Tactical voting in the upcoming General Election

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"The problem is, I just don't like *any* of them", was my dad's emphatic response when I asked him about the election. I don't think he's unusual in his antipathy to the current leadership of the UK's political parties. The present Conservative leader, Boris Johnson, is widely regarded as an inveterate liar and thoroughly untrustworthy. Jeremy Corbyn – the leader of the Labour Party – is seen as a throwback to 1970s-style socialism, certainly by many older voters. Meanwhile, Jo Swinson, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, is seen as a political opportunist with few principles.

I do not quite share my dad's despondency at the state of politics in this country, but I'll admit to being a little jaded and a lot cynical. After all, let's rerun why we're having this election:

1. It's been obvious from day 1 of the Johnson premiership that the Conservative leadership has been itching for an excuse to call an election. Even with the support of the DUP, the Conservative majority had effectively evaporated by the summer. Rather than seek to compromise, the Johnson administration effectively voluntarily neutered its own ability to get things done by removing the whip from 21 MPs. As a result, they have been in office but not in power.

2. The government then decided to run roughshod over convention and the UK's unwritten constitution, acting unlawfully in seeking to prevent Parliament from holding the Executive to account. This was rather spectacularly followed by the intervention of the Supreme Court, which effectively declared the prorogation of Parliament null and void.

3. Parliament then voted for the revised Withdrawal Agreement, put together by Johnson and the EU. Johnson's statements to the contrary – suggesting that somehow Parliament "blocked" the deal – are categorically untrue. What Parliament *did* do, however, was reject the proposed timetable to ratify the Agreement. Had Johnson decided to proceed on the basis of a

revised parliamentary timetable, it is quite probable that Britain would no longer be an EU member. Instead, Johnson pulled the Bill to ratify the Withdrawal Agreement and the timetabling issue was used as a pretext to attempt to call an early election.

4. Lacking the parliamentary numbers to do so, Johnson was reliant on the opposition to provide them. Fortunately (for him), naked political opportunism trumps principles. The Liberal Democrats decided to vote in favour of Johnson's pitch for an early election as they forecast an increase in both vote share and seats. This is in spite of the fact that doing so makes a hard Brexit (which they claim to vociferously oppose) vastly more likely.

5. Similarly, the SNP (which also opposes a hard – or indeed any – Brexit) voted in favour of an early election. In this case, the motivation was slightly different – gambling that Brexit made winning a second independence vote much more likely – but the upshot was the same. As such, these outspoken Remainers have effectively become the midwives of Brexit. Even more ironic is the fact that recent polling suggests that they will reap handsome electoral rewards for doing so.

6. At this point, an election was all-but-guaranteed (unlike calling an election under the Fixed Term Parliament Act, the Bill brought before Parliament by Johnson's administration merely required a simple majority to pass). In order to avoid being portrayed as "running scared" of an election, the Opposition Labour Party was thus bounced into supporting an early election that it didn't really want.

The upshot of this rather sordid politicking (and complete absence of any desire to compromise) is that we've been left with an election in the dead of winter, with an insipid collection of party leaders. Can anyone blame my dad for not liking any of them?

None of this solves the riddle of who to vote for. However, the desire to vote *against* something is often a more powerful motivator than wanting to vote for it. Many of us therefore plan to use our votes not to vote in favour of parliamentary candidates that have our full-throated support, but instead against the candidate we most viscerally oppose.

It's unsurprising that a plethora of websites have sprung up urging people to vote tactically. Some polling suggests that almost ¼ of all voters in the UK plan to vote tactically in the upcoming election[1]. Brexit appears to be the issue that is motivating a majority of tactical voting this time around, although as in previous elections, antipathy to the Conservative Party amongst some voters also appears to play a role[2].

Ultimately, this is entirely due to the anachronistic and fundamentally un-democratic voting system used in the UK. Whilst all electoral systems struggle to accurately mirror the views of those they purport to represent[3], there is very little one can reasonably say in favour of the First-Past-The-Post system used in the UK. It has in the past tended to deliver relatively stable governance, but I think most of us would feel uncomfortable arguing that *less* democracy is a good thing. After all, dictators frequently deliver stable governance, but that hardly makes dictatorship a desirable electoral model!

No, ultimately there are some forms of electoral representation that can reasonably be argued to be "better" than others[4], and our current model fares poorly. However, given where we are, I would urge all who have a vote and hold a view on the best way forward to ensure that they use that vote wisely. For most of us, that means voting tactically.

I will.

[1] https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/media-centre/press-releases/new-bmg-poll-finds-almost-a-quarter-of-voters-planning-to-vote-tactically-in-general-election/

[2] This seems to be as much due to the composition of second-place parties as anything else. Labour-held seats with a non-Tory centre-right challenger are rare. The left-of-centre vote in the UK is more fragmented than its right-wing counterpart.

[3] Economically-inclined readers will note that Arrow's Impossibility Theorem essentially guarantees that no electoral system can always deliver a democratic and fair outcome.

[4] The work of Eric Maskin demonstrates this – https://scholar.harvard.edu/maskin/publications