Does Tactical Voting Matter?
The Political Impact of Tactical Voting in Canadian Elections

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Abstract

Tactical voting primarily takes place under single-member district plurality electoral institutions and takes the form of third-party supporters voting for one of the major parties. Although much has been written about tactical voting, few studies have attempted to show its impact on seat distribution within the parliament or on the makeup of the subsequent government, in countries with single-member plurality systems. In this article, we assess the magnitude and impact of tactical voting in the Canadian general elections between 1988 and 2000. We build a model of tactical voting by identifying factors that are known to affect the level of tactical voting that we can measure using available data. Based on this model, we generate predicted levels of tactical voting for all parties within each district, and then use these predicted values to adjust the actual election data to produce a new set of data containing a would-be election outcome in the absence of tactical voting. By comparing actual election data, adjusted election data, and the seat share of political parties in the parliament after these elections, we discuss the political impact of tactical voting in Canada. The results of our study affirm that, in some cases, tactical voting does lead to election outcomes different from those in its absence and that arguments based on voter rationality are to some degree valid in the real world. At the same time, our results demonstrate that the impact of tactical voting on election outcomes, and thus on the actual distribution of seats within the parliament, has been minimal in Canada. It had no impact on the partisan composition of the government in any of the four elections studied.

Key words: tactical voting, voting behavior, elections, single-member district plurality electoral systems, Canadian politics.

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Introduction

Sincere voting assumes that voters always choose their most preferred candidates or parties. It has been argued in both the formal and empirical literature, however, that voters might not always vote for their most preferred candidates. This is known as tactical (or strategic, sophisticated) voting and refers to voting contrary to one's nominal preferences. Tactical voting, as usually described in the literature, primarily takes place under single-member district plurality electoral systems and takes the form of third-party supporters voting for one of the major parties. The logic of tactical voting, of course, is that of Duverger's law, which states that the supporters of a small party would not ‘waste’ their votes by voting for their most preferred party (candidate) since it does not have a chance to win under a plurality system with single-member districts. Instead, they vote for the major party that is most acceptable to them and that has a chance of winning (Duverger, 1963). Since Duverger, ample theoretical literature has shown incentives to vote tactically under different electoral institutions (Riker, 1976, 1982; Tsebelis, 1986; Bowler & Farrell, 1991; Jesse, 1995).1

Until now, empirical studies of tactical voting have taken two different paths: the first evaluates whether indeed some voters vote tactically under single-member district plurality electoral institutions (primarily Britain and Canada), and if so, how many of them do? These studies investigate the level of tactical voting for a single election using existing survey data; they have shown that tactical voting does occur, usually at a rate of somewhere between 5% and 10% of the electorate (Fisher, 1973; Curtice & Steed, 1988; Evans & Heath, 1993; Blais & Nadeau, 1996; Alvarez & Nagler, 2000. For different estimates of the level of tactical voting, see Niemi, Whitten & Franklin, 1992, 1993).

The second path taken by empirical studies of tactical voting is the investigation of the causes of tactical voting for a given election. These studies have shown that several individual factors as well as contextual factors within districts affect the level of tactical voting in a given election (Black, 1978; Cain, 1978; Gailbraith & Rae, 1989; Johnston & Pattie, 1991; Bowler & Lanoue, 1992; Lanoue & Bowler, 1992; Blais & Nadeau, 1996; Blais et al., 2001).

Kim and Fording (2001) take yet another approach. Using data from four recent general elections in Britain, they investigate the political impact of tactical voting over a period of time. That is, they assess whether tactical voting has had an impact on the actual distribution of seats within the parliament and eventually the