

# Outsourcing democracy to an algorithm: the tyranny of the tactical voting site

 [democraticaudit.com /2017/06/27/outourcing-democracy-to-an-algorithm-the-tyranny-of-the-tactical-voting-site/](https://democraticaudit.com/2017/06/27/outourcing-democracy-to-an-algorithm-the-tyranny-of-the-tactical-voting-site/)

By Democratic Audit UK

27/06/2017

*Anti-hard Brexit and 'progressive' sites that advised voters which of their local candidates to vote for were a popular feature of the 2017 General Election. **Annabel Mullin** questions the democratic legitimacy of effectively outsourcing one's vote to an algorithm, and argues that detailed party manifestos have a deadening effect on political debate.*



If you were to go by the Labour and Conservative manifestos, in this general election over 80% of the population supported a hard Brexit. Or did they? We do not know. Because 30% of those [polled by ORB](#) in May said they were considering a tactical vote to stop a hard Brexit – which might, variously, mean voting for a Labour candidate who opposed it, a Green or a Lib Dem. Sites like [Best for Britain](#), [More United](#) and the [Progressive Alliance](#) sprang up with the aim of helping people vote tactically.

As we have seen in the few weeks since the election, that tactical vote has allowed the Labour party to mask its internal prevaricating on Brexit. To be even more blunt, the party has tried to deceive the electorate about its own divisions, just as the Conservatives did when they put Brexit in motion. So, in the space of one year, we have been faced with fallacious binary choices – first when a section of the electorate got a hard Brexit they did not think they had voted for, and now a General Election in which voters, on June 8, 'really didn't vote for Brexit'. Where does this leave us?

[Kensington](#), where I stood as the Lib Dem candidate, was a shock win for Labour. The Lib Dems' locally-driven campaign laid the groundwork for the result. We wanted our Conservative MP to be accountable for her votes on Brexit, climate change and housing. My teams canvassed the constituency comparing voting records and values. But, in the end, we failed to convince the anti-Brexit tactical sites to choose us. We estimate that 20-30% of the vote shifted to Labour because of their influence. Nationally, Lib Dems failed against a Labour surge that was based on strong turnout among young people, reaction against the Tory manifesto and campaign u-turns, and what seemed a logical response to what was often presented as a binary choice between Labour and Conservatives.

Constituents are exhausted by having to deconstruct their own vote, as well as the votes of everyone else. In some communities, a Labour manifesto supporting Brexit became a slightly better option than the Tory Brexit. Some argued they voted for a hung parliament – and as a Remainer I sympathise – but that is not a vote for our future. Most importantly, we cannot outsource our voting decisions to an algorithm.

And the growing public distrust in party manifestos was what enabled the tactical voting sites to thrive. Had the public been able to take the Labour manifesto at its word, those who opposed a hard Brexit would have struggled to vote for the party. Manifestos put politicians across the spectrum in a position where they are forced to waffle and lie. Look again at the Kensington constituency. The Labour candidate, [Emma Dent-Coad](#), was put in place by the pro-Brexit Jeremy Corbyn. She committed in a local manifesto (against her own party manifesto) to membership of the single market. She consequently won the backing of anti-hard Brexit tactical voting sites. The same phenomenon occurred in many constituencies across Britain. It reinforces a cynical culture that leaves voters feeling tuned-out and powerless.

Rather than insisting that politicians listen to them and engaging with the candidates, voters instead relied on the simplistic and often opaque methodology of tactical voting sites in order to decide who deserved their vote.

These sites need an urgent rethink. Parties themselves, meanwhile, must ditch the tyranny of the manifesto. It is a declaration of intention that denies politicians and governments flexibility and – crucially – honesty. Policy proposals should be an extension of the fundamental principles to which each party subscribes, not a new contract with voters negotiated amongst party insiders before each General Election. There is no reason not to set out a series of proposals – but these should be considered just that: a pitch to voters, and not a binding dictum that inhibits intelligent policy-making.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit.*

*Annabel Mullin (@AnnabelMullin) was the Liberal Democrat parliamentary candidate for Kensington.*

