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Nobody likes to support a loser, do they? Examining the social-group bases of third-party voting in recent British elections

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Abstract
While single-member district plurality electoral systems create incentives for voters to avoid supporting a party that will place third or worse in their district, recent research suggests non-trivial shares of voters do. To help understand why so many voters support third-placed parties, this paper examines an argument rooted in social cleavage theory holding that voters belonging to social groups represented by a particular party will be more likely to vote for that party in districts where it places third than other groups – even if they recognize that “their” party is out of the running in their district. Using data from the 2005-2010 British Election Panel Study, the analysis shows that, even after controlling for several alternative explanations of third-placed voting behavior, voters belonging to groups affiliated with particular political parties are significantly more likely to vote for their party in districts where the party places third or worse than voters belonging to other social groups.
Duverger’s “law” (1954; see also Cox, 1997) constitutes one of the most well-established findings in social science. According to Duverger and the body of literature that has been amassed around his seminal study, single-member district plurality (SMDP) systems provide incentives that work against the formation of multiparty systems. Because only one party wins each seat, only two parties are viable in any given district. As such, voters face incentives not to support parties placing third or worse in their districts. Anticipating voters’ behavior, parties face incentives not to contest districts in which they anticipate placing third.

Despite the large body of research on voting behavior in SMDP systems, the reason why some voters (constituting a non-trivial number in some cases) do not obey Duverger’s law, defying the incentives for voters not to support third parties, remains unclear. While previous literature has done well to isolate the effects of variables that are sufficient to cause voters to support third-placed parties, we lack a clear overarching explanation identifying which voters are most likely to possess these traits and why. Absent such an explanation, we are unable to explain why some third parties have managed to attract sizable vote shares over multiple successive elections. Furthermore, by failing to understand what motivates sustained third-party voting behavior, we are unable to explain why third parties and their politicians have been willing to contest hopeless elections in the first place.

This paper begins to develop such an explanation of third-party voting behavior. Tying what we know about the traits that predict which individuals support third parties to the literature on social groups rooted in social cleavage theory offers the potential to understand the sources of these traits. Because social group membership is associated with many of the perceptions, preferences, and ultimately behaviors that result in voters supporting third-placed parties, this social cleavage approach leads us to expect that voters belonging to social groups represented by
a particular party will be less likely to abandon that party – even in districts where the party has no chance of winning. This argument is tested in the context of recent British elections using panel data from 2005 to 2010. Because Britain’s multiparty system has persisted for several decades, explaining third-party voting behavior here may be crucial to understanding third-party voting in other SMDP systems as well.

**Previous Research on Third-Party Voting**

A large body of literature holds that SMDP systems put downward pressure on the number of parties. Connecting the mechanics of the electoral system to the incentives facing parties and individual voters, this literature argues that the number of parties – particularly those with any significant voter support – will tend towards two in SMDP systems. Even if multiple parties do contest elections, voters will tend to concentrate their support on the two most competitive parties in their district. This is because voters behave tactically, voting for a less-preferred party if their most-preferred party has no chance of winning their district – and particularly if supporting their most-preferred party indirectly and unintentionally results in the election of their least-preferred party (McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1972; Riker, 1982; Cox, 1997). Anticipating this tactical voting, political parties focused on the outcome of the present election and possessing accurate information about their chances of winning in the district (and the other parties’ chances as well) will avoid contesting districts where they anticipate placing third or worse (Cox, 1997, pp.151-172).

Tactical voting requires that four assumptions about voters are met; absent any of these assumed characteristics, voters may not behave tactically (Cox, 1997, pp.76-80). For one, we must assume that voters are short-term instrumentally rational with regard to the outcome of the
election in their district; if they do not care about the outcome of the current election (especially if they are focused less on the present election and more on the long-term fortunes of the parties), then there is no reason to abandon third-placed parties in their district for a party with a better chance of winning. Second, voters must possess accurate information about each party’s viability in their district. If voters think that their preferred party has a chance of winning (i.e. finishing in first, or second place – when it might benefit from tactical voting from other parties’ erstwhile supporters) when it does not, they may vote for the party because they mistakenly believe such behavior is the best strategic use of their vote. A third assumption is that voters do not believe with certainty that only one party has a chance of winning; if one party is guaranteed to win the district, then there is no point in voting tactically, and so voters may choose to express their true preferences for third-placed parties. Finally, a fourth assumption is that voters possess ordered, transferable preferences for the parties contesting their district. If voters cannot distinguish between their second and third preferences, then there is no reason to vote tactically because there is no lesser of two evils to choose between. A key part of this assumption also requires that voters do not favor their first preference so intensely that they cannot be compelled to vote tactically; if they prefer one party so intensely over all others, then they do not possess preferences that can be transferred from one party to another.

While an extensive literature has found evidence of tactical voting (e.g. Heath et al., 1991; Niemi et al., 1992; Franklin et al., 1994; Blais & Nadeau, 1996; Hale, 2019), neither tactical voting nor anticipation of tactical voting by parties have eliminated support for third parties. The number of parties contesting elections in SMDP systems often exceeds two (Weiner 2011; Raymond, 2013). Moreover, vote shares in several SMDP systems are fragmented across multiple parties not just at the national level, but also at the district level (Gaines, 1999, 2009;
To explain why multiparty systems have formed in several SMDP systems, some literature has turned to examine whether the assumptions required for tactical voting have been violated. The assumption most literature has examined is the second assumption that voters possess accurate information about the parties’ chances of winning. This seems a natural starting point given that many voters are poorly engaged with or informed about a great many issues in politics (Berelson et al., 1954, pp.307-310; Converse, 1964; Butler & Stokes, 1969, pp.217-239), and because polling information about voters’ preferences aggregated at the district level (as opposed to the national level) is hard to come by. Considering also the partisan and personal attributes which can and do cloud voters’ perceptions of party viability (Franklin et al., 1994; Lanoue & Bowler, 1998; Blais & Turgeon, 2004; Johnston & Pattie, 2013; Raymond, 2018), this literature finds that possessing inaccurate information makes some voters more likely to waste their votes on parties placing third in their districts rather than voting tactically for a party with a chance of winning – i.e. finishing first or second (Niemi et al., 1992; Bowler & Lanoue, 1998; Blais, 2002; Blais & Nadeau, 1996; Johnston & Pattie, 2013; Hale, 2019).

While a lack of information could lead to non-tactical voting in levels that result in multiparty fragmentation (as opposed to concentration on the two most viable parties: see Clough, 2007), a lack of information alone is not the reason why multiparty systems have formed in several SMDP systems. For one, the frequency of tactical voting seen in previous research (e.g. Heath et al., 1991; Blais et al., 2001; c.f. Franklin et al., 1994) is far too limited to produce the levels of vote fragmentation seen in many countries, or even affect the outcome of the election (Kim & Fording, 2001; Kim & Kostadinova, 2011). Moreover, the effects of (in)accurate information on voting behavior alone might not be able to prevent sincere voting:
even though perceptions of electoral viability influence voting behavior, other research shows that it may not prevent a majority of voters from supporting their preferred parties – even when these parties place third or worse in their constituency (Blais, 2002; Blais et al., 2009; Raymond and Tromborg, 2016; Raymond, 2018).

In addition to studying the effects of voters’ perceptions of electoral viability, other research has examined the impact of voters’ intensity of preferences. The fact variables like party identification and feeling thermometers influence whether one supports third-placed parties (Blais & Nadeau, 1996; Lanoue & Bowler, 1998; Blais, 2002; Blais et al., 2009) suggests violations of the fourth assumption required for tactical voting to occur are also important to understanding why voters will sometimes fail to behave tactically. While important, these findings raise more questions than they answer. Particularly, they lead us to ask who is more/less likely to hold such feelings towards parties that they do not vote tactically, and why they come to hold such intense preferences for third-placed parties. To answer that question, it may help to turn to a very different literature emphasizing voters’ motivations to vote for particular parties: the literature rooted in social cleavage theory.

A Social Cleavage Perspective on Third-Party Voting

Social cleavage theory (Lipset and Rokkan, 1967) holds that elections are an extension of the major social divisions in society. Political parties form around the major divisions and represent groups on one side or the other. For their part, voters divide along social-group lines, voting for the party representing their social group and its interests. This symbiosis results in stable patterns of voter-party ties over several decades.¹

¹ While some research holds that the effects of social cleavages on voting behavior have weakened over time (Franklin et al., 1992; Best, 2011; Goldberg, 2019), other research notes that
A social cleavage perspective would lead us to expect that voters belonging to the social
groups represented by parties placing third may be unwilling to vote tactically, resulting in larger
vote shares for third parties than the tactical voting literature would expect. If voters are
fundamentally motivated by questions pertaining to the representation of their social group, then
the act of voting, stripped of the chance to elect one’s party, is primarily an expressive act:
voting in these contexts will still divide along cleavage lines because voters are primarily
concerned with expressing the preferences and the superiority of their social group. If voting in
these circumstances is primarily an expressive act, then we would expect them to support the
parties representing their social group regardless that party’s chances of placing third.\(^2\)

This perspective is supported by a large body of literature in social psychology regarding
the attitudes and behavior of social groups. According to social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner,
1979; Tajfel, 1981), people, as an extension of their need to belong, think and act largely as
members of social groups. People in social groups act in ways that express the superiority of
their groups (Tajfel, 1970; Otten & Wentura, 2001). As members of a social group, people favor
their own group and perceive out-groups negatively in ways that are independent of the objective
differences and material concerns associated with each group (Tajfel et al., 1971; Brewer, 1999,
2007; Hewstone et al., 2002).

As an extension of the inter-group competition among social groups in society, social
groups competing in politics will view their in-group party favorably and will often perceive all
out-groups equally unfavorably and/or distant from their own. Applied to voting behavior, this

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2 Although some previous research has found that some social groups are more/less likely to vote
sincerely (i.e. non-tactically) for third parties (e.g. Alvarez & Nagler, 2000; Alvarez et al., 2006),
the variables measuring social group backgrounds were treated as mere control variables, and the
theoretical links to third-party voting were not elaborated in any detail.
suggests voters may favor their party and perceive out-group parties as so different and distant from their own that they cannot be compelled to vote tactically – in line with violations of the fourth assumption required for voters to behave tactically. Because social groups persist long after the election, voters also may not be entirely short-term instrumentally rational (violating the first assumption), but instead may view elections in terms of the long-term struggle to assert their social group – and by extension, the party giving voice to their social group – and its interests.

Social group dynamics may even influence perceptions of parties’ electoral viability. One explanation of voter misperceptions of electoral viability is known as wish fulfilment (Granberg & Brent, 1983; Uhlaner & Grofman, 1986). According to this argument, partisan-motivated reasoning leads voters to believe the parties they like stand a better chance of winning than is the case. Because social groups tend to prefer the party representing them and their interests, they may be prone to wishful thinking, overestimating the chances that their party will win – thereby violating the second assumption required for tactical voting to occur.

While the social cleavage argument would lead us to expect voters would be more likely to vote for a third party if they belonged to a social group represented by the party, we would expect voters belonging to multiple groups represented by the party would be particularly likely to vote for a third party. Drawing from the concept of reinforcing identities (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954), voters identifying with more than one group represented by a party might be even more prone to in-group favoritism and thus more likely to vote for third parties than voters belonging to only one group because their experiences as members of multiple groups associated with the party representing their social groups would reinforce in-group favoritism benefitting the party. Those belonging to one group represented by a party and another group not represented by the party may be less prone to in-group favoritism and, thus,
less likely to vote for third parties because they face more cross-pressures that pull them in
different partisan directions; in such situations, voters would be less likely to vote for third
parties and more likely to vote tactically – though perhaps still more likely to vote for the party
than those belonging to none of the groups represented by the party.

The discussion above suggests that a social cleavage perspective may help us to
understand third-party voting in SMDP systems. Not only does this perspective help us to
explain which voters are more/less likely to vote for third parties, but it also helps us to explain
why these voters hold preferences that prevent them from voting tactically in the first place.
What is missing, however, is direct evidence of social identities influencing voting behavior in
ways that defy the incentives associated with SMDP systems. To rectify this situation, the
analysis below seeks to determine more convincingly whether social group membership
increases the likelihood of voting for third parties in contexts where voters have incentives to
behave tactically.

Social Groups and Third-Placed Voting Behavior

To test the social cleavage account of third-party voting, I examine data from the British
Election Study’s 2005-2010 panel. Examining third-party voting in the context of British
elections presents a theoretically case to explain, that of a multiparty system in a longstanding
SMDP electoral system. Britain’s decades-old multiparty system can be observed at both the
national and district levels (Raymond, 2013), where a major “third” party (the Liberal
Democrats) has contested districts alongside the two largest parties – the left-of-center Labour
Party and the right-of-center Conservative Party – across the country and attracted significant
vote (if not always seat) shares. Although the party has won seats in every election, the Liberal
Democrats’ seat shares have usually been significantly lower than its vote shares. Moreover, while the Liberal Democrats tend to finish behind Labour and the Conservatives in most districts, each of the major parties performs better in some parts of the country than others, which means that each party is the third-placed party in at least some districts in every election. The fact voters do not completely desert the parties when they place third in their district, resulting in multiparty fragmentation in most districts, means there is work to be done to explain why significant shares of voters in most districts continue to support their party instead of voting tactically for a party with a better chance of winning.

In the analysis below, I examine the determinants of third-party voting behavior. Respondents voting for the party placing third in their district are coded one, and zero otherwise. To ensure that we examine voters in contexts where they actually have incentives to behave tactically (see Alvarez et al., 2006), I analyze support for each party only in English districts where parties placed third or worse. While other third parties like the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru contest elections and attract significant vote shares in Scotland and Wales, respectively, restricting the analysis to the top-three parties in English districts reduces complications to the analysis associated with voters having to choose among four parties (i.e. between two “third” parties in their districts).

To measure the social group identities associated with particular political parties – which social cleavage theory suggests will lead members to vote for these parties even when they place third in their districts – I include three scales, one for each party. Building on the notion of reinforcing identities (Lazarsfeld et al., 1944; Berelson et al., 1954), these scales are designed to test whether voters identifying with multiple groups associated with a party are more likely to vote for that party than those identifying with only one group (who are, in turn, more likely to
vote for the party than those who identify with none of the groups affiliated with a party. For each party, I measure two groups identified by previous research as being represented by the party, each coded one for members of the group (and zero otherwise), leading to additive scales ranging from zero to two (for those identifying with both groups).

Two groups affiliated with the Labour Party identified in previous research are those employed in working-class occupations and those who are members of trade unions (Butler & Stokes, 1969; Rose & McAllister, 1986; Heath et al., 1991). The Conservatives have long drawn high levels of support from members of the Church of England (Butler & Stokes, 1969; Rose & McAllister, 1986; Tilley, 2015) – to such a degree that the Anglican Church is sometimes referred to as the Conservative Party at prayer. Another consistent base of support for the Conservatives can be found among homeowners, which promotes notions of individual and familial responsibility associated with the party, and because homeowners tend to be found most often in two other environments that lend support to the Conservatives: suburbs and the countryside (Rose & McAllister, 1986; Heath et al. 1991; Norris, 1997). While support for the Liberals (now the Liberal Democrats) is far less rooted in the class cleavage than Labour or the Conservatives, the party consistently performs better among middle-class voters, and even better still among voters having completed university education (Rose & McAllister, 1986; Heath et al., 1991).

To determine more conclusively whether social group identities influence third-party voting behavior, I estimate a series of regression models predicting whether social groups impact the likelihood of voting for the third-placed party in their district. Several control variables are

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3 Following practice in much of this literature, working class includes skilled and unskilled manual laborers, as well as the long-term unemployed.
4 I use the traditional, broad definition of middle-class employment, which includes professionals, managers and senior administrators, clerical workers, those employed in sales and services, and small business owners.
included to account for alternative explanations of third-party voting. To control for the impact of perceiving a party as being out of the running on the likelihood of voting for that party (i.e. the second assumption required for tactical voting), I include a ten-point scale measuring voters’ perceptions of each party’s chances of winning their district. This scale is recoded to range from zero (no chance of winning) to one (high chance of winning).

To account for the possibility that voters respond to differences in the level of competitiveness in their district (which, in turn, intensifies/attenuates the incentives to abandon their preferred party in favor of a party with a better chance of winning), I include two variables measuring the competitiveness of the race in respondents’ districts in the previous election (2005), which voters and parties can use as a heuristic to anticipate the competitiveness of the present election and decide whether they need to vote tactically. One variable measures the closeness of the contest between the top-two parties in the district using the difference in proportions of the district-level vote won by these parties. The second variable measures the closeness of the contest between the top runners-up in the district, found by dividing the vote share of the third-placed party by the vote share of the second-placed party: values closer to one reflect more competitive races in which the incentives to abandon one’s first preference are reduced.

To account for the part of the fourth assumption required for voters to behave tactically regarding the ordered nature of voters’ preferences, I created a variable differentiating voters who prefer the party placing third but are indifferent between the top-two parties in their district on the one hand, and voters who are able to rank-order their preferences on the other. To create this variable, I used respondents’ thermometer scores for each political party and coded one all respondents who preferred the party placing third over the top-two parties in their district but
whose thermometer scores for the top-two parties were equal (and zero otherwise). Because most voters are able to rank-order the three parties, I exclude these respondents from the analysis. This controls for the possibility that those preferring the party placing third but who could not differentiate between the two parties placing first and second will be more likely to vote for the third-party than those with clearly ranked preference orderings – because the former type of voter has no incentive to vote tactically. Controlling for this type of voter allows us to estimate the behavior of voters with differing (intensity of) preferences towards the parties – as reflected in the three social group scale variables.

I estimate a series of logistic regression models predicting support for third-placed parties, one for each party. In each case, the sample changes to include only those respondents residing in districts where the party whose support is estimated placed third or worse (and where two of the three largest parties – Labour, Conservatives, or the Liberal Democrats – constituted the top-two parties in the district).

The Impact of Social Group Identities

Before proceeding to the results of the regression analysis, I analyze the bivariate relationships between each social group identity scale and support for each party – as well as some of the individual-level traits which often prevent tactical voting – in districts where each party placed third. This allows us to examine the many ways in which social group identities

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5 This variable had to be dropped from the model predicting Conservative Party support in 2010 because indifference between second and third preferences is a perfect predictor of voting Conservative. Including this variable in the models predicting Labour and Liberal Democrat support produces results similar to those presented here.

6 Using binary logistic regression creates possible IIA problems, as the reference category for each dependent variable does not distinguish between the party alternatives. Despite these concerns, the results using multinomial logistic regression to estimate a categorical measure of the dependent variable differentiating each choice produce similar results (see the Supplementary Analysis).
may lead voters belonging to particular groups to vote for third-placed parties in their district. Initial evidence of the potential impact of voters’ social-group identities on their willingness to vote for third-placed parties in their districts can be seen in Table 1, which presents the proportion of voters supporting each party in districts where it placed third, broken down by level of overlapping identification with each social group identity scale. For all three parties, we see that identification with the social groups represented by each party is associated with higher levels of support for those parties. For example, only ten percent of those not employed in working-class occupations who are not members of trade unions voted for Labour in 2010 in districts where Labour finished third, while 17 percent of those with one of these traits voted for the party, as did 24 percent of those with both of these traits. Similarly strong relationships between social group background and support for the third-placed party representing particular social groups could be seen when looking at the groups supporting the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats.

Not only do voters belonging to social groups affiliated with particular parties seem more likely to vote for those parties (despite placing third in their districts) in the present election, but the data in Table 1 also suggest these voters were also more likely to have voted for these parties in previous elections.\(^7\) Though the share voting for Labour does not increase significantly with union membership and working-class employment in 2010, home-owning Church of England members were significantly more likely to vote for the Conservatives across multiple elections, increasing from seven to 23 percent along the Conservatives’ social-group identity scale. Middle-class university graduates were more likely to vote for the Liberal Democrats, with support for the Liberal Democrats increasing from six to 13 percent along their social-group

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\(^7\) This variable is coded one for voters who supported the party in both 2005 and 2010, and zero for voters supporting any other party in 2010.
identity scale. While these findings cannot demonstrably say that voters belonging to social groups affiliated with particular parties are less likely to hold short-term instrumentally rational orientations, they certainly suggest that a considerable share of voters’ support for preferred, third-placed parties is consistent across multiple elections.

Social-group identities are often associated with other traits that may predispose them to support their preferred party despite its third-party status in their district. Table 2 presents voters’ perceptions of the electoral viability of the party that would place third in their district using the scale described above, broken down by voters’ social group background. We see some evidence of wishful thinking among working-class union members: though the average voter ranks Labour’s chances as poor, working-class union members have considerably more favorable perceptions of Labour’s chances than do voters not employed in working-class occupations and/or trade union members. Interestingly, we do not observe such “wishful thinking” on the part of the Conservatives’ social group bases. Although we do observe that perceptions of the Liberal Democrats are somewhat rosier among the party’s social group bases of support, the differences are not substantial. While the wishful thinking observed in Table 2 suggests that voters’ social group identities may undermine the second assumption required for tactical voting to occur, the fact the social group bases of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats do not engage in the same level of wishful thinking suggests that non-tactical voting in the broader electorate may not be dependent solely or even primarily to partisan-motivated estimation of parties’ electoral viability.

Table 2 also presents the average feeling thermometer scores for each party in districts where the party places third. While feelings toward Labour do not increase in linear fashion when moving up the working class/union scale, working-class union members still possess
considerably more favorable views of the Labour Party than voters not belonging to either group. Feelings towards the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats increase much more with voters’ identification with affiliated social groups. Feelings towards the Conservatives are much higher among home-owning members of the Church of England than those belonging to only one of those groups (and especially more than those belonging to none). Voters possessing one or two social-group traits affiliated with the Liberal Democrats have higher thermometer ratings of the party than do voters who are neither university educated nor middle class. This suggests voters belonging to groups affiliated with each party are more likely to strongly favor their in-group party (so intensely that they do not vote tactically – in keeping with assumption four noted above) than voters not belonging to these groups.

Thus, the analysis above suggests voters’ social group identities may be associated with some of the traits identified by Cox (1997: 76-80) as capable of undermining the likelihood of tactical voting which, in turn, increases the likelihood voters will cast votes for third-placed parties in their districts. While the analysis above suggests that social group identities – particularly when identities associated with a particular party overlap and reinforce one another – are often associated with preferences and perceptions that undermine the likelihood of tactical voting, other voters not possessing these social group identities may also hold perceptions or preferences that lead them to vote for third parties in spite of the incentives to vote tactically. Some voters may misperceive the relative viability of the parties in their district irrespective of any partisan-motivated reasoning clouding their perceptions. By controlling for these and the other alternative explanations noted above, we would have more convincing evidence that social cleavages shape preferences in ways that lead voters in SMDP systems to support third parties.

Parameter estimates of voting behavior are presented in Table 3. Consistent with
expectations drawn from previous research, voters perceiving that a party is viable in their
district were more likely to vote for the party. In most cases, voters correctly perceiving that the
two larger parties were viable were less likely to vote for the third-placed party.

Even after controlling for the effects of these other variables, the results in Table 3 show
that the coefficients for the variables measuring voters’ social-group identities are associated
with a significantly greater likelihood of voting for third-placed parties. Consistent with the
argument that voters are more likely to vote for the party representing their social group(s) and
its (their) interests despite the incentives to vote tactically, working-class union members are
significantly more likely to vote Labour; home-owning members of the Church of England are
significantly more likely to vote for the Conservatives; and middle-class, university-educated
voters are significantly more likely to vote for the Liberal Democrats than voters not belonging
to the groups associated with each party.

While we see considerable evidence of in-group favoritism in these results, we do not
find much evidence to suggest that social group identities create hostile out-group reactions
leading members to adopt more negative opinions of out-group parties. In fact, it is remarkable
how little out-group identities influence voters’ likelihood of voting for other parties – in most
cases, there is almost no systematic variation to speak of. In keeping with previous literature
suggesting that group boundaries are maintained more by in-group favoritism than out-group
hostility (Brewer, 1999, 2007; Hewstone et al., 2002), Table 3 suggests that the impact of social-
group identities on non-tactical third-party voting is characterized more by voters’ intense
preferences for their preferred party rather than outright animosity towards other parties.

The magnitude of the effects of social group identities can be seen in Table 4, which
presents the predicted probabilities of voting for each party at different levels of the social-group
identity scales. These predicted probabilities are generated assuming a scenario in which third-party voting is unlikely to occur: that voters (correctly) perceive the listed party places third, reside in districts where the race between first- and second-placed parties in the previous election was competitive (10 percentage points), and the third-placed party received a vote share that was 50 percent of the size of the second-placed party in the district. Even after controlling for the other explanations of voting behavior, working-class union members are significantly more likely to vote for Labour (30 percent) than voters belonging to neither group (13 percent). Home-owning members of the Church of England are considerably more likely to vote for the Conservatives (33 percent) than voters belonging to neither of those categories (six percent). Support for the Liberal Democrats roughly doubles among middle-class, university-educated voters (28 percent) relative to voters belonging to neither group (14 percent). Thus, these findings suggest that voters’ social-group identities create in-group favoritism that leads a significant share of voters to support the parties associated with their social groups even when they recognize that these parties have no chance of winning their district – particularly if voters possess multiple overlapping identities.

The effects of voters’ social group identities remain significant even if the focus is adjusted to those who vote for the same party over multiple consecutive elections. Table 3 also presents the results from models estimating those who voted for the third-placed party in their district in 2010 who also voted for the same party in 2005. As with voting for third-placed parties in 2010 alone, the results show that voters belonging to social groups affiliated with each party are significantly more likely to vote for that party over consecutive elections even after

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8 Dropping respondents unable to rank-order the other two parties also assumes voters are not indifferent between the top-two parties in the district. Thus, this allows us to examine the impact of holding intense preferences for voters’ most-preferred party on supporting that party in districts where the party placed third.
controlling for the noted alternative explanations of voting behavior. Working-class union members are significantly more likely to vote for Labour;\(^9\) home-owning members of the Church of England are more likely to vote for the Conservatives; and middle-class, university-educated voters are more likely to vote for the Liberal Democrats than voters not belonging to the social groups affiliated with each party.

The predicted probabilities of voting for each party over the two consecutive elections can also be found in Table 4. Working-class union members have an 17 percent probability of voting Labour (compared to the six percent probability among voters belonging to neither group); home-owning members of the Church of England have a 27 percent probability of voting for the Conservatives (compared to just four percent among voters belonging to none of these groups); middle-class, university-educated voters have a 12 percent probability of stable Liberal Democrat support (compared to five percent among voters belonging to neither group). While Table 4 cannot demonstrate conclusively any long-term instrumental rationality on the part of voters, the results do show that voters belonging to social groups represented by particular parties will often remain faithful to those parties, election after election, even if the party has no chance of winning their district. Even if voters do not consciously vote in one election to improve the chances of their preferred party winning the subsequent election, these findings nonetheless suggest that voters represented by a particular party are more likely to behave in a manner that appears unconcerned with casting a “wasted” vote in the present election.

\(^9\) Though the fact that the Labour scale is not clearly associated with higher probabilities of long-term support in Table 1 raises questions about the robustness of the Labour scale’s effects seen in Tables 3 and 4, robustness tests – in which the Labour scale is recoded into a binary variable differentiating union members and/or working-class voters from all other voters – produce substantively equivalent results.
**Concluding Thoughts**

Previous studies seeking to explain why so many voters in SMDP systems vote for third-placed parties in defiance of Duverger’s law have provided some explanations for non-tactical voting, but they have not been able to explain why voters possess the traits identified which prevent tactical voting behavior, nor have they been able to explain which voters are more/less likely to possess these traits. To improve our understanding of which voters are most likely to support third-placed parties and why, this study has examined insights rooted in social cleavage theory. Paired with our understanding of why individuals may not vote tactically, a social cleavage approach helps us to understand why voters belonging to particular social groups are likely to hold strong in-group party preferences, inaccurate perceptions of their party’s chances, and take a long-term view of elections. All these traits stemming from voters’ social group memberships lead them to support the parties representing their social groups in districts where those parties place third – and where the incentives suggest they should vote tactically instead.

The analysis above shows that an understanding of social cleavages helps us to understand why so many voters in Great Britain support third-placed parties in their districts. Voters belonging to social groups represented by the major parties are more likely to hold strong preferences for their party, sometimes perceiving it as more electorally viable in their districts than may be the case than voters not affiliated with these groups. As a result, voters belonging to these groups are significantly more likely to vote for their party – even when they recognize that their party is likely to place third in their district – than voters belonging to other groups. Not only do voters belonging to social groups represented by particular parties fail to vote in one election, the results suggest these voters support the same party in election after election.

These results suggest an interesting possibility: that the levels of third-party support seen
in other countries are due in part to voters dividing along cleavage lines. While the analysis above suggests this is the case in Great Britain, further study is needed to demonstrate that third-party voting behavior in other countries is rooted in those countries’ social cleavage structures. The fact that voting behavior in Britain divides less clearly along social group lines than is the case in many other countries suggests the patterns seen above may be observed in other countries as well. Should this finding prove to be generalizable, it would further suggest that the increased party system fragmentation seen in SMDP systems can be explained in part by third-party voting along cleavage lines. Although clearly a distinct possibility, such a conclusion would require further evidence that third-party voting behavior elsewhere divides along social cleavage lines like it does in Great Britain.
References


Goldberg, A. C. (2019). The evolution of cleavage voting in four Western countries: Structural,
behavioural or political dealignment? *European Journal of Political Research*. DOI:
10.1111/1475-6765.12336.


University Press.


Table 1: Third-Party Voting By Social Group Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number of Social Group Traits</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0 Traits</td>
<td>1 Trait</td>
<td>2 Traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Class &amp; Union Member</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Labour in 2010</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Labour in 2005 &amp; 2010</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home Owner &amp; Church of England</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Conservative in 2010</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.34</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Conservative in 2005 &amp; 2010</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Class &amp; Degree Holder</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Lib Dem in 2010</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Lib Dem in 2005 &amp; 2010</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries are the proportion of the vote won by the party listed in each row in districts where the listed party placed third or worse. The second set of values are the proportion voting for the same party in the present election who voted for the same party in the previous election.
Table 2: Feeling Thermometers, Indifference to Other Parties, and Perceptions of Electoral Viability by Social Group Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Social Group Traits</th>
<th>0 Traits</th>
<th>1 Trait</th>
<th>2 Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Class &amp; Union Member</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Labour’s Chances</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour Thermometer</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home Owner &amp; Church of England</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Conservatives’ Chances</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative Thermometer</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Class &amp; Degree Holder</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Lib Dems’ Chances</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lib Dem Thermometer</td>
<td>0.45</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries are voters’ perceptions of parties’ chances of winning their district and feeling thermometers in districts where the listed party placed third or worse.
Table 3: Parameter Estimates of Voting for Third-Placed Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>2010 Votes</th>
<th></th>
<th>Same Vote in 2005 &amp; 2010</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lab</td>
<td>Con</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class &amp; Union Member</td>
<td>0.53*</td>
<td>-0.53</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.58*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Owner &amp; Church Member of England</td>
<td>-0.27</td>
<td>1.00*</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>-0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class &amp; Degree Member Holder</td>
<td>-0.26</td>
<td>0.28</td>
<td>0.42*</td>
<td>-0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Labour’s Constituency Chances</td>
<td>0.91+</td>
<td>-2.24*</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Conservatives’ Constituency Chances</td>
<td>-1.62*</td>
<td>1.42+</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>-1.60*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of the Lib Dems’ Constituency Chances</td>
<td>-1.58*</td>
<td>-2.50*</td>
<td>1.48*</td>
<td>-1.54*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margin of Victory</td>
<td>-0.35</td>
<td>0.74</td>
<td>2.31+</td>
<td>-1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second:First Loser Ratio</td>
<td>0.90+</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>-0.83</td>
<td>1.62*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.73</td>
<td>-0.94</td>
<td>-2.15*</td>
<td>-1.88*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFadden’s R^2</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>179</td>
<td>848</td>
<td>811</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05. Entries are binary logistic regression coefficients (standard errors).
### Table 4: Predicted Probabilities of Voting for Each Party by Social Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Group &amp; Trait</th>
<th>Number of Social Group Traits</th>
<th>0 Traits</th>
<th>1 Trait</th>
<th>2 Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Class &amp; Union Member</strong></td>
<td>Voting Labour in 2010</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voting Labour in 2005 &amp; 2010</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home Owner &amp; Church of England</strong></td>
<td>Voting Conservative in 2010</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voting Conservative in 2005 &amp; 2010</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Class &amp; Degree Holder</strong></td>
<td>Voting Lib Dem in 2010</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Voting Lib Dem in 2005 &amp; 2010</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries are the predicted probabilities of voting for the party listed in each row placing third in the district.
Supplementary Analysis

To determine whether the results using binary logistic regression in Table 3 are biased by failing to differentiate among the two parties in the baseline, Table S.1 presents the results of multinomial logistic regression models predicting categorical measures of voting behavior, while Table S.2 presents the predicted probabilities of voting for each party. The predicted probabilities in Table S.2 show that the results seen in Tables 3 and 4 are comparable to those based on the multinomial logistic regression analyses in Table S.1. Belonging to more groups affiliated with a party is associated with higher probabilities of voting for that party.

Table S.2 also presents the results from multinomial logistic regression models (1) including voters from all districts and (2) only those voters from districts in which the listed party placed first or second. Compared with the results seen in Table 4, the results from these two additional sets of models show similar patterns in the effects of each social-group identity scale, though with higher probabilities of supporting each party. The differences in these probabilities suggest that voters in districts where the parties representing their social group place third are significantly more likely to vote tactically for other parties than districts where these parties place first or second. Nonetheless, the fact the results from these models show similar patterns in the effects of each social-group identity scale to those seen in Table 4 shows that the conclusions drawn from the results presented in that table are not biased by the exclusion of districts in which parties placed first or second.
Table S.1: Parameter Estimates of Voting for Third-Placed Parties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Lab in 3rd</th>
<th>Con in 3rd</th>
<th>LD in 3rd</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Con</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Lab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Class &amp; Union Member</td>
<td>-0.72*</td>
<td>-0.28</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Owner &amp; Church of England</td>
<td>0.54*</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>-0.89*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Class &amp; Degree Holder</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.51*</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Labour’s Constituency Chances</td>
<td>-0.40</td>
<td>-1.02</td>
<td>3.23*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Cons’ District Chances</td>
<td>2.32*</td>
<td>1.40*</td>
<td>-1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of Lib Dems’ District Chances</td>
<td>1.39*</td>
<td>2.46*</td>
<td>2.18*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margin of Victory</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>0.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second:First Loser Ratio</td>
<td>-0.72</td>
<td>-0.93+</td>
<td>-0.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-0.68</td>
<td>-0.57</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McFadden’s R²</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>719</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>764</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

+ p<0.10, * p<0.05. Entries are multinomial logistic regression coefficients (standard errors).
Table S.2: Predicted Probabilities of Voting for Each Party by Social Background

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Group Traits</th>
<th>Number of Social Group Traits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0 Traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Working Class &amp; Union Member</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Labour (3rd Place Only)</td>
<td>0.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Labour (from Table 4)</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Labour (All Districts)</td>
<td>0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Labour (1st &amp; 2nd Only)</td>
<td>0.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Home Owner &amp; Church of England</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Conservative (3rd Place Only)</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Conservative (from Table 4)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Conservative (All Districts)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Conservative (1st &amp; 2nd Only)</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Middle Class &amp; Degree Holder</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Lib Dem (3rd Place Only)</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Lib Dem (from Table 4)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Lib Dem (All Districts)</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting Lib Dem (1st &amp; 2nd Only)</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Entries are the predicted probabilities of voting for the party listed in each row. “3rd Place Only” refers to the results of multinomial logistic regression models focusing only on districts where the listed party placed third or worse. “from Table 4” refers to the results seen in Table 4. “All Districts” refers to the results of models including all districts. “1st and 2nd Only” refers to the results of models focusing only on districts where the listed party placed first or second.