

“A Possible Case of Strategically Targeted Strategic Voting?
The 1999 Ontario Election and Its Importance to the Wider Strategic Voting Literature”

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Introduction:

Studies of strategic voting are now commonplace in the voting behavior literature. Since 2000, over 25 articles on the subject appear in peer reviewed journals in political science. The questions these articles attempt to answer vary, but much recent work is on whether strategic voting exists in systems where there are less “mechanical” incentives for strategic voting than are provided by plurality voting systems (c.f. Niou 2001; Karp, Vowles, Banducci, and Donovan 2002; Abramson, Aldrich, Diamond, Diskin, Levine, and Scotto 2004; Ferrara and Heron 2005; Moser and Scheiner 2005). However, as Blais and Cary (1991: 79) remind us, there is a psychological factor to strategic voting, e.g. “the tendency for voters, realizing that votes for minor parties are not effectively translated into seats, to rally to what they consider the least unacceptable of the two major parties.” A key psychological force is information about candidate viability, information that usually comes to the voters via polls and sometimes campaign messages that urge or imply the utility of voting strategically.

An open question in the literature is whether elites can “cue” strategic voting in the electoral context, particularly in a case where more than two parties field viable candidates and candidate viability varies across electoral districts. Such is the case in the Canadian Province of Ontario, where in 1999 three parties (the incumbent Progressive Conservatives, the Liberals, and the New Democratic Party (NDP)), all of whom had held power at one point in the previous decade, competed for the hearts and minds of the

voters. What makes this race significant is the presence of a coordinated campaign by a coalition of interest groups known as the Ontario Election Network (OEN) that wanted to see the right-of-center Conservatives defeated at all costs and were willing to see them replaced by a Liberal-NDP coalition government. The OEN made an effort to induce strategic voting for the more viable of the other two parties in 26 of Ontario's 103 ridings. Given the varying competitiveness of the two parties, the OEN *did not* simply attempt to get voters to strategically vote for either the Liberals *or* the NDP. Rather, in the 14 ridings where the former was perceived as more viable, voters received information encouraging them to vote Liberal. In the remaining 12 ridings, voters were encouraged to vote for the more viable NDP candidate in order to defeat the Conservative in the riding (Tanguay 2002). Consequently, the message encouraging strategic voting can be considered to be *independent* of those sometimes made by self-interested partisans attempting to induce strategic voting for their own electoral benefit.

Using the 1999 Ontario Election Study (OES), we test the hypothesis that the OEN campaign to induce strategic voting was successful. To test this assumption, we add contextual variables to the individual level survey in order to determine whether a respondent resided in a targeted district. If the OEN campaign was successful, the analysis below should reveal that these respondents are more likely to report casting a strategic vote *for the targeted* party than those in districts that were not targeted and that the incidence of voters in targeted ridings that report casting a strategic ballot for a non-targeted party to be nearly non-existent.

Unfortunately, preliminary analysis taking what Blais, Young, and Turcotte (2005) label the "direct approach" to strategic voting exhausts the available data. This approach, using the post-election study asking "Was [the party you voted for] your first choice, that is, were they the party you liked the most" renders inconclusive results. In our discussion, we speculate on whether the indirect approach that Blais et al. (2005) are skeptical of using can better tackle this important research question.

Strategic Voting and Information

In plurality elections, Cox (1997, 72) defines strategic voting as "voting for a lower-ranked candidate that one believes is stronger, rather than for a higher-ranked candidates that one believes is weaker." Blais, Nadeau, Gidengil and Nevitte (2001) add that perceptions of the viability of the candidates must motivate the vote for the less preferred candidate. In order for strategic voting to be effective, the voter must believe shifting from a "sincere" vote for the most preferred party that has no chance of winning to a "strategic" vote in the hopes of defeating the least preferred candidate can affect the outcome of the election. The multi-candidate extension of the calculus of voting model developed by McKelvey and Ordeshook (1972) considers voter's combined utility over various outcomes combined with the probability of the outcomes occurring as instrumental to the voting decision.

Merolla (2006a, 5) points out that the McKelvey and Ordeshook (1972) formulation is problematic because, "the probability that a voter casts a decisive vote will always be close to zero in a large electorate." In conditions of uncertainty where the uninformed voter has next to nil chance of casting the vote to give either their sincere or second preference candidate a victory, scholars such as Ferejohn and Fiorina (1974) argue that it would be appropriate for the voter to follow the "minimax regret" criterion.

In any given race, a voter's maximum regret is usually conceived of as the failure to cast the decisive vote that gave the sincere preference the victory. In the low information context where a voter cannot trust polls or information they receive about the viability of a race, the most preferred candidate should be chosen. A voter is likely to be faced with the greatest sense of remorse if they wake up on election day and realize that their strategic vote cost their most preferred candidate the election or feel the greatest sense of fulfillment (elation) if they learn that their decision to endure the costs of voting and casting a sincere ballot propelled their favorite candidate to victory (c.f. Tideman 1985 [cited in Geyes 2006]).

However, voters rarely walk into a race without some assessment of how the parties and candidates are faring at the polls and this leads to criticism of the mini-max conceptualization of the decision to turnout and vote sincerely. Although "the voter does not make (point) estimates of the probabilities associated with all possible outcomes," Mayer and Good (1975: 917) remark that it is "unrealistic to assume that the voter ignores his rough ideas concerning the outcome of the election so his decision is not made under uncertainty." Blais and Turgeon (2004) present a "glass-half-empty, glass-half-full" analysis of the accuracy of Canadian assessments of the viability of candidates for federal office. They find that well-informed independents (e.g. those without declared loyalty to a political party) were skilled at picking the least viable candidate in their constituency while those predisposed to liking one of the parties sometimes allowed their partisanship to cloud their views, particularly if they were ill informed about political matters. In short, a good portion of the electorate is not blind, and Blais and Turgeon's (2004) findings suggest that when voters are informed, accurate viability assessments necessary for strategic voting can fall into place.

A study of the prevalence of strategic voting in Britain during the 1980s implicitly finds that levels of strategic voting are influenced by the competitiveness of a district or riding. Lanoue and Bowler (1992) discover that the prevalence of strategic voting in the 1983 British election was partially a function of the competitiveness of the district, measured by the closeness of the prior election. This result suggests that there are at least some voters who are aware of the situation in their constituencies and use perceptions of competitiveness among the candidates in their decision to cast a sincere or strategic ballot.

A large literature exists on the role campaigns play in informing voters about parties, candidates, and issue positions.¹ The question is whether additional information above and beyond prior information about the competitiveness of a district can induce additional strategic voting. Often voters receive their "rough ideas" from elite cues such as media polls that reinforce the notion that a third party such as the NDP in Canada or third party candidates such as Ralph Nader have little chance of either forming a government or winning the Presidency on Election Day. This possibly induces *some* strategic voting, but there is likely a separate subset of the population that remains true to their first preference for reasons such as a wanting to demonstrate "expressive support" for their party or candidate (c.f. Schuessler 2000; Merolla 2006b). In doing so, the voter may make the calculation that the probability of their one vote for the weaker candidate

¹ For examples that campaigns matter in the American context, see for example, Bartels (1988, 1992) and Alvarez (1998). For the role of campaigns in the Canadian context, see for example, Johnston, Blais, Brady, and Crete (1992).

opening other voters up to the candidate in subsequent elections is greater than a strategic vote defeating the least preferred candidate.²

The question is what happens when candidates or outside organizations make an attempt to coordinate strategic voting? The existing literature differentiates between two types of elite priming of strategic voting. Bruden (2005) finds that cues that came from a major party candidate (Al Gore), asking voters to cast a strategic vote had a minimal effect, a finding consistent with Merolla's (2003, 2006a) claim that Gore's advertisements attempting to induce strategic voting were ineffective. She notes that major parties may have difficulty getting minor party supporters to respond to their advertisements justifying a rationale for strategic voting because the party and its messages are seen as less trustworthy due to the self-interest it has in seeing its candidate win the election. Building on the political psychology literature, Merolla (2006b: 8) notes that "many studies of persuasion and priming find that individuals are more likely to incorporate messages when they trust the sender of the message." The results from Merolla's (2006b) experimental work show that while all varieties of cuing can induce strategic voting, those that come from sources independent of simple newspaper polls or a major party are more persuasive at shifting voters over to the less preferred candidate with a greater chance of defeating the least preferred contender.

Messenger type is not the only covariate influencing the probability of casting a strategic vote. From the earliest empirical studies of strategic voting (c.f. Black 1978) onward (c.f. Duch and Palmer 2002), levels of political sophistication among voters are shown to influence the phenomena. High sophisticates are likely to understand that the chances of a minor party candidate winning an election are low and recognize concerted attempts at inducing strategic voting (c.f. Merolla 2006b). Political psychologists have long recognized (c.f. Zaller 2002), Cox (1997) has theorized, and Merolla (2006b) has empirically shown that minor parties that offer arguments against strategic voting can successfully combat some of the strategic defection away from their parties. Other covariates that have been tested but shown to be not crucial to including in empirical models of strategic voting include socio-economic characteristics of the individual voter (c.f. Abramson, Aldrich, Diamond, Diskin, Levine, and Scotto 2004) and their levels of political efficacy (Merolla 2006b).

The one assumption that recent studies of strategic voting in systems with no runoffs and single-member districts make is that there is a minor party with little chance of winning the election. We wish to relax this assumption and ascertain a) what occurs in a system where one cannot entirely rule out any of the three parties forming either a majority or a significant portion of a coalition government; and b) the impact of the above mentioned covariates in a situation where the elite interest group providing the cue is trying to induce strategic voting for different parties in different constituencies?

Below, we describe how and determine whether existing data can evaluate the success or failure of the OEN's attempt to induce strategic voting for the party it believed

² The value of an expressive vote for an unviable candidate may increase further if there are side benefits that could come to the candidate or party as a result of receiving a minimal number of votes. For example, a voter may derive further utility from a sincere vote for a third party U.S. presidential candidate if they knew that their vote would push the candidate closer to the threshold necessary to qualify for public financing. In Canada, where the level of public financing a party receives is a function of their prior electoral support, this rings especially true.

to be most capable of beating their least preferred alternative, the Conservative Party, at the constituency level. The 1999 Ontario election is unique because the OEN's willingness to endorse either the left NDP or the centre-left liberals was dependent on the group's calculations as to a) which was the stronger party in the riding, and b) whether their support for this party could prove crucial to the Conservative defeat in the riding thus reducing this party's chances of forming a government.

The Ontario Election of 1999: A Brief Description of Our Case:

As a nation with a single-ballot plurality system where the federal and many of the provincial party systems have failed to follow Duverger's Law and converge around two parties for over a half-century (c.f. Epstein 1964), Canada presents an interesting case for students of strategic voting. This has not gone unnoticed by social scientists, and despite the existence of multiple parties, studies show strategic voting to exist in Canada, albeit at low numbers (c.f. Allan, O'Reilly and Vengroff 2000; Blais, Nadeau, Gidengil, and Nevitte 2001; Justice and Lanoue 2005). The "two-party-plus" system Epstein (1964) describes, where the Liberals and the Progressive Conservatives battle for control of the Government with the NDP competitive in select blue collar ridings and marginally competitive in the Province has existed in Ontario at least since the NDP competed under its previous label, the Canadian Cooperative Federation (CCF).

What makes the story of Ontario provincial politics so interesting is the fact that it party control over the Legislative Assembly historically ran against the party that held control of the national government in Ottawa. The exception of the "Diefenbaker Interlude" notwithstanding, the Liberals have been Canada's governing Party for most of the post-War period. In contrast, prior to 1985, politics in Ontario was dominated by the so-called "Big Blue Machine," a center-right Tory government dedicated to effective management of the Province. The Tory engine ran dry in the mid 1980s when the NDP and the Liberals teamed up to form a coalition government that rendered the plurality winning Conservatives to the opposition. Interestingly, the parties on the left took power in Ontario shortly after Mulroney's Conservatives took power in Ottawa, lending credence to the "balance theory" of early social scientists such as Lord Bryce (1921) and Frank Underhill (1955). As one of us has noted elsewhere (c.f. Scotto and Kornberg 2004: 4), this "theory holds that voters deliberately elect different governments at different levels of a federal system so that governments can keep their eye on one another. This is an obvious "ecological inference" and Wilson and Hoffman's work (1970, 1972) with empirical data holds that the reason for the differences in party control rest largely with the more mundane explanation federal Liberals and New Democrats either failing to vote in provincial elections or crossing over to select a government that had long proved adept at its non-ideological leadership role of providing for the Province's citizens.

The relegation of the Tories to the minority following the 1985 provincial election and its shared status with the Liberals as a minority party following the stunning NDP upset in 1990 led to an internal shift in the party *from* one that governed from the center *to* one that aspired to govern from the right. The new-right Tories led by Mike Harris received their chance in 1995 after voters rejected the NDP, a party of the ideological left when in the minority who did not adapt well to the practicalities of governing Canada's largest province. As Jacek and Tanguay (2001) note, Harris introduced a set of

economic, social, and administrative reforms under the banner of a “Common Sense Revolution” that polarized the electorate and were particularly unpopular with those in the public sector and advocates of the disadvantaged. The 1999 provincial election that we analyze served as a referendum on this agenda.

Although polling showed that less than fifty percent of the electorate believed that the Tories deserved a second mandate, many activists feared that Ontario’s first-past-the-post electoral system would divide the NDP and Liberal opposition and return Harris to the Premiership (Tanguay 2002). To prevent this from occurring, Reshef and Rastin (2003: 167-168) note:

a ‘loose coalition’ of unions and community organizations calling themselves the Ontario Election Network (OEN) asked their members to ‘vote strategically’. The OEN comprised pressure groups such as Citizens for Local Democracy, and unions representing teachers, the building trades, provincial public servants, and the Canadian Autoworkers (CAW). The leaders of these unions advocated that members vote for the candidate in their riding that was most likely to oust the incumbent Tory member or prevent the Tory candidate from obtaining the seat. While this strategy did not oppose voting for NDP candidates, it did mean that, atypically, many Liberal candidates received union endorsements.

Tanguay (2002) comments that this did not sit well with many of the private sector unions and even the CAW did not attend the press conference that the OEN held the week before the election to announce its plans to endorse strategic voting in 26 ridings. The unease that many on the left felt in being asked to abandon their mature affiliation with the NDP might signal that only the 12 ridings where the OEN endorsed NDP candidates should show higher levels of strategic voting as the preferences for of many who were targeted were too strong to get them to vote strategically for the Liberals.

Evaluations as to the success of the OEN in Ontario are mixed. For one, the ability of the campaign to be effective was muted by the fact that the coalition waited until the last week to make public the targeted ridings and the information that encouraged strategic voting in these constituencies (Tanguay 2002). Moreover, Reshef and Rastin (2003) report that many interpreted the OEN’s action to be encouraging blanket strategic voting for the Liberal Party across the entire province.

The easiest evaluation to make is one based upon the failure of the OEN to attain its primary goal—the relegation of the Tories to minority status. Further, the actions taken by the group may have served to further weaken the NDP to the point where it lost its official status in the Provincial Parliament and is even further removed from ever regaining control of the Government. Tanguay (2002) does note that there were a small number of ridings where the OEN targeted NDP incumbents for strategic voting and these incumbents saw their share of the vote surge. However, it is an open question as to whether the increased NDP support would have occurred without the OEN endorsement because of the incumbency effect. Two of the elections won by Liberals in ridings targeted for Liberal strategic voting also led to the defeats of Cabinet Ministers. However, looking at outcomes and aggregate results will not tell us whether *individuals* responded to these cues and behaved in a strategic manner. To do this we must look at data measuring the calculations and attitudes of a representative sample of Ontario’s voting population taken shortly before and after the 1999 provincial election.

Data and Methods:

To test our hypothesis that strategic voting will be more prevalent and in the direction of the targeted party in the ridings that the OEN identified as targets, we utilize the 1999 Ontario Provincial Election study that we appended with contextual information that identifies the riding of as many of the respondents as possible. The two stage pre-post election survey was conducted by the York Institute for Social Research under the direction of Michael Ornstein. 1157 telephone surveys of Ontario residents were conducted in the seven days preceding the election (May 27-June 2, 1999), and 896 of these respondents were re-interviewed in the two months following the election (July 22-September 4, 1999). The pre-election component of the study was designed to measure respondents' beliefs about election chances of the three major parties in the province and in respondents' respective ridings. The focus of the post-election questionnaire was on the policy beliefs of the respondents.³ A nominal variable called "targeted" was added to the dataset to identify whether the OEN targeted the riding and the party that was targeted. As of this writing, we have identified that 833 of the 935 respondents that we were able to associate with a riding (89.1%) did not reside in a riding targeted for strategic coordination. Fifty-eight of the respondents resided in a riding where the OEN wanted people to abandon the N.D.P. for the Liberals and the remaining forty-four respondents resided in a riding where the OEN's goal was to steer people away from the Liberals and toward the N.D.P.⁴

Following Blais et al. (2005), we take a direct approach to identifying the respondents as strategic voters or not.⁵ This involves first analyzing the breakdown of the direct question by constituency and then placing restrictions on the cases to weed out those that do not understand the strategic nature of the direct question. Following Blais et al. (2005), these who tell the interviewer that they are voting for a candidate that is not their first choice but ranked the candidate, and the candidate's party and party leader higher than all other candidates. Second, we eliminate those who indicated casting a strategic vote when asked the direct question but did not believe their second preferred candidate had a better chance of winning than their most preferred party.

The direct question was asked in the post-election survey. Of the 935 respondents with known ridings, 193 did not participate in the post-election study. Further, 163 of the respondents in the identified ridings reported not voting and another 14 failed to provide an answer to the direct strategic voting question. Consequently, we are left with only 529 remaining cases for the analysis we wish to run.

Analysis:

³ We thank Professor Ornstein and his co-investigators for use of the data although all interpretations and errors in this paper are ours alone. We are especially grateful to Richard Myles at the York Data Centre for helping us identify the ridings of as many respondents as possible long after the survey was conducted and the riding boundaries had changed. Information on this process is available from the authors upon request.

⁴ Confidentiality concerns dictated that only five of the six characters in each respondent's postal code were made available to us for geographically placing the respondent in a riding. Consequently, approximately 10% of our cases fell between more than one of the ridings and maybe recoverable through second-party coding that assures anonymity. The remaining cases are instances where the respondent refused to give their postal code or gave a postal code that did not exist in Ontario.

⁵ Note that a non-strategic voter is not necessarily one that will always vote sincerely. A person that votes for their first choice might luck out in that their most preferred party's candidate also has what they consider to be the greatest chance of winning in their constituency. In a different geographical location, the person may be inclined to vote strategically.

Of the remaining 529 remaining respondents, only 10.6% or 56 resided in targeted districts. This is a bit less than we expected given that approximately twenty-five percent of the ridings were targeted for strategic voting by the OEN. Thirty-five resided in districts where the voters were asked by the interest group coalition to cast a ballot for the Liberals and while the remaining 21 lived in districts where the NDP was the OEN's favored candidates. Only 3 of those residing in Liberal targeted ridings reported casting a strategic ballot while 6 (almost 30%) of those residing in the N.D.P. districts reported such activity. Unfortunately, only one of these voters reported that their strategic vote was cast on behalf of the targeted party! Of the three voters in the ridings targeted for Liberal victories, only one in three behaved in the manner desired by the OEN.

The situation gets worse when the other two conditions Blais et al. (2005) identify as necessary for the voter to be considered a strategic actor are considered. Twenty-two of the remaining cases are instances where the voter fails to vote for the candidate that has the best chances, thus rendering the respondent "irrational" (c.f. Abramson, Aldrich, Paolino, and Rohde 1992). Another four cases are those where the respondent reports a strategic vote, but the thermometers indicate that the vote was for a candidate they most preferred. Consequently, an analysis using Blais et al.'s direct measure of strategic voting has only 511 cases of which there are too few in the targeted ridings to render a verdict as to the success of the OEN's efforts.

Discussion and Future Direction—Can this Project be Saved?:

The Ontario case presents an extraordinary opportunity to determine whether actions on the part of an interest group can be successful in motivating strategic voting among the electorate. Moreover, it presents a "least likely case" because the OEN did not fully launch their strategic voting campaign until the closing days of the election, many union members were at best ambivalent about abandoning the NDP, and parties, again particularly the NDP, sent out messages designed to counter the plea for strategic voting (Tanguay 2002). Therefore, if it can be shown that voters in the constituencies targeted for strategic voting were more likely to behave in this manner, we have strong evidence that backs Merolla's (2006a) experimental results that show individuals to be pulled away from their sincere preferences when elites that are not affiliated with political parties make the case for strategic voting.

The obvious problem is that the method for measuring strategic voting favored by Blais et al. (2005) fails to yield enough information to test this important hypothesis. As these authors note in their article and one of the authors notes in previous work (Blais and Nadeau 1996), measuring strategic voting is contentious and political science is far from a consensus on the *one* way to determine the difference between a sincere and a strategic voter. In their article on the 1999 Ontario election Blais et al. (2005: 166) mention that their indirect approach to modeling strategic voting yields aggregate estimates that are accurate but fail to correctly predict the individual strategic voters:

The complex [indirect] modeling method gains some validity because it yields estimates of strategic voting that are similar to those obtained through a simpler direct approach. But the latter method is more useful in identifying *which individuals* [their emphasis] did and did not cast a strategic vote because the starting point of the inquiry is actual vote choice while the indirect approach compares *predicted* (not actual) vote choice under two different scenarios.

The question is whether or not adding an interactive term that mixes the strategic

covariates in Blais et al.'s (2005) indirect model of strategic voting with a second-level variable that codes for whether or not the respondent resided in a targeted constituency would improve our ability to predict which voters behaved in a strategic fashion. Further, it remains to be seen whether alternative indirect models of strategic voting that are more in accord with the McKelvey and Ordeshook (1972) formalization of the empirical model and favored by scholars such as Abramson et al. (2004) would do a better job at accurately delineating the individuals into the sincere and strategic categories after adding the second-level interaction term.

There is an added bonus in attempting to model strategic voting via the indirect route. All of the variables necessary to estimate this model are included in the pre-election survey of the Ontario electorate. This will allow us to retain additional cases and possibly avoid the "Small N" problem that hindered our above attempt at directly modeling strategic voting. This constitutes the next stage of this important project.

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