

Upbeat and in the margins: the British Trotskyist Left and their exceptionally poor election results

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Only eight out of forty-one Trotskyist candidates secured more than one per cent of the vote in the 2010 general election. But how do parties cope with, and explain, such results? [John Kelly](#) writes that Trotskyist organisations saw the vote share as not reflecting the actual level of support for their policies. Many would also highlight positive features of the campaign, such as new party recruits, while others thought the result was due to tactical voting, and hence actually not that bad.



In the 2010 General Election eight Trotskyist organisations contested 41 constituencies in England and Wales but obtained a median vote share of less than half of one per cent (0.45). Only eight candidates managed to secure more than one per cent of the vote. By any standards – even those of the Trotskyist left – this was an abysmal performance: the economy was in recession, disillusion with the Labour government was widespread and David Cameron’s Conservative party was promising drastic cuts in public expenditure. Elsewhere in Western Europe, parties of the far left had been making electoral advances: the Left Bloc in Portugal, The Left (Die Linke) in Germany and Syriza in Greece so the British far left had some grounds for optimism. Moreover, the two largest groups, the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party, had put aside their differences to participate in an electoral alliance, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition.



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The extremely poor electoral performance therefore created a significant dilemma for these party leaders. On the one hand, an open acknowledgement of an extremely poor vote implies there is very little support for their programmes and potentially calls into question their main policies, and possibly their core ideology. Moreover, an open admission of unpopularity could threaten the positive attachment of activists to their respective parties. On the other hand, the denial of poor electoral performance or indeed claims that it constitutes some form of success,

potentially threaten the credibility and authority of the party leaders. Research was therefore undertaken to understand how Trotskyist party leaders constructed accounts of their electoral performance which identified positive achievements in the face of meagre vote shares.

The principal source of data was the publications, both hard copy and online, of the eight Trotskyist organisations that contested the election. They spanned a time frame of 6 April 2010 – the date the election was called – until 31 May 2010, over three weeks after the 6 May election. This exercise yielded 54 articles that comprised 127 discrete units of text about electoral performance.

Trotskyist press coverage of the general election acknowledged their vote shares were poor, although the language employed was somewhat euphemistic. The results were never abysmal or dreadful; they were “poor” “disappointing” or “modest”. Whilst most of them acknowledged the results were ‘disappointing’, they produced a discourse that offered a very different representation of their electoral participation. The dominant theme challenged the link between votes and popularity, arguing that evidence from public meetings and discussions with voters showed their policies enjoyed widespread support. This did not translate into votes because, it was claimed, voters’ fear of a Conservative victory led them reluctantly to support Labour instead of the far left. In any case the electoral campaign itself produced significant benefits, such as the dissemination of socialist ideas to large numbers of people, party recruits, newspaper sales and increased organisational capacity through the links built with other organisations.

The most conspicuous theme in the Trotskyist texts, present in 67 per cent of the articles examined, was that the level of support for their policies was far higher than indicated by vote shares. The most subtle variant of this theme was captured in the statement that “The Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition (TUSC) campaign has won the argument in Cardiff Central even if we have not won the election.” Other groups wrote of the “sympathetic hearing” or the “warm response” to their candidates and one organization even claimed their hard left critique of Labour policies was “shared by millions of working people”.

In any case it was often claimed that “working class confidence and struggle matters more than elections”. The terrain of mobilisation and collective action is more familiar to left activists than the procedures and rhythms of parliamentary politics; and it is one in which their own efforts often yield tangible results, in the form of meetings and demonstrations. The reference to collective action therefore appeals both to a sense of agency (we can control our environment) and to a sense of efficacy (we can make a difference).

The second component of the election discourse switched focus, away from votes as the central outcome of the election, by emphasising more positive outcomes. Socialist ideas were explained to “thousands of people”; new members were recruited; large amounts of socialist literature were sold; and links were built with a range of campaigning groups. These themes also entail leadership praise for the electoral work conducted by party activists and thus help to maintain their loyalty.

The third major theme in the election texts recapitulated the argument that votes do not necessarily reflect attitudes. According to the Socialist Party for example, many more people “would have voted for us” but the threat of a Conservative election victory led them to “vote New Labour in order to stop the Tories”. In addition the name of the electoral alliance, the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, was new and therefore unfamiliar to many voters and this was also cited as a factor discouraging a far left vote.

Taken as a whole the thrust of Trotskyist discourse around the 2010 election was to downplay the potentially unsettling and threatening reality of dismal vote totals by constructing a complex, alternative discourse. It aimed to uncouple votes and popularity, stressed evidence of the popularity of far left policies, outlined a range of positive outcomes beyond votes and argued Labour support was fragile. Poor electoral performance was not denied as such, but was reconfigured within a discourse that provided an optimistic message for party activists and sympathisers.

Note: this article draws on the author's [published work](#).

About the Author

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