Anatomy of a Labour Landslide: The Constituency System and the 1997 General Election

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ONE noted characteristic of the UK electoral system is that a party's percentage of the votes cast at a general election is usually substantially different from the percentage of the seats that it wins in the House of Commons. In general, parties with more than 30% of the votes get a greater percentage than that of the seats and are over-represented, whereas those with fewer votes are under-represented, in some cases very substantially so, as has been the experience of the Liberal Democrats over the last twenty-five years. There are some exceptions to this generalisation, however; small parties whose votes are geographically concentrated in a few constituencies (such as Plaid Cymru and several of the Northern Ireland parties) tend to get a number of MPs consistent with their share of the vote; in 1951 and 1974 (February) the party with most votes did not also get most seats; and then in 1997 the Conservative Party won 30.7% of the votes cast but only 25% of the seats.

It is generally appreciated that this bias in the translation of votes into seats is created through the interaction of two geographies—the geography of support for the parties and the geography of the map of constituencies. The latter is overlaid on the former, which tends to be very consistent in its structure over time, even if its relief varies as party fortunes wax and wane. But can the bias be manipulated, by the parties or other agents, to partisan ends? To answer that question, we first define and then decompose the nature of bias in the UK electoral system and then look at the most recent general election in detail.

Bias and the electoral system

Bias in electoral systems has been defined in a variety of ways. We define it here as the difference between the number of seats won at an election by two main parties if the only change were in their relative shares of the votes cast. For example, in 1997, Labour won 43.2% of the votes cast in the UK and obtained 419 seats in the House of Commons, whereas the Conservative Party won 30.7% of the votes,

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which brought it 165 seats. What would have been the result if Conservative got 43.2% of the votes and Labour 30.7%?

This question is usually answered by moving a set percentage of the votes from one party to the other across all constituencies, In order for the 1997 result to be reversed, as suggested in the previous paragraph, Labour would have to lose 12.5 percentage points of the poll (taking it from 43.2 to 30.7) and the Conservatives would have to gain a similar amount (i.e. going from 30.7 to 43.2). Applying this simple method, Norris showed that the Conservatives would obtain 340 seats and Labour 262.[1] Similarly, one can calculate what the result would be with the two parties having the same vote share midway between their achieved shares (i.e. 37% each), by reducing Labour's share by 6.2 percentage points and increasing the Conservatives' by the same amount: Labour would have obtained 341 seats and the Conservatives 254, a lead of 87 seats for Labour if the two had the same proportion of the votes.

These simple calculations indicate that in 1997 the electoral system was very substantially biased towards the Labour Party relative to its main opponent, the Conservatives. But has this always been so? Figure 1 shows the bias at each general election since 1950 at the equal-shares position: i.e. if the Conservative and Labour Parties got the same percentage of the vote, midway between their actual shares. A negative bias is pro-Conservative and a positive bias is pro-Labour. At the beginning of the period, the system produced advantages for the Conservatives, of more than 50 seats in 1950 and 1951: by the end it was even more strongly pro-Labour. We focus here on that bias in 1997 and how it came about.

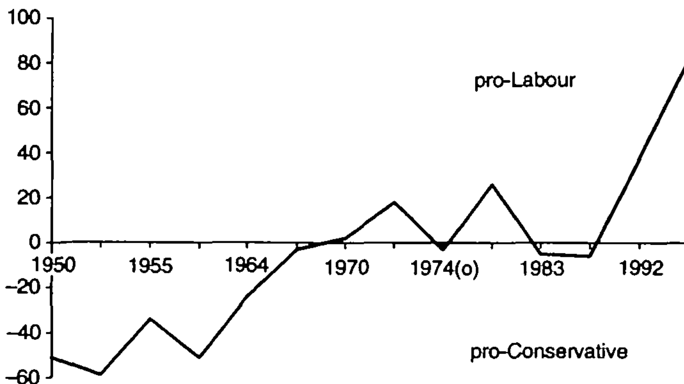

Figure 1. Bias in the UK electoral system 1950–1997, if parties had equal vote shares (pro-Conservative bias is shown as negative and pro-Labour bias as positive)

Bias is produced in the British electoral system in three main ways: because constituencies vary in their size (the number of electors);

because they vary in the number of effective votes needed for victory by one of the two main parties; and because parties vary in the efficiency of their vote distributions. The following paragraphs explore these in more detail.[2]

VARIATIONS IN CONSTITUENCY SIZE. The average United Kingdom constituency had 66,535 voters on the electoral roll in force at the 1997 general election, but the number varied from 102,687 in the largest (the Isle of Wight) to 23,293 in the smallest (Western Isles). This variation comes about, first, because Scotland and Wales were guaranteed minimum numbers of seats in the House of Commons (Redistribution of Seats) Act 1944 and its successors. As the English population has grown more rapidly since this means that English constituencies are on average much larger than Scottish and Welsh: at the 1997 general election, the average English constituency's electorate was 69,578, compared to 55,339 for Scotland and 55,563 for Wales. (Northern Ireland's average was closer to England's, at 64,088.) Secondly, although the Boundary Commissions are asked to produce constituencies whose electorates are equal, as far as is practicable, there are difficulties in achieving this within each country because constituency boundaries have to fit within those of local governments as far as possible.[3] In addition, the Commissions are allowed to create small constituencies (in terms of numbers of voters) in areas with 'special geographical considerations', which is generally interpreted as areas with sparse population densities.

These variations are important in the creation of bias because the smaller the constituency electorate, the smaller the number of votes needed to win it. Consider two constituencies, with 30,000 and 50,000 electors respectively; assuming that none abstain, 15,001 votes are needed for victory if only two parties are contesting the former seat, whereas 25,001 are needed in the latter. Thus a party whose support is concentrated in small constituencies is likely to win more seats, relative to its total number of votes, than one which gets most of its support in areas with large constituencies.

In the UK, this bias component can be divided into the two sub-components identified above. A well-supported party in Scotland and Wales will probably perform better in terms of seats won than one whose main strengths are in England, where constituencies are on average 14,000 electors larger: fewer votes are needed to win seats in Scotland and Wales. Traditionally, Labour has always been relatively strong in Scotland and Wales, especially in their industrial areas, and has become increasingly so over recent decades. In 1997, this *national quota* sub-component of the bias was worth 11 seats to Labour.

The second sub-component operates in exactly the same way within each of the countries; the party which is strongest in the smaller constituencies tends to win more seats than the one whose main strengths are in the larger constituencies. Most of the smaller seats are in urban areas,

especially the inner cities which have been regions of substantial population decline in recent decades. Each time the Boundary Commissions redraw the constituency boundaries they try to equalise electorates, but over time as people desert the urban centres for the suburbs and the countryside, so the inner city constituencies get smaller and easier to win (i.e. fewer votes are needed to win seats there than in the expanding suburbs). Again, in the British context Labour has been the beneficiary of this bias sub-component, based on its traditional strength in the industrial cities and conurbations, especially the relatively deprived inner city areas. In 1997, this *constituency electorate variation* bias sub-component was worth 13 seats to Labour at the equal vote share division. (In 1992 it was worth 29 seats, but there was a redistribution before the next election which made constituencies more equal in size: the inner cities lost some seats, to Labour's detriment.)

VARIATIONS IN THE NUMBER OF EFFECTIVE VOTES. Few British constituencies have been contested by only two parties (Conservative and Labour) since the 1960s. In addition as many as one-quarter of all registered electors have failed to vote. (The 1997 election had the lowest turnout (71.2%) since 1950, when the maximum postwar turnout of 84% was recorded.) The more people who either vote for parties other than Conservative and Labour or who do not vote at all, the easier it is for one of those major parties to win a seat. Take a constituency with 50,000 electors. If all of them vote, and all vote for either Conservative or Labour, then 25,001 votes are needed for victory. But if 10,000 abstain, then only 40,000 votes are cast, and 20,001 are needed to win the seat. If, in addition, 5,000 vote for a minor party, then 35,000 is the total number of 'effective' votes, and the Labour or Conservative candidate needs only 17,501 to win.

Both turnout and voting for minority parties vary substantially in Great Britain. In 1997, for example, on average 71.5% of the registered electorate voted, but this figure varied from 51.9% in Liverpool Riverside to 87.8% in Colne Valley. Votes for the 'minor parties' (i.e. other than Conservative and Labour) varied from 5.5 to 69.5%, with a mean of 24.1. The larger these two percentages are, the smaller the number of votes needed to win a seat of average size, for exactly the same reasons set out above with regard to variations in constituency size: in effect, the larger the number of abstentions and the larger the number of votes for minor parties, the smaller the constituency is for the two main contestants.

Labour tends to benefit from the *abstention rates* sub-component. Abstention rates tend to be highest in inner city and other deprived areas, where Labour is strongest; the sub-component was worth 24 seats to Labour in 1997. This somewhat contradicts a general impression that abstentions present a greater problem to Labour than to the other parties. Abstainers tend to be concentrated in seats that Labour

wins by large margins, and so do less harm to the Labour cause than they would if they were in marginal seats: if more of them voted, Labour would win no more seats. (Though if too many of them stayed at home, the seats may become marginal and then Labour would have to campaign more strongly there!)

The Liberal Democrats (and their various predecessors) have been the strongest minor party in recent elections, and their vote-winning capacity has been greatest in the southern parts of the country, especially the more rural areas, where the Conservatives are strongest. Thus the *minor-party votes* sub-component tends to favour the Conservatives (the Liberal Democrats' relative success reduces the number of votes needed to win in many dominantly Conservative areas), and it was worth 36 seats to the Conservatives in 1997 if it had an equal vote share with Labour.

A minor party may win a seat, of course (abstentions never do!), and the number of Liberal Democrat, Plaid Cymru and Scottish National Party victories has increased substantially since 1970. This has been to the Conservative Party's cost in most cases, because it comes second in a majority of those seats, especially those won by the Liberal Democrats. As a consequence, the Labour Party is the main beneficiary of the *minor-party victories* sub-component, and it was worth 33 seats to it in 1997.

VARIATIONS IN THE EFFICIENCY OF VOTE DISTRIBUTIONS. Even if none of the above bias components were operating, the two parties could differ in their seat-winning performance because of differences in the distribution of their votes across the constituencies. The most efficient distribution is the one which will win the most seats, holding constant all of the sub-components already discussed. If, for example, a party not only won 51% of the votes cast overall in the UK but also 51% of the votes in every constituency, then it would win all of the seats with a bare majority of the votes. This will almost certainly never occur, but parties do differ in the efficiency of their vote distributions. Labour has traditionally suffered because of this: it has tended to win by large majorities in its areas of strength and so gained fewer seats than might have been the case if its support was more evenly spread across the country, relative to that of the Conservatives. For all elections between 1950 and 1992, except February 1974, this component benefited the Conservatives, by as many as 39 seats (in 1951 and 1970; it was 34 in 1987: Figure 2). Labour won too many of its votes in the wrong places at almost every election—except in 1997 when its vote distribution was much more efficient than that of the Conservatives, giving Labour a benefit of 48 seats.

At the 1997 general election, therefore, Labour was the beneficiary from all but one of these bias components—the minor-party voting pattern. Of its 87-seat advantage when the vote shares were set equal,

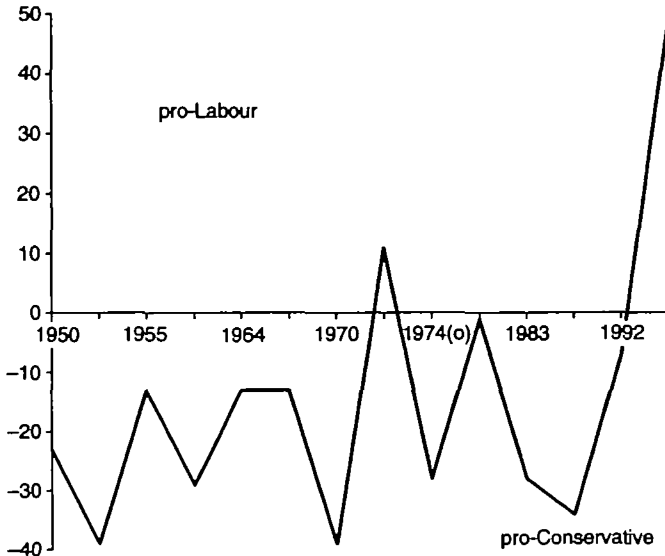

Figure 2. Trends in the efficiency bias 1950–1997, if parties had equal vote shares (pro-Conservative bias is shown as negative and pro-Labour bias as positive)

over half came from the impact of the minor-party victories, especially those of the Liberal Democrats, in constituencies where the Conservatives came second.[4] Countering this, however, the Conservatives benefited by some 36 seats over Labour because they were more likely to win in constituencies where the minor parties (again, especially the Liberal Democrats) performed well—but not well enough to win. To a considerable extent, therefore, the impact of the Liberal Democrats and the other minor parties through those two sub-components cancelled each other out, so that Labour's main advantages came from its more efficient vote distribution and its better performance in the areas with high abstention rates.

To what extent was this serendipitous, and to what extent was it planned for? We explore two possible answers to that question: the creation of the constituency map by the Boundary Commissions and the effectiveness of the constituency campaigns.

Influencing the Boundary Commissions and the geography of constituencies

There is a full periodic review of all Parliamentary constituencies every 8–12 years according to the current legislation (The Boundary Commissions Act 1992). The four Commissions (one each for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) have to evaluate the existing constituencies against the Rules for Redistribution in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, and decide whether to recommend any alterations. The basis of their evaluation is the relevant national electoral quota (their country's registered electorate on the date at which the Review com-

menced, divided by the existing number of constituencies). Constituencies should fit within the local government template (e.g. no constituency should cross a County or London Borough boundary in England: the Rules differ across the four countries and will have to be reconsidered in the light of 1990s local government reorganisation in all except Northern Ireland). Each constituency should also be as close to the electoral quota as is practicable, and if necessary the Commissions can override the rule regarding local government boundaries to achieve equality. Commissions are not bound to recommend changes to the existing constituencies in order to remove relatively small variations in electorates between constituencies, because such changes can disrupt local political and other organisations and break established local ties in representation, but they must do so in order to meet the local government boundary requirement. All of those rules can be overridden where they identify 'special geographical considerations', however; the Act specifically refers to 'size, shape and accessibility' and these terms are interpreted as allowing much-smaller-than-average constituencies to be recommended for sparsely-populated, remote areas. Finally, the Commissions should not substantially increase the number of constituencies, although no maximum is specified—except for Northern Ireland.

The Commissions operate by calculating the theoretical entitlement to seats for each major local government unit (Counties and London Boroughs in England at the last, 1991–1995, Review; Counties in Wales and Regions in Scotland; the Northern Ireland Commission deals with the entire province). They then allocate constituencies accordingly—if necessary, to combinations of units (the English Commission combined seven pairs of London Boroughs and the Scottish combined two pairs of Regions). For any unit entitled to more than one seat, the Commission then considers various options for defining its constituencies—always as groups of local government electoral wards—and selects one as its provisional recommendations for the unit, which are published and subject to public consultation.

The process of redrawing the constituency map is a very political activity, since the electoral prospects of parties, their incumbent MPs and their potential candidates can be significantly affected by where the boundaries are drawn. These possible consequences play no part in the Boundary Commissions' deliberations, which are undertaken without any knowledge of areas' electoral alignments and the likely consequences of the options being considered for one or more parties. Once the provisional recommendations are published, however, the political parties and others evaluate them for their likely electoral impacts.

During the public consultation process, individuals and organisations are invited to make representations to the Commissions regarding the provisional recommendations—either positive or negative; if their comments fall into the latter category, they can offer alternative configurations for one or more constituencies. If either one local government in

the area covered or 100 individual electors submit negative comments, the Commission must hold a public Local Inquiry in the area to obtain further information regarding public opinion about its recommendations and to evaluate the submissions (both those made in writing before the Inquiry and those made orally at it). The Inquiries are conducted by Assistant Commissioners appointed for the purpose (all of them are senior lawyers). They read all of the submissions, listen to the oral presentations (which can be subject to cross-examination by other interested parties), weigh up the evidence and write reports which comprise reasoned cases either that the Commission should not change its provisional recommendations or that specified changes should be made. The Commissions then decide, on that advice and their own appreciation of the submissions, either to retain the original recommendations (which then become final) or to alter them, in which case they are subject to further public consultation and, occasionally, a further Inquiry.

The parties seek to influence the Commissions during this procedure, either to ensure that they retain their provisional recommendations (because they are in their interest) or to get them changed to a set of constituencies which is more favourable to their electoral prospects. In most areas, what is seen as good for one party is bad for another, and competing schemes are offered to the Inquiries. In presenting their cases, the parties must not discuss their electoral prospects or anything related to them: their cases must be set within the criteria addressed by the Rules. Thus a party will use fitting into the local government map, electoral equality and, especially, local community ties in its written and oral submissions to try and ensure a map which is biased in its electoral favour.

Since this system of periodic reviews was introduced in the 1940s, it has generally been assumed (correctly) that the redistribution process largely favours the Conservative rather than the Labour Party. This is because of the electoral equality rule. If the Commissions have to ensure that constituency electorates are as equal as is practicable, this will mean that they will have to reduce the number of seats in areas of population decline and increase them in areas of growth. The former are concentrated in the older urban areas and the inner cities, which are traditional Labour heartlands, whereas the latter are in the suburbs and rural areas, which favour the Conservatives; the impact of the *constituency electorate variation* bias sub-component (see above) is reduced by a redistribution therefore. However, within any area there is a large number of ways in which the constituency map could be drawn consistent with the rules (i.e. there is a large number of combinations of contiguous wards),[5] and the parties examine these to find those which they identify from their knowledge of local voting patterns as being in their best interests, and prepare their cases accordingly. The quality of those cases, and of the advocacy with which they are presented in the

written and, especially, the oral submissions, is crucial to their prospects.

It is generally accepted by observers and the other political parties that Labour was much better organised than the Conservatives in preparing for the Commissions' Fourth Periodic Review (which began in 1991): it produced the better cases and was more disciplined and consistent in advancing its cause. Labour put a full-time official on to the task of identifying the party's best option in each area, and backed him in his negotiations with local parties to ensure that they supported the central party's proposals in both their written submissions and their contributions to the Local Inquiries. The Conservatives were relatively complacent, especially at the outset, believing that the Review, like past ones, would favour them, and gave it relatively little attention and few resources at Central Office. The Liberal Democrats have few resources to devote to the issue centrally, and left responding to the provisional recommendations to locally-interested groups and individuals in most areas: in any case, their dislike of the current electoral system has led them to pay little attention to the minutiae of manipulating it.

Because of the large number of possible outcomes to the constituency-drawing process, the various proposals presented to the Local Inquiries can have very different political complexions. We investigated this by evaluating the likely electoral consequence of the plans presented by each party, as well as the Boundary Commission.[6]

Compared to the 1992 general election result, the Boundary Commissions' provisional recommendations favoured the Conservative Party, which would gain 21 seats while Labour lost 11 (Table 1: the Commissions recommended seven additional seats). The Conservatives' own proposals would have produced 30 more seats for the Party, however, with Labour holding 19 less than its 1992 result (there were eight new seats in the Conservative plan). Labour's plans, on the other hand, gave it 20 more seats than the Boundary Commissions' provisional recommendations and cut the Conservatives back by 18.

1. Estimated number of seats won in 1992, by Boundary Commission recommendations and party plans

	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Other
1992 General Election (651)	336	271	20	24
Boundary Commissions' Provisional Recommendations (658)	357	260	17	24
Party Proposals				
Conservative (659)	366	252	17	24
Labour (660)	339	280	17	24
Liberal Democrat (658)	357	259	18	24
Boundary Commissions' Final Recommendations (659)	351	265	18	25

The eventual outcome looks like a classic 'split the difference' decision, but the four Commissions operate independently and each (excepting Northern Ireland's) treats its country on an area-by-area basis rather than as a whole. The fact that the final recommendations

giving both Conservative and Labour 15 fewer seats than their separate submissions argued for is probably serendipitous. More important for Labour, they increased their number by five over that in the provisional recommendations, whereas the number of likely Conservative victories was reduced by six. Labour's careful preparation and advocacy before the Assistant Commissioners paid off; it substantially reduced the Conservatives' potential gains from the Review.

Our evaluation of the various plans reported in Table 1 assumes that Labour and Conservatives won the same overall percentage of the votes in the new constituencies as they did at the 1992 general election. But Labour was planning to increase its share of the poll, and in some cases it may have argued for constituencies which would be held by the Conservatives if the 1992 result were repeated at the next election, but by a small margin only so that a modest swing to Labour would see them change hands. To evaluate whether this would have been so, we calculated the total bias in Great Britain (i.e. excluding Northern Ireland) at various divisions of the vote between the two main parties. At the 1992 election, the Conservatives won 41.9% of the votes cast in Great Britain and Labour won 34.4%: if those percentages had been obtained in the new constituencies (using our method of estimating the votes there) then there would have been a pro-Labour bias in the system of about 10 seats (Figure 3). If the Conservative share increased, that bias would be reduced, but if it declined, then as the distribution of votes between the two shifted towards an equal share at around 38.0% each, so the pro-Labour bias increased substantially to about 25.

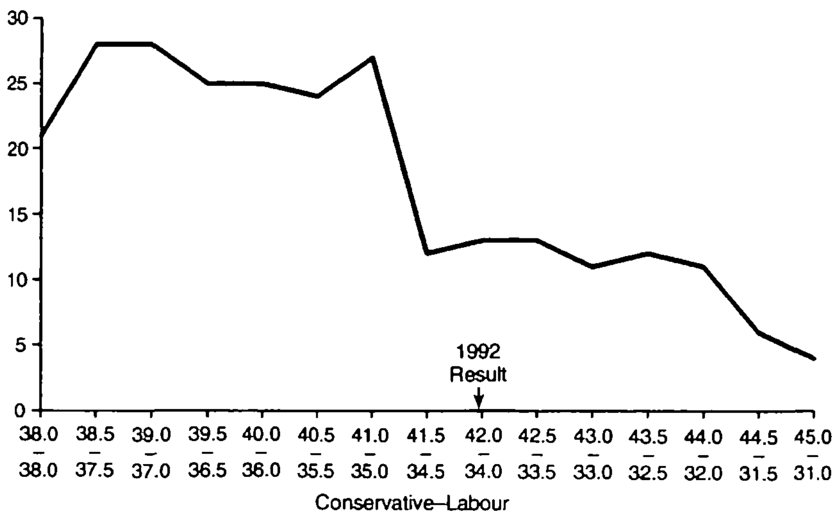

Figure 3. Pro-Labour bias in the electoral system: the 1992 general election in the 1997 constituencies with different vote shares, from 38% each for Conservative and Labour to 45% for Conservative and 31% for Labour

This provides strong circumstantial evidence that Labour's strategy in making submissions to the Boundary Commissions was very carefully conceived and successfully carried through: it promoted the creation of a set of constituencies from which it would gain substantial benefits if the electorate swung its way by, in effect, creating a more efficient geography of its vote. (Under Labour's proposals, for example, with an equal vote share it would get 329 seats and the Conservatives 285: under the Conservative proposals the two would have won 306 and 308 respectively.)

The effectiveness of constituency campaigns

Once the new set of constituencies is in place, each party's task is to evaluate the probability of success in every seat and to allocate resources in order to maximise the returns for its efforts—to ensure that its votes are as efficiently distributed as possible. This can be illustrated by placing votes into three categories: effective, surplus and wasted. Effective votes are those needed to win seats: in each constituency the number of effective votes for the winning party is the number that the second-placed candidate obtained plus one. Surplus votes are those in excess of the effective number: additional votes in a seat which a party has won bring no further tangible rewards. Finally, wasted votes are those won in constituencies that a party loses—they too bring no tangible rewards. A party's goal is to maximise its number of effective votes and minimise its wasted and surplus votes (though clearly it would be too risky to plan on winning seats by a margin of only one!).

Parties approach this goal by dividing seats into three categories: those they hold; those they want (and hope) to win; and those where they think their cause is probably hopeless. They will expend relatively little resources in the last category—money and effort spent amassing a few more wasted votes in hopeless seats is very largely money and effort wasted. In the seats that they hold, they will determine those where they think that no challenger has a reasonable chance of displacing their candidates and those where their incumbency might be under threat; more resources will be expended in the latter (their marginals) than the former, where additional surplus votes are not worth the effort. Having secured the constituencies that they already hold, parties (and especially opposition parties) will direct resources at the seats which they do not hold but feel that they could win—the 'key marginals'.

At the 1997 general election, the trend in the opinion polls put the Conservatives very much on the defensive. Their opponents devised long-term and short-term campaign strategies. The former involved identifying target seats and allocating resources to mobilise the vote there. Labour identified 90 seats as winnable, and campaign teams for each were established as long as two years before the election. Their tasks, to a considerable extent undertaken by telephone from outside the constituencies, were to contact as many electors in the seats as

possible and identify both those who were Labour supporters and those who might either swing to Labour from another party or, as important, vote for Labour in 1997 not having voted at all in 1992 (i.e. those who abstained and those who were first-time voters). This provided crucial information not only for targeted mailings in the build-up to the election but also for the teams on the ground during the six-week official campaign, whose task was to contact the likely Labour voters and ensure that they voted on 1 May. The Liberal Democrats had a similar two-stage strategy, although they identified only 34 target seats and had many fewer resources to use in the long campaign.

During the election campaign proper (from the announcement of the dissolution on 17 March until polling day on 1 May), the parties on the ground were active in the usual ways—promoting their candidates through leafleting, posters and other advertising, canvassing support on the doorsteps, arranging postal and proxy votes and so forth. The amount of campaigning undertaken was a function of both the number of workers available, for how long and for what purposes, and the amount of money that could be raised to spend on the various advertising campaigns. Labour and Liberal Democrats, as in 1992, had most workers and money available in the targeted marginal seats: the Conservatives were better able to recruit workers and raise campaign money in their safer seats, which was not necessarily the optimum for seat-winning.[7]

British electoral law places no restrictions on the amount that parties can spend on their campaigns nationally, but puts clear limits on the amount that any candidate can spend in a constituency during the official campaign period. In 1997, these limits were: £4,965 plus 4.2 pence for every person on the electoral roll in a borough constituency; and £4,965 plus 5.6 pence for every person on the electoral roll in a county constituency. In a constituency with 70,000 electors, therefore, this meant a maximum expenditure of £7900 in a borough (i.e. urban) constituency and £8,900 in a county (i.e. more rural) one.

Analyses of recent elections have shown not only that parties tend to spend more where they are electorally strong but also that those which spend more tend to run more active campaigns, with more party workers canvassing and undertaking other activities to mobilise the vote.[8] We have been able to obtain these data from the Returning Officers for 554 of the 641 constituencies in Great Britain, and Table 2 shows the mean and standard deviation in each party's spending for various categories of constituency. Conservative-held seats (according to our estimates of the 1992 vote in the 1997 constituencies) were divided into those in which Labour was second and those where the Liberal Democrats occupied second place, and then into: *marginal* (gap between first and second less than 10 percentage points); *possible* (gap between first and second 10–20 points); and *safe* (gap between first and second more than 20 points). Labour-held seats (in the great majority of which the Conservatives occupied second place) were divided into

2. Party campaign expenditure in 1997 (% of maximum allowed) by type of seat

Spending By:	Conservative		Labour		Liberal Democrat	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Conservative-held seats, Labour second						
Marginal (63)	89.4	9.8	92.6	6.6	21.0	17.2
Possible (43)	91.2	8.5	90.1	10.9	32.0	24.0
Safe (69)	86.3	11.1	73.1	18.3	31.2	21.1
Conservative-held seats, Liberal Democrat second						
Marginal (15)	92.5	8.6	57.9	26.7	94.4	3.9
Possible (30)	91.1	11.3	62.8	23.5	87.9	14.6
Safe (98)	89.4	10.2	51.8	18.9	61.5	23.7
Labour-held seats						
Marginal (57)	79.2	17.9	85.8	12.2	27.6	25.3
Possible (61)	53.7	22.3	78.3	13.1	19.4	18.0
Safe (101)	37.4	18.7	70.8	18.1	14.0	14.8
Liberal Democrat-held seats						
All (17)	78.4	21.4	64.5	27.6	95.3	8.0

the same three categories, whereas the small number of Liberal Democrat-held seats for which we had spending data (17) were treated together.

The first two blocks in Table 2 show that on average the Conservatives spent fairly close to the limit in all of the seats that they held, with relatively little variation around that high figure (compared to the other parties and its own performance in other seat types). Labour spent much more on average in the seats where it was second (especially if they were winnable—i.e. either marginal or possible) than where it was third. The Liberal Democrats displayed the latter pattern in exaggerated form, spending four times as much in the marginal seats where they were second as in the Conservative-held seats where Labour occupied that position. In the Labour-held seats all three parties spent more the more marginal the contest, and the Liberal Democrats spent most in the seats they were defending.

But what were the outcomes? Table 3 shows the absolute change in each party's share of the vote between 1997 and our estimate for 1992, in each seat type, plus the same figure for abstentions (for those constituencies for which we have spending data). The Conservative share fell by 11.5 percentage points overall, but by much more in the seats which it was defending against Labour plus those which Labour held by a relatively small margin. The party's best performances, on average, were in the seats where to do well was unimportant, such as Labour's safe seats. In other words, by losing most votes where they could be most effective, the proportion of the Conservatives' votes which were wasted was increased.

Labour's average increase over the 554 constituencies was 9.6 percentage points, but it was much more than that in the seats where votes were most needed—those held by the Conservatives where Labour occupied second place—as well as in those which Labour itself held by margins of less than 10%. (Note, too, that in the Conservative-held

3. **Absolute change in vote share 1992–1997 by type of seat**

	Average Change (percentage points) in			
	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	Abstentions
Conservative-held seats, Labour second				
Marginal	−12.3	12.2	−2.4	5.6
Possible	−12.2	13.7	−3.8	5.1
Safe	−13.1	13.8	−4.0	6.1
Conservative-held seats, Liberal Democrat second				
Marginal	−9.7	3.3	2.6	4.9
Possible	−12.1	6.8	2.4	4.9
Safe	−12.6	8.8	−0.4	5.5
Labour-held seats				
Marginal	−13.0	10.6	−0.7	7.2
Possible	−10.5	9.0	−1.0	6.5
Safe	−8.8	6.9	−0.9	6.5
Liberal Democrat-held seats				
All	−9.8	5.8	−0.1	4.9
TOTAL	−11.5	9.6	−1.3	5.9

seats where the Liberal Democrats were second, Labour performed less well on average in the marginals than in the others; even so, it overtook the second-placed candidates in some of those seats, and indeed won some after starting in third place.) Labour performed relatively badly in its own safe seats and in those held by the Liberal Democrats: it did not pile up large numbers of surplus and wasted votes but concentrated on winning more effective votes. In many ways the Liberal Democrats were even more effective at such a strategy. Their vote share fell overall but it increased in the seats where they were challenging Conservative incumbents and stayed the same in those they were defending.

Abstentions increased most in Labour-held seats, where the party needed no more support. The effect of this was to reduce the number of votes needed to win those seats (see above). They increased by less than average in the Conservative marginal and possible seats, indicating that their opponents' successes there was at least partly achieved by mobilising relative large percentages of the electorate to turnout and vote.

Tables 2 and 3 together suggest a link between campaign intensity (as indexed by party spending) and the election outcome, especially for the challengers: where they spent more they performed better. That link is only circumstantial in the data presented here, but sophisticated statistical analyses we have undertaken sustains these conclusions: the more intense the local campaign the better the outcome for the party involved.[9]

The two main opposition parties also achieved more effective distributions of their votes through the substantial volume of tactical voting that occurred in the marginal constituencies. In general, this was condoned though not promoted by the party leaderships and central campaign teams, but strongly pressed by the best-placed of the two in many Conservative-held marginals (especially by the Liberal Democrats). This is illustrated in Table 4 by our estimates of the flow-of-the-

vote matrix in every constituency.[10] Part A shows the estimated national matrix indicating that, for example, 57.1% of those who voted Conservative in 1992 did so again in 1997, whereas 9.2% switched their votes to Labour, 5.4 switched to the Liberal Democrats, and so forth. The second block shows the average figures, and variations around those, for the constituencies held by the Conservatives after 1992, according to which party was in second place, for certain flows only.

4. Estimates of the flow-of-the-vote 1992–1997

A. The national matrix

1992	C	L	LD	N	O	A
C	57.1	9.2	5.4	0.3	2.2	25.9
L	1.6	80.6	2.8	0.5	1.9	12.5
LD	3.2	14.8	58.7	0.6	2.9	19.8
N	3.0	13.2	1.6	67.9	2.2	11.3
O	3.7	12.1	3.2	0.4	47.8	32.8
A	11.5	19.1	6.2	1.1	4.3	57.9

B. Variations in Conservative-held seats

	Labour second		Liberal Democrat second	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
CC	58.8	3.0	60.7	3.1
CL	10.3	1.1	7.3	1.8
CD	4.3	0.8	6.9	1.7
CA	24.5	2.8	22.5	2.1
LC	1.9	0.2	2.6	0.6
LL	83.2	2.1	75.8	6.1
LD	2.5	0.5	5.6	2.5
LA	10.5	1.5	13.0	2.7
DC	3.9	0.4	3.3	0.5
DL	20.7	2.7	12.2	4.0
DD	50.0	5.1	64.5	7.2
DA	22.1	3.1	16.7	2.6
AC	14.0	1.5	15.4	1.6
AL	22.4	2.3	16.8	3.7
AD	5.6	1.1	9.5	2.5
AA	53.6	3.5	52.6	2.9

Key: C, Conservative; L, Labour; LD, Liberal Democrat; N, Nationalist parties (Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru); O, other parties; A, non-voters

There are very clear differences between the two sets of constituencies, depending on which of the two opposition parties was in second place, all of which are entirely consistent with the hypothesis of tactical voting. For example, on average 10.3% of those who voted Conservative in 1992 voted Labour in 1997 in the seats where Labour was second (i.e. the flow CL), as against 7.3% in those where the Liberal Democrats were in second place, whereas the averages for the CD flows (Conservative to Liberal Democrat) were 4.3 and 6.9 respectively. More than twice as many 1992 Labour voters switched to the Liberal Democrats in seats where the latter were second (the LD flow) as in those where Labour occupied second place, with the flows in the other direction (DL) averaging 20.7% where Labour had the best chance of winning and 12.2 where the Liberal Democrats were lying second.

Tactical voting is a very good way for the opposition parties' votes to

be made effective. It reduces the number of wasted votes that each obtains in the constituencies where it is in third place, makes the incumbent's hold on the seat more tenuous, and makes the second-placed party's votes more efficiently distributed. It clearly worked in 1997, and other analyses that we have conducted show that the more that the second-placed party spent on the local campaign, the more tactical votes it won over from its third-placed opponent.

Conclusion

The 1997 UK general election was a landmark event for a number of reasons. We have focused here on one aspect only, the outcome—the high ratio of seats to votes which the Labour Party obtained, and the low ratio for the Conservatives, because Labour's votes were much more efficiently distributed than had ever previously been the case. This has come about, we argue, because Labour successfully used the electoral system to promote its interests in two ways—by its presentation of cases to the Boundary Commissions during the redistribution process which preceded the election,[11] and by its targeted campaign on winnable seats, as illustrated by its campaign spending and success at winning-over tactical voters in marginal seats. (The Liberal Democrats were also successful at the second of these, but not the first, in which they took very little interest.)

Table 5 summarises the impact of these two sets of interventions, with the bias components at the 1992 general election, at the 1992 general election if it had been fought in the new (1997) constituencies, and at the 1997 general election. Of the two constituency size sub-components, that relating to national quotas was very similar in all three, but the other—reflecting constituency electorate variations—changes very considerably. Labour's substantial advantage from this in 1992 was removed by the redistribution, which eliminated much of the inter-constituency variation in electorates, but by 1997 it had regained some of it as variations increased again. (The equalisation was done

5. The components of electoral bias in 1992 and 1997 with an equal share of the votes cast
(a positive bias is pro-Labour; a negative bias is pro-Conservative)

	1992 result	1992 in 1997	1997 result
Constituency size			
National quotas	12	13	11
Constituency electorate variations	29	4	13
Effective votes			
Minority party victories	20	18	33
Minority party votes	−30	−30	−36
Abstentions	19	21	24
Efficiency	−7	0	48
TOTAL	38	21	87

using 1991 electoral data in England, so by 1997 there had been six years of population change.)

In terms of the effective votes, the Labour Party's advantage in 1992 was substantially increased by 1997 because of the Liberal Democrats' success in more than doubling their number of MPs, very largely at the Conservatives' expense. Where minor parties did not win their votes continued to favour the Conservatives, however, because of Liberal Democrat vote-winning in the Conservative heartlands. The impact of abstentions was somewhat more favourable to Labour in 1997 than 1992, largely because of the lower turnout in its safer seats. Most important, however, the Conservatives' slight advantage from having a more efficient vote distribution in 1992 (worth seven seats) was eliminated by the redistribution, and then in 1997 Labour gained a massive 48-seat advantage by having its voters in the right places.

Successful campaigning and careful presentation of cases to the Boundary Commissions were the keys to Labour's 1997 success in terms of converting votes to seats; they used the known bias mechanisms in the electoral system to their considerable advantage, as did the Liberal Democrats. The geography of Labour votes in 1997 was far more efficient than any preceding geography over the period 1950–1997.

1 P. Norris, 'Anatomy of a Labour Landslide', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 50, October 1997.

2 The method used here was devised and published by a New Zealand political scientist in the late 1950s, and has since been used by us on a number of occasions. See R.H. Brookes, 'Electoral Distortion in New Zealand', *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 5, 1959, and 'The Analysis of Distorted Representation in Two Party, Single Member Elections', *Political Science*, vol. 12, 1960; R.J. Johnston, 'Spatial Structure, Plurality Systems and Electoral Bias', The *Canadian Geographer*, vol. 20, 1976; R.J. Johnston, C.J. Pattie and E. Fieldhouse, 'The Geography of Voting and Representation' in A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice (eds), *Labour's Last Chance? The 1992 Election and Beyond.* (Dartmouth, 1994); D.J. Rossiter, R.J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie, 'Redistricting and Electoral Bias in Great Britain', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 27, 1997.

3 On the Boundary Commissions, see C. Rallings and M. Thrasher, 'The Parliamentary Boundary Commissions: Rules, Interpretations and Politics', *Parliamentary Affairs* vol. 47, July 1994, and D.J. Rossiter, R.J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie, *The Boundary Commissions: Redrawing the UK's Map of Parliamentary Constituencies* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

4 The figures given in the previous paragraphs for the bias sub-components do not sum to 87 because of the residual interaction terms which we have not discussed here.

5 In our research on Sheffield at the time of the Commissions' Third Periodic Reviews we identified over 15,000 different ways in which the City's 27 wards could be combined into 6 constituencies, within the constraints set by the Rules: R.J. Johnston and D.J. Rossiter, 'Constituency Building, Political Representation and Electoral Bias in Urban England' in D. T. Herbert and R.J. Johnston (eds), *Geography and the Urban Environment, Volume 3* (John Wiley, 1983).

6 Full details of our estimating procedure are in D.J. Rossiter, R.J. Johnston and C.J. Pattie, 'Estimating the Partisan Impact of Redistricting in Great Britain', *British Journal of Political Science*, vol. 27, 1997.

7 See D.T. Denver and G. Hands, *Modern Constituency Campaigning* (Frank Cass, 1997).

8 See R.J. Johnston, *Money and Votes: Constituency Campaign Spending and Election Results* (Croom Helm, 1987); C.J. Pattie, E. Fieldhouse and R.J. Johnston, 'Winning the Local Vote: The Effectiveness of Constituency Campaign Spending in Great Britain, 1983–1992', *American Political Science Review*, vol. 89, 1995.

9 R.J. Johnston et al., 'Spatial Variations in Voter Choice: Modelling Tactical Voting at the 1997 General Election in Great Britain', *Geographical and Environmental Modelling*, vol. 1, 1997.

10 For details on the technical aspects of the procedure, see R.J. Johnston, C.J. Pattie and J.G. Allsopp, *A Nation Dividing? The Electoral Map of Britain 1979–1987* (Longman, 1988)

11 Labour also successfully influenced the Boundary Commission procedures in another way. The number of seats allocated to each local government area is a function of its electorate relative to the national quota. Successful registration campaigns in areas where it was likely to benefit from the allocation of another constituencies probably gained Labour four seats in 1997 that would not have been there to be won if the normal processes of registration had proceeded.