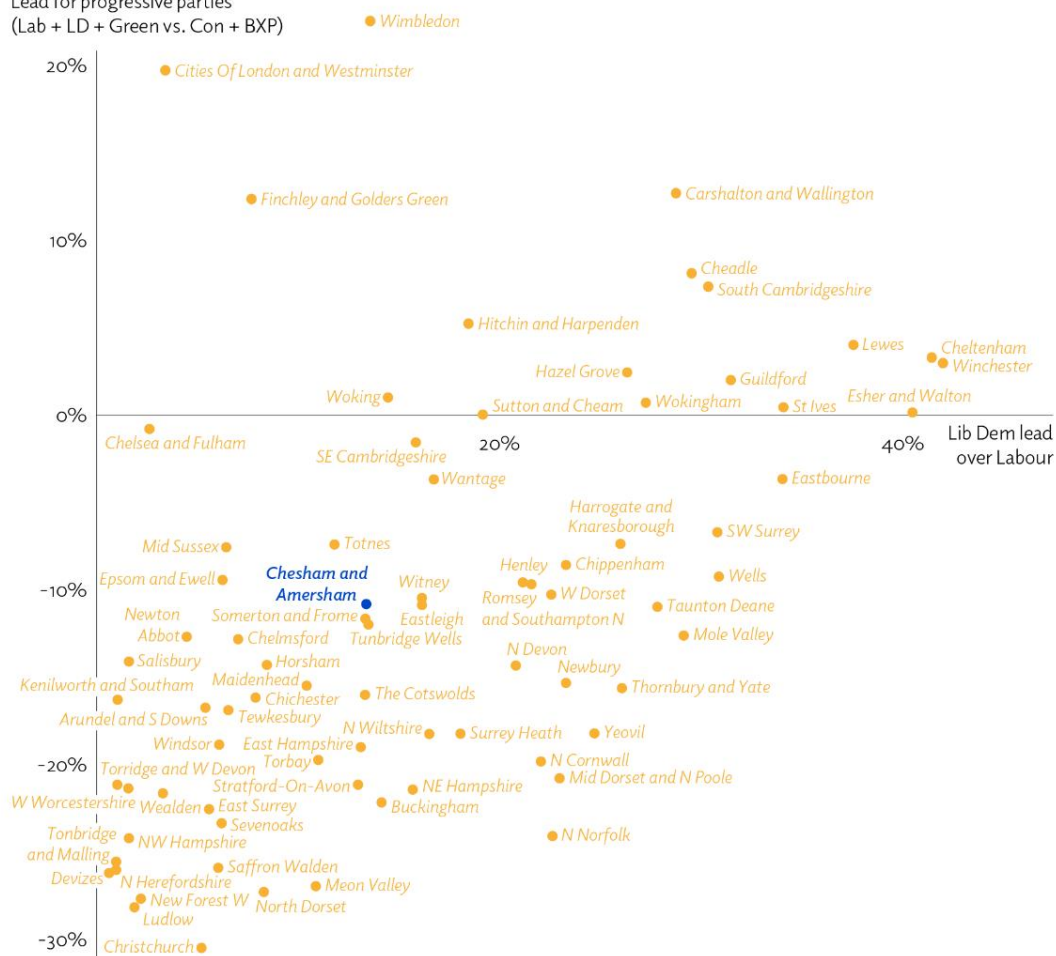
election (complete with all the caveats that come with extrapolating from a by-election contest). In December 2019, the Conservatives won 55% of the vote, ahead of the Liberal Democrats on 26%, Labour on 13% and the Green Party on 6%. While squeezing the Labour and Green Party vote share undoubtedly helped the Liberal Democrats in the constituency, it was the remarkable 25% swing against the Conservatives that really made the difference in the 2021 by-election. The combined vote for the Liberal Democrats, Labour and the Green Party – the centre-left bloc, in other words – rose from 45% to 63%. Hypothetically, a swing away from the Conservatives of the size – combined with the level of tactical voting seen – would put nearly all the seats in Figure 3 above at risk.

Over 30 Conservative seats are vulnerable if the Lib Dems can repeat their Chesham and Amersham performance

English constituencies won by the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election, where the Liberal Democrats are in second place.

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Lead for progressive parties
(Lab + LD + Green vs. Con + BXP)



Source: House of Commons Library.

More realistically, alongside the 17 seats with a 'progressive majority' where the Liberal Democrats are the Conservatives' main challenger, there are a further 16 constituencies where the combined 'progressive' vote is a) within a five per cent swing of the Conservatives and b) the Liberal Democrats are in second place. Among those are Witney and Henley, formerly the constituencies of former Prime Minister David Cameron and the current Prime Minister Boris Johnson. These, then, are the places to watch should we see both a dramatic uptick in tactical voting and a southern revolt against the Conservatives.

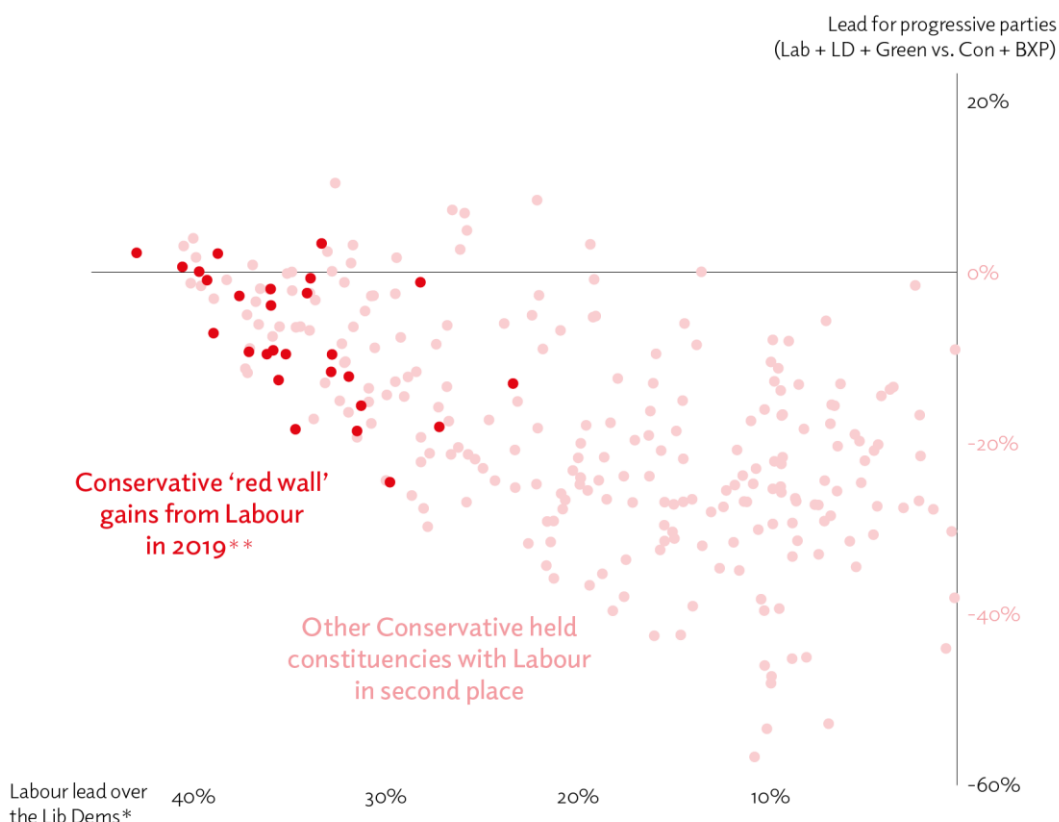
WOULD TACTICAL VOTING MAKE MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE IN THE ‘RED WALL’?

Keir Starmer has been criticised in some quarters for failing to respond to a potential realignment by embracing the possibility of electoral gains in the ‘blue wall’, if not through an electoral pact at least by ‘leaning into’ his social liberal credentials. However, while there are several seats where Labour could benefit from consolidation of voters who backed the Lib Dems in 2019 – such as Kensington and Chipping Barnet – ‘several’ does not quite cut it for a party looking to replace the Conservatives in government. As Figure 4 shows, the share of Liberal Democrat or Green voters in 2019 was too low in most of Labour’s Conservative-held target seats for the party to be able to rely on squeezing tactical voters. Instead, it must rely more heavily on switching from Conservative to Labour, or from Conservative voters turning out at a lower rate than Labour voters.

Labour cannot rely on just tactical voting in most of the seats where they are the Conservatives’ main challenger

English constituencies won by the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election, where Labour are in second place.

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* The Labour lead over the Greens is shown in six constituencies where the Lib Dems did not stand.

** ‘Red wall’ indicates constituencies in the North East, North West, or Yorkshire and the Humber.

Just highlighting seats in Yorkshire, the North East and the North West of England that Labour lost at the last election demonstrates the limits of tactical voting in winning back seats lost in December 2019. Just five of the 28 seats lost in those constituencies had even a theoretical ‘progressive majority’. Reversing at least some of these losses is something the Labour leadership clearly think is a pre-requisite for returning to government. The most direct road to victory in nearly all these places runs through at least some of the voters who shifted their vote to back Boris Johnson in December 2019.

FOR THE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS, THE DEMOGRAPHY AND GEOGRAPHY OF TACTICAL VOTING IS SIMPLER THAN FOR LABOUR

There are some key reasons why the politics of talking up a ‘progressive alliance’ based on an anti-Conservative backlash in the south of England is easier for the Liberal Democrats than it is for Labour. Here, we highlight three: the geography of Lib Dem support, and the concentration of their target seats in the south of England; the demographics of Lib Dem support, which make a clear case aimed at graduates easier to make; and the fact that their target seats have a more homogenous profile in terms of Brexit support, which acts as a useful proxy for how socially liberal each constituency is. In contrast, Labour’s electoral coalition is significantly more disparate. This is not just true when it comes to the types of voters in the constituencies that it can target, but also when it comes to where in the country its support lies.

Electoral Geography

The vast majority of Liberal Democrat target seats are Conservative-held. Of the 78 Conservative-held seats where the Lib Dems are in second place, 70 are in the South of England. Even more importantly, the majority of the most favourable targets – in dark yellow in the chart below – lie to the west of London. This type of electoral homogeneity is extremely useful: studies of the Liberal Democrat vote prior to the coalition found there is an ‘epidemiology’ to Liberal Democrat support: when they won or were competitive in wards or constituencies, they were disproportionately likely to do well in neighbouring places.⁹ If voters

⁹ D. Dorling, C. Rallings & M. Thrasher (1998) ‘The epidemiology of the Liberal Democrat vote’ *Political Geography* 17 (1)

get the message that the Liberal Democrats are competitive in the type of place they live, and in nearby constituencies and counties, this builds the message that they are a party worth voting for.

Labour, on the other hand, is competing with the Conservatives across a much broader geography. A few of the party's most immediate target seats, where a 'progressive majority' already exists, are similar to Lib Dem target seats – wealthier, remain supporting seats in southern England such as Milton Keynes North, Hendon and Wycombe. Yet even the seats that might well suit a strategy of trying to consolidate 'progressive votes' under Labour's banner are geographically disparate, with seats like Rushcliffe and High Peak in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire, Warrington South in Cheshire and Pudsey in Yorkshire.

Lib Dem target seats are concentrated in the south, particularly a 'yellow halo' around London

English constituencies won by the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election, by second place party and whether progressive parties have a higher vote share.

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Conservative constituencies where
**progressive parties have a higher
combined vote share***...

... with Labour in second place

... with the Lib Dems in second place

Other Conservative constituencies...

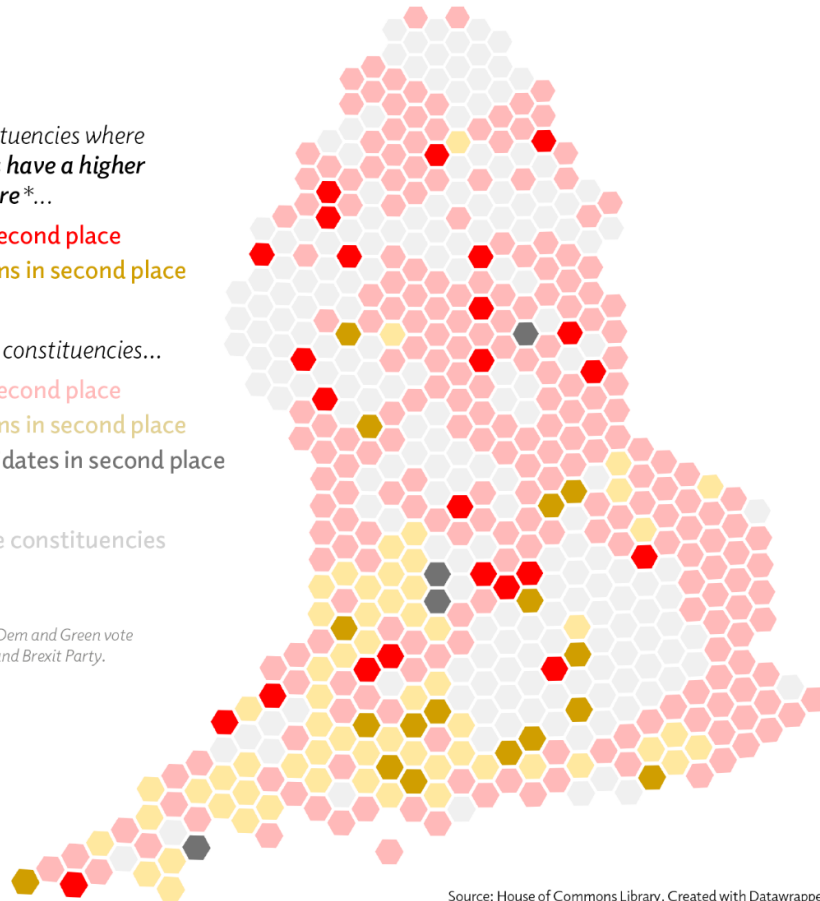
... with Labour in second place

... with the Lib Dems in second place

... with other candidates in second place

Non-Conservative constituencies

*Defined as the Labour, Lib Dem and Green vote
share vs. the Conservatives and Brexit Party.



Source: House of Commons Library. Created with Datawrapper.

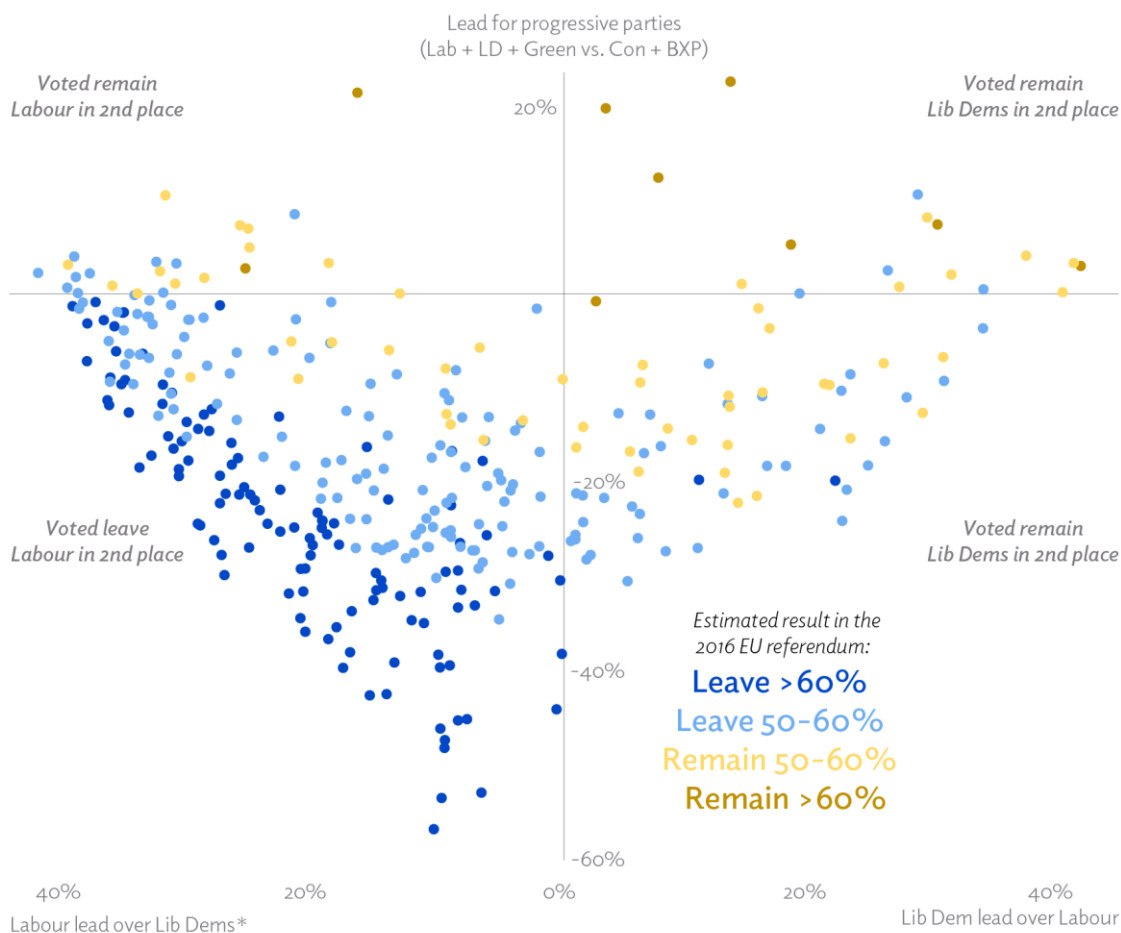
More importantly Labour must also secure a swing against the Conservatives in 'red-wall' constituencies, which have a markedly different demographic profile to some of these 'progressive majority' seats.

One way of illustrating that difference is through the Brexit vote in different constituencies. In the top right of the graph below are Lib Dem seats with a 'progressive majority', and 13 of the 17 (the gold dots) have Remain majorities. Below the line are seats where the Liberal Democrats are ahead of Labour or the Greens and are the key challengers: this quadrant is dominated by places that supported Remain by between 50% to 60% (in yellow). Yet, on the left hand side, Labour targets are heterogeneous: more places are narrowly Leave than Remain, a reflection of the fact that Labour is a party that cannot be as narrowly constrained and must operate on the basis of a broader electoral appeal.

Liberal Democrat target seats overwhelmingly voted Remain, Labour target seats did not

English constituencies won by the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election, by vote share for progressive parties in 2019 and 2016 EU referendum result.

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Source: House of Commons Library, Dr Chris Hanretty.

* The Lib Dems did not stand in six constituencies, so the Labour lead over the Greens is shown. Four constituencies where neither Labour or the Lib Dems were in second place are not shown.

Electoral Demographics

What determines these differences in constituencies are the people that live in these places. It is clear that the Liberal Democrats, who have struggled in the past decade to find a 'core vote', may now have found one in (disproportionately home-owning) graduates – exactly the sort of voters likely to be receptive to a message that is less economically radical but instead centred on social liberal attitudes and a competence critique of the government.¹⁰ In the absence of

¹⁰ D. Howarth and M. Pack 'The 20% strategy: building a core vote for the Liberal Democrats' Available at: <https://www.markpack.org.uk/building-a-core-vote-for-the-liberal-democrats-the-20-strategy/>

Jeremy Corbyn, these are places likely to be less hostile to the idea of a Labour-led government and – the argument goes – more likely to move to the ‘progressive majority’s’ leading candidate, which is often the Liberal Democrats.

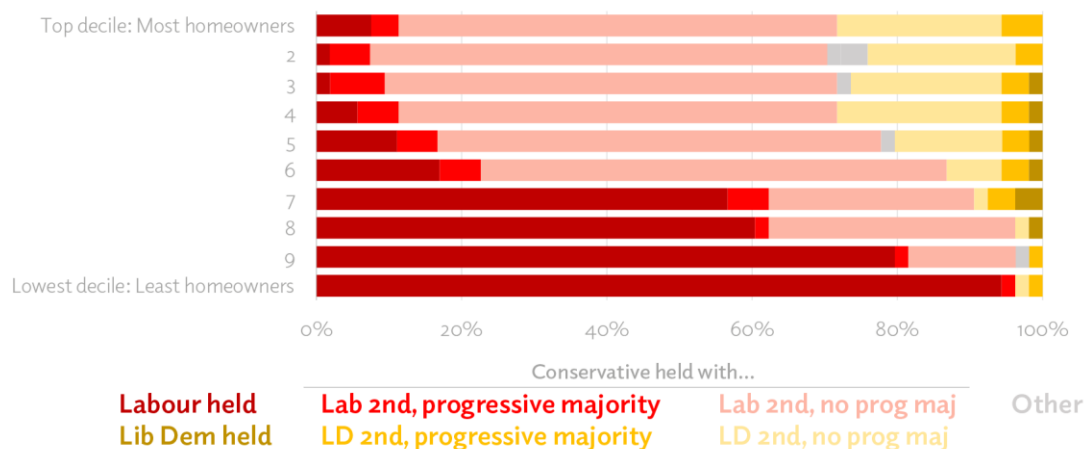
It is to be expected that Labour and the Liberal Democrats – different parties after all – should have different electoral profiles, indeed the strength of formal or informal types of co-operation between both parties would lie in their potential ability to reach different parts of the electorate to the other.

However, highlighting the different make-up of these places does make clear some of the key potential conflicts in messaging for parties opposing the government but who may have an interest in working together. For example, places the Liberal Democrats have a high chance of winning are disproportionately in the top deciles in terms of home ownership. Indeed, the only two northern seats where the Lib Dems are the Conservatives’ main challengers – Cheadle and Hazel Grove – are also in the top decile for homeowners in England. A policy opposed to the liberalisation of planning reform could well play strongly for Liberal Democrats in these places – indeed, the party delivered leaflets in Chesham and Amersham opposing planning liberalisation. In contrast, the Labour Party is a party for renters – and is in power in 95% of the constituencies in the lowest decile of home ownership.

Labour is the party of renters, while the Lib Dems are more competitive in seats with more homeowners

English constituencies by decile for percentage of homeowners, and outcome in the 2019 General Election.

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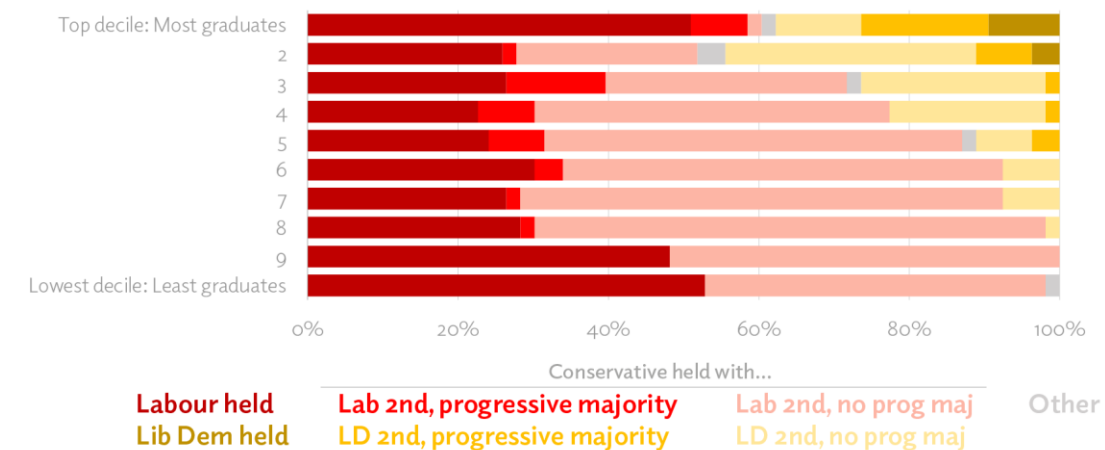
Source: House of Commons Library, Census data 2011.

Perhaps the neatest encapsulation of Labour’s conundrum is that it still holds a majority of the constituencies with both the most and the least graduates. In contrast, seats both held and seats attainable for the Liberal Democrats are overwhelmingly in the top 10% in terms of the percentage of the adult population with a degree. There is no seat in England where the progressive tactical voting numbers add up for the Lib Dems that is also in the bottom half in terms of the number of adult graduates that live there. It is worth noting that the evidence from the UK on tactical voting shows that there is no ‘educational attainment’ effect – being educated to degree level does not make you any more likely to consider voting tactically.¹¹

The Liberal Democrats are competitive in the areas with most graduates

English constituencies by decile for percentage of graduates and outcome in the 2019 General Election.

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Source: House of Commons Library, Census data 2011.

Conclusions and (progressive) dilemmas

In 2023 or 2024, it will be over a quarter of a century since Labour was last returned to government from opposition. In that 1997 election, anti-Conservative tactical voting was significant but ultimately inconsequential – the Conservatives lost 178 seats, and multiple studies showed the level of tactical voting seen in that election accounted for somewhere between just 24 to 35 of those losses.¹² The constituency-level analysis above is inherently

¹¹ S. Fisher. ‘Extending the Rational Voter Theory of Tactical Voting’, *Mid-West Political Science Association Meeting*, April 2001. Available at: <https://users.ox.ac.uk/~nuff0084/fishermw.pdf>

¹² See: G. Evans, J. Curtice P. Norris (1998) ‘New labour, new tactical voting? The causes and consequences of tactical voting in the 1997 general election’ *British Elections & Parties Review* 8(1) 65-79; D. Brack ‘Lessons from the Ashdown-Blair ‘Project’ L. Nandy, C. Lucas & C. Bowers (eds) *The Alternative: towards a new progressive politics* London: Biteback

forward-looking, and therefore cannot make those types of estimates. What it can show, however, is there are grounds for thinking the electoral geography of England makes tactical voting a potentially important contributory factor in determining the outcome of the next general election. However, a tacit or explicit 'progressive alliance' on tactical voting cannot – in and of itself – solve the electoral conundrum for anti-Conservative parties in Britain, and would be likely to disproportionately benefit the Liberal Democrats rather than Labour.

The fundamental questions that underlie these types of psephological calculations are more than a century old, and relate to the strategic purpose of the UK's political parties. If Labour's longer-term future after Brexit is as a party that is increasingly attractive to socially liberal voters, what are the implications for ceding ground in some of the areas that most fit those characteristics to the Liberal Democrats? On the other hand, what are the existential implications for the Labour Party of a (historic) fifth straight election defeat? It is the fate of Keir Starmer as Labour leader to weigh up these short and long-term costs and benefits, as he looks to overcome the electoral mountain that faces him and his party at the next election in two or three years' time.

A METHOD NOTE ON OUR ANALYSIS

1) Our analysis focusses on England. Tactical voting operates differently in Scotland, with pro-unionist, anti-SNP tactical voting often outweighing anti-Conservative tactical voting. Wales is not included in our analysis for similar reasons, where progressive tactical voting among unionist voters and nationalist voters cannot be assumed. It should be noted, however, that in constituencies where Plaid Cymru has a low vote share, the dynamics are similar to those in English constituencies. One such example is Delyn – a Labour-Conservative marginal, where tactical votes from Liberal Democrat or Brexit Party supporters could be decisive, even if the 3.7% of voters that supported Plaid Cymru do not vote tactically.

2) We have not included other parties or independent candidates in our calculation. While this makes little difference overall, the effect is significant in some constituencies, e.g. East Devon and Beaconsfield, where independent candidates were in second place. We mostly exclude these constituencies from the analysis, which looks at Conservative constituencies where either Labour or the Liberal Democrats were in second place.

3) For this analysis we have made the assumption that – for the next election – constituency boundaries will remain as they are at present. If an election takes place in 2023, then it will take place on current boundaries. If an election is held on the latest possible date of May 2024, it may be conducted on new boundaries.

It is worth considering that, if the type of constituency-level co-ordination described here – made more efficient through clarity over second-placed non-Conservative candidates – is viewed as a real problem in Conservative Central Headquarters, this increases the incentives for the government to push through boundary reform prior to the next general election.

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