

Can You Report Tactical Voting Or A Hung Parliament In A Balanced Way?

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Conservatives like [@iaindale](#) are rightly anxious that the tactical voting surge could help rob the Tories of a majority. He fears that reporting the possibility of tactical voting is akin to advocating it:

“The BBC should be very careful about how it covers this tactical voting story. Reporting it is fine, but promoting it isn’t.”

It’s a tricky one, especially in the Internet age when it is relatively easy to give a guide to how to vote tactically online. There are plenty of [websites devoted to campaigning for tactical voting](#). But you can use constituency information from the [BBC Election Guide](#) to do it yourself.

Of course, it’s not that simple. Boundaries have been re-drawn, candidates have personal pulling power, and there are local issues. The whole Lib Dem surge has brought some seats into play that looked safe Labour or Tory bets a month ago. So there is actually a legitimate demand from the voters for some guidance on this. Surely the BBC, as well as the partisan newspapers, should provide that?

The paradox is that the broadcasters are generally seen as impartial conveyors of political information so if they start to give guidance to the tactical voting choices at constituency level then people may start believing them. At that point, it could be argued, they are getting too close to advocating a particular voting choice.

It is perfectly legitimate for the BBC to cover the general story that politicians are advocating tactical voting. With the polls suggesting a hung parliament it is the hot issue over the next few days. But I agree with Iain that the BBC in particular needs to leave the finer detail to the campaigning websites and the newspapers and get back to the policy issues.

Of course, if we do get a deeply hung parliament then that will also raise all sorts of interesting procedural issues for journalists – especially the BBC. Generally, governments – especially new ones – are given the dominant position in news coverage and allowed to dictate terms and set agendas because they have the popular mandate. But if we have a minority administration it raises the question of just how to balance stories.

I am reminded of the latter stages of John Major’s administration when the Eurosceptics were given equal billing to the Government. They were holding the Major administration to ransom even though they were a relatively tiny group led by mavericks such as Bill Cash. The BBC is usually accused of being Europhile but this small group of highly ideological people (‘bastards’ as Major referred to them)dictated the terms of the debate.

History might say that the journalists were right to get so excited about the Eurosceptics because :

- a) they did effectively destroy Major’s administration
- b) they were much more representative of public opinion than the House of Commons
- c) they were the story, the new element that was changing things.

I am not sure how that historical analogy fits into a post May 6th world (most historical analogies are similarly specious) but it reminds us that journalism is an art not a science and may well have to adapt to new circumstances.

My prediction is that the right-wing press will become more manically pro-Cameron in a desperate attempt to

discredit collaborative politics. It will be fascinating to see how the BBC copes with that.

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