

**“We won the argument even if we have not won the election”: British far left party responses to poor electoral performance**

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## 1. Introduction

Since the start of the economic crisis in 2008 austerity policies have been pursued by governing parties across Western Europe from all the major families, Conservative, Liberal, Christian and Social Democrat. This remarkable degree of policy convergence, and in particular the pursuit of austerity policies by social democratic governments, might have been expected to provide an electoral opening to the left for anti-austerity parties. A number of 'leftist' parties, further left than mainstream social democracy without being revolutionary, have recorded significant vote shares in recent years: Die Linke in Germany (11.9%, 2009), Syriza in Greece (26.9%, 2012) and the Left Bloc in Portugal (9.8%, 2009). However where overtly revolutionary parties have contested elections their performance has generally been dismal<sup>1</sup>. The vast majority of these organizations are Trotskyist, in other words they either label themselves as Trotskyist or locate themselves in the Trotskyist tradition. In the eleven national elections throughout Western Europe they have contested since the economic crisis broke in early 2008 their median vote share is just 0.21 per cent. In England and Wales, the median vote share for 44 Trotskyist candidates at the 2010 General Election was 0.45 per cent and the highest median vote share recorded by British Trotskyist parties at any general election between 1974 and 2010 was a mere 1.25 per cent (the average for the 108 candidates who fought the 2001 General Election).

An electoral outcome of less than one per cent of the popular vote, particularly under what appear to be auspicious conditions, represents a significant challenge to Trotskyist party leaders: how do they reconcile their admittedly modest expectations of electoral success against the reality of truly meagre vote shares? And how do they

account for such a low vote share to their own members without undermining member expectations of imminent voter radicalization? These are the research questions at the heart of this paper.

The next section briefly discusses the literature on party responses to electoral setbacks but then considers the difficulties faced by Trotskyist parties in implementing any significant organizational or policy changes in response to poor electoral performance. Section 3 outlines a theoretical framework rooted in discourse analysis and explains how the approach can help understand the role of language in framing electoral performance. Section 4 describes the methodology, particularly the selection of party texts and the method of textual analysis. Section 5 presents the results of the textual analysis and Section 6 concludes.

## **2. Poor electoral performance and the British Trotskyist left**

According to Mair et al (2004a) electoral setbacks often trigger one or more of five responses by party leaders: changes to organizational structure, policy or institutions and/or changed responses to voters or to other parties. These response categories are not logically incompatible and indeed some may be inter-dependent: for example radical changes in policy may require centralization of power inside the party in order to weaken the influence of ideologically motivated party activists who might resist policy shifts (cf Kitschelt 1994). The repertoire of behaviours mapped out by Mair and colleagues makes a number of assumptions: that party leaderships will acknowledge poor performance; that they will engage in a more or less rational process of analysis and decision-making; and that they will select appropriate responses to the problems they face. There are of course

constraints on decision-makers, whether from party groups with opposing views or from a “traditional mode of thinking” that inhibits rational appraisal of, and response to, evidence (Mair et al 2004b: 271). Equally there may be parties for whom falling vote share poses little threat to office holding or to policy implementation because they continue to occupy a pivotal position in coalition formation ((Strøm and Müller 1999). Nonetheless the expectation is that parties will display some form of behavioural response to significant electoral problems.

Can Trotskyist parties be analyzed within the same framework? On the one hand it could be argued that since these parties expect to obtain political power through revolution rather than through parliament then poor votes, and an absence of seats in government, should be of no concern. In other words they are an unusual type of party committed to policy and indifferent to votes and office (or at least in the conventional route to office). Moreover they probably don't expect to win parliamentary seats under most circumstances and parliament itself is often derided as nothing more than a branch of the state that is necessarily subordinate to capitalist class interests: “power does not lie in parliament [but with]...unelected bosses and bankers.” (Choonara and Kimber 2011: 39). Within this perspective elections serve primarily as an opportunity to disseminate anti-capitalist propaganda and build party membership.

However there is a more nuanced view which suggests that Trotskyist parties do anticipate some increase in mass support when people “find the conditions under which they live and work intolerable.” (ibid. 57-8). On this criterion, the recent period of prolonged and profound economic austerity should have begun to generate discontent with government policies and the very large protests and demonstrations against British

government austerity policy (March 2011 and October 2012) and against the 200 per cent rise in university tuition fees (November 2010) are consistent with this claim.

Consequently it would be reasonable to expect that some critics of austerity might vote for candidates of the far left, particularly younger voters who are less inclined to vote for mainstream parties or indeed to vote at all. According to the Socialist Workers Party “the number of votes....provides an expression of how large numbers of people feel, and this in turn affects their willingness to fight for a better society.” (Harman 2001). Measured against this more nuanced and more positive expectation of electoral outcomes, Trotskyist electoral performance in the UK 2010 general election (and throughout the rest of Western Europe) was extremely poor.

Before considering the capacity of such organizations to analyze and respond to electoral problems we need first to describe the organizations themselves. Britain, like almost all countries in Western Europe, has a plethora of Trotskyist organizations although there is very little academic literature on them or on the more broadly defined radical left parties such as Die Linke in Germany (see Alexander 1991; Callaghan 1984; McIlroy 1999; March 2011; Olsen et al 2010). Only two of them – the Socialist Workers Party and the Socialist Party – have membership totals that reach four figures whilst the rest are extremely small (see Table 1). All exist as independent organizations although many have operated at one time or another as secret factions inside the Labour Party. The Socialist Party for instance used to work as the Militant Tendency until a series of expulsions of hundreds of its members persuaded the group in late 1991 to abandon ‘entry work’ and organize as an independent political force. Clearly the Trotskyist groups are very small organizations but evidence from internal documents, including minutes of

leading committees, suggests that a very high proportion of members are extremely active compared to the membership of mainstream parties.<sup>2</sup>

Table 1 about here

In the 2010 General Election the highest vote share recorded by any of the 44 Trotskyist candidates in England and Wales was 3.67 per cent (Socialist Party, Coventry North East)<sup>3</sup>. This is a rather unusual result because it reflects a personal vote for Dave Nellist who originally held the seat from 1983 as the official Labour candidate until his expulsion in 1991 because of his membership of the Militant Tendency. Deselected in early 1992, he has since fought the seat for the Socialist Party, obtaining a steadily shrinking vote share. Only eight of the 44 candidates obtained more than one per cent of the vote and the median vote share for all Trotskyist candidates combined was just 0.45 percent, down significantly on the results for 2005 and 2001 (see Table 2). To put these figures in context we should recall that the Labour vote share fell from 40.7 per cent in 2001 to just 29.0 per cent in 2010, yet their most vociferous critics on the far left utterly failed to capitalise on widespread disillusion with Labour policies.<sup>4</sup> Elections to the European parliament have yielded equally poor results: despite contesting every constituency in the two recent elections Trotskyist vote shares were just 1.11 per cent in 2004 and 0.98 per cent in 2009. On the other hand Trotskyists have enjoyed a little more success in local authority elections so that prior to 2010 the Socialist Party had four local councillors. According to the editor of the party's monthly magazine even a handful of

councillors “can be important tribunes”, arguing for socialist policies (Interview 10 February 2014).

Table 2 about here

However despite repeatedly poor election results the most striking feature of Trotskyist parties and policies over many years is just how little they have changed: they remain highly centralized organizations, offering revolutionary policies, rooted in Marxist-Leninist theory, to working class voters and typically display unremitting hostility to most, if not all, other parties. The only notable change in the electoral arena has been the construction of far left electoral coalitions as a way of pooling resources: Socialist Alliance in 2001; Respect in 2005; and the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition in 2010.

Close examination of their structures and policies suggests that they operate under constraints significantly greater than those affecting mainstream parties. First, almost all of these organizations firmly adhere to a specific organizational structure and have shown no inclination to alter it. Normally described as democratic centralism, the structure is based on Lenin’s precepts about the organizational attributes of the revolutionary party: complete freedom of expression in inner-party debates but complete unity in action under the leadership of the central committee once policy has been decided (Lenin 1902). One important aspect of democratic centralism is the process for electing a new national leadership. Members at annual conference are invited to vote for a “recommended list” of candidates, presented to them by the outgoing Executive and normally comprising most, if not all the current leadership. Membership compliance is the norm and ensures that

almost all Trotskyist organizations are led by a self-reproducing oligarchy that remains in office for many years. Consequently the ability to introduce radical leadership change (and therefore radical change in policy) is extremely limited. Second, as small parties whose membership rarely exceeds a few thousand and is sometimes counted in the hundreds, or even less (Table 1), such organizations have a limited supply of parliamentary candidates. Changing the pool of candidates to introduce say, more women or ethnic minorities, is therefore extremely difficult.

Changing policies in order to align them more closely with voter preferences, encounters equally severe obstacles. As revolutionary organizations dedicated to the forcible overthrow of capitalism they promote radical policies on behalf of their target working class constituency. The Socialist Equality Party (SEP) 2010 manifesto called for “No cuts in pay, jobs services...For a workers’ government and socialist policies” (SEP 2010). The Trade Union and Socialist Coalition (TUSC, an alliance of the Socialist Party, Socialist Resistance and the Socialist Workers Party) called “For a democratic socialist society run in the interests of the people not the millionaires. For democratic public ownership of the major companies and banks that dominate the economy, so that production and services can be planned to meet the needs of all and to protect the environment.” (TUSC 2010). All of these policies are generally derived from, and often justified by, a version of Marxist theory heavily rooted in the writings of Trotsky and Lenin, as well as Marx and Engels. For example the website of the Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP) declares that “We are the British section of the International Committee of the Fourth International, founded by Leon Trotsky. We are Marxists and fight for the principles founded by Marx, Engels, Lenin and Trotsky. Our party...fights to



build a leadership throughout the working class and youth to lead the struggle for the British and world socialist revolutions.” (WRP 2013). Changes in policy are therefore constrained by the overwhelming desire to retain consistency with the general ideology, or worldview, of the organization.

Relations with voters and other parties are also subject to constraints: as organizations committed to a Marxist class analysis the target electorate for Trotskyist organizations is generally defined as the ‘working class’, with particular emphasis on industrial workers and on workers organized in trade unions, the classical Marxian ‘gravediggers of capitalism’. Intermediate classes or class fractions, often described as the petit bourgeoisie, are viewed with deep suspicion and therefore have little attraction as target voters. Relations with other parties also offer little potential for change: almost all other mainstream parties are routinely dismissed as ‘bourgeois’ organizations serving the interests of the capitalist class. Even the Labour Party is viewed with suspicion, so whilst most Trotskyist groups encourage people to vote Labour in the absence of a revolutionary candidate, this is not true of all of them. The only exception to the anathema on rival parties is that of other Trotskyist organizations and that is why recent elections have witnessed a number of organizations contesting seats as part of a far left coalition. For example the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party, as well as two smaller organizations, fought 98 seats in the UK 2001 general election as the ‘Socialist Alliance’.

The implication of these points is that Trotskyist organizations may possess only a limited capacity to adopt any of the usual responses to poor electoral performance. To the extent this is true it leaves organizational leaders with an acute dilemma. On the one hand

their claims to be the authentic representatives of working class interests would presumably lead many of their members to expect reasonable election results, especially in the context of economic austerity and after a period of disillusion with a Labour government. On the other hand, the reality of their dismal performances could call into question the relevance of their policies and the authority of the organizations' leaders. These processes in turn could result in disillusion amongst the membership, leading to reduced activity and even resignations.

### **3. Discourse in political science**

Theoretically there is a way in which party leaders can respond to poor election results without implementing any significant organizational or policy changes. In place of these *behavioural* responses they could respond *discursively*, constructing a 'narrative' about the election which acknowledges poor results whilst simultaneously playing them down. Discourse has been defined in different ways: according to Schmidt (2002: 210) it "consists of whatever policy actors say to one another and to the public in their efforts to generate and legitimize a policy programme" (and see also Chilton 2004; Fairclough 2000; Fairclough and Fairclough 2012). Others place less emphasis on policy and more on the role of language in constructing a particular interpretation of situations or events and persuading their target audience to adopt it. Attending to the persuasive role of discourse has led some analysts to deploy the terms 'rhetoric' and 'rhetorical strategy' to capture the idea that discursive activity involves "formulating interpretations of a situation such that audiences are moved to respond in certain ways rather than others." (Martin 2013: 6). The literature contains a variety of approaches to the definition and

analysis of discourse, and they vary on a number of dimensions. Some are focused on individuals, others on groups, both small and large; some treat discourse as an instrumental means of preparing and organizing action, others are more interested in its purely representational role; some focus on the ideas within discourse as relatively stable beliefs, whilst others emphasise the fluidity of ideas as they are continually reworked to persuade others; and finally some analyze discourse as a causal variable within a positivist framework whereas others are interested in language in its own right, within social constructionist or post-Marxist paradigms (for a comprehensive review see Finlayson 2004 and on post-Marxism, see Howarth, Norval and Stavrakakis 2000). Within political science different forms of discourse analysis have been applied to a range of topics, including the speeches of Tony Blair as he constructed the idea of ‘New Labour’ and the ways in which “globalization” has been constructed as an inevitable process that will bring economic benefits to large numbers of people (Fairclough 2000: Hay and Rosamond 2002; Smith and Hay 2008). The intended effect of the ‘New Labour’ discourse was to shift Labour policies whilst claiming they remained consonant with traditional Labour values; the intended effect of the ‘globalization’ discourse was to facilitate popular support for pro-globalization policies and to marginalize opposition from critics of global capitalism.

The focus of this paper is the representational role of discourse, the use of language to assert and justify a particular interpretation of a situation and more specifically in the case of Trotskyist organizations, to defend and value positively the policy of contesting elections (Dick 2004; Fairclough 2001). Discourse about poor

electoral performance is also likely to have another role which is to explain the unexpectedly poor results.

#### **4. Method**

The principal source of data was the publications, both hard copy and online, of the eight Trotskyist organizations that contested the 2010 General Election, either as separate parties or as components of a far left coalition (the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, TUSC). All produce newspapers, magazines or web sites, directed at three main audiences: existing party members, sympathisers who might become members and potential supporters and voters. Members of these organizations are generally required to purchase and read party literature, particularly its newspaper, and so members are a key target audience for newspaper articles. In addition I interviewed a leading member of each of the two largest organizations, Clive Heemskerk, editor of the Socialist Party journal *Socialism Today* and Charlie Kimber, National Secretary of the Socialist Workers Party. Both interviews were recorded and transcribed.

The simplest approach to data analysis would have been to collect from each organization the main newspaper, magazine or website article analyzing the election results but this was problematic for two reasons. First, only four of the eight organizations produced a major article containing such an analysis; in two other cases post-election articles focused on the main parties, ignoring the Trotskyist candidates almost entirely. Second, the themes that comprised party discourse about electoral performance were often prefigured in pre-election articles, particularly in the case of the two larger parties, the Socialist Party (SP) and the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), whose

weekly papers carried substantial amounts of election coverage. Since political discourses are often refined and developed over time, it makes sense to try and capture this aspect of discourse by examining articles produced over a period of time. Publications and web stories from these eight organizations were therefore examined over a time span starting 6 April 2010 – the date the election was called – and ending 31 May, over three weeks after the 6 May election. Appendix 1 provides the titles, publication dates and sources for the 58 articles that discussed election results. Each article is numbered in a single sequence and each unit of text within each article is identified by a separate number: text item SP 17.3 therefore refers to the third item in article 17 published by the Socialist Party. It was decided to pool the articles and treat the texts as a single collection firstly because all eight organizations belong to the same political family, and secondly because the numbers of texts varies significantly between the organizations.

Each of the 58 articles was read through in order to identify units of text that represented, explained or legitimated electoral outcomes. This exercise yielded 151 discrete items, each comprising either a clause, a phrase, a sentence or a set of connected sentences. Given the large differences in the frequency of newspaper publication it is not surprising that the majority of text items come from the newspapers of the two largest organizations, the Socialist Party and the Socialist Workers Party. Two other points emerged from the first reading of the articles: first, they often discussed outcomes other than votes, such as increased party membership or organizational capacity; and second, they often discussed other facets of the election process, such as numbers of meetings held or numbers of voters canvassed. A second reading of all the texts was then used to identify themes that could be used to produce an initial categorization of statements. For

example some statements claimed that in the course of conversations many voters agreed with the party's policies; others referred to the idea that people were so afraid of a Conservative government they voted Labour instead of far left. Another theme was that voting per se was not as important as people's willingness to oppose spending cuts through collective action. A third, and final reading of the 58 texts suggested a number of broad categories that together comprised the main themes making up Trotskyist discourse about the electoral process and the election results.

## **5. Results**

Trotskyist press coverage of the general election acknowledged their vote shares were low; the results were described as "poor" ((AWL 4.3), "disappointing" (SWP 50.2), "modest" (SP 21.6). Yet in the texts under review this admission was surrounded by three other sets of claims. First, and this was the most common theme in the publications under review, it was frequently argued that the Trotskyist vote share underestimates the level of popular support for Trotskyist ideas and policies. At the same time this view was often juxtaposed with the alleged dishonesty of the campaigns run by the mainstream parties whose refusal to admit publically to their planned spending cuts negated any mandate for austerity policies. Second, it was sometimes suggested that the Trotskyist vote share was not too bad given that many electors were driven reluctantly to vote Labour through fear of the Conservatives and that the left parties, especially the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition, were unfamiliar to voters. Finally, it was claimed that the campaigns run by Trotskyist candidates generated many positive outcomes, irrespective of their poor vote share: there was extensive leafleting, canvassing and discussions with voters; there were

high levels of newspaper sales and party recruitment; and the higher profile of the parties and their candidates has helped to build the organizational capacity that will facilitate a post-election fightback against the austerity policies of the new government (for examples of all these themes see Table 3).

Table 3 about here

In more detail, six of the organizations that commented on the results admitted they were poor. Yet this observation was normally confined to a single sentence or even part of a sentence. Moreover in each case the potentially disturbing observation about low vote share was *immediately* followed up, in the ensuing sentence, with a claim that served to undermine its salience. The SP immediately followed its observation about the “modest” vote by asserting: “But many - far more than those who voted for TUSC – expressed appreciation and support for the literature, and the speeches in hustings of TUSC candidates.” (21.6). The SWP remark about the “disappointing” vote was proceeded by two statements, one pointing out that TUSC was a “new organisation” that most voters had “never heard of” and the second arguing that the TUSC vote was “squeezed by the two main parties” (SWP 43.4 and 43.5). The AWL statement on its “poor” result was followed up with the declaration “That does not mean that the election campaign was wasted effort” (AWL 4.4). The SEP mentioned its “small vote” and in the very next sentence asserted “But this is not the only, or even the best measure of the political importance of the campaign the party waged.” (10.3).

The micro-structure of the text is arguably significant in helping achieve its desired effect. The remarks about vote share are brief and voting figures are not explored or elaborated. For example, there is no attempt to compare and contrast with the vote shares of other parties, major or minor and no reference to the financial implications of low vote share, namely the party's forfeit of the £500 election deposit for each candidate. The sequencing of material is also important: the reader is not left to dwell on the vote share figures but is immediately presented with claims designed to portray the results in a new light. The Socialist Party text presents one of the most frequently used arguments in the Trotskyist election coverage by suggesting there is widespread support for Trotskyist policies. The SEP statement quite explicitly seeks to reject the value of vote share as a way of measuring support for socialist policies. These statements are important because they perform two functions: they begin to map out the view that vote share can be interpreted in different ways; and through their provision of reasoned arguments, elsewhere in the same text, they serve to legitimate a critical rethinking of the significance of vote share.

*The vote underestimates our level of support*

The most conspicuous theme in the Trotskyist texts, present in 70 per cent of the 58 articles examined, was that the level of support for their policies was far higher than their votes suggested. The most subtle variant of this theme is drawn from the same source as the title of this paper and is captured in the statement that “where people have been able to hear the arguments, we are the winners” (SP 18.1). This claim bolsters the idea that Socialist Party policies are popular – “we are the winners” – but hints at one possible



reason for the low vote share, namely lack of resources. Contacting voters so they can “hear the arguments”, in meetings, on the streets, in door-to-door canvassing, is enormously resource-intensive. The Socialist Party at the time of the election had fewer than 2,000 members, distributed across the whole of England and Wales. The numbers who could be deployed in each of 32 election campaigns (28 candidates stood as TUSC and four as the ‘Socialist Alternative’) was therefore very limited. Yet whilst small numbers are clearly disadvantageous from the standpoint of electoral resources, they become advantageous as a means of explaining disappointing election results.

Other organizations offered a more subtle variant of this theme, referring to the “sympathetic hearing” (AWL 4.1), the “good hearing” (SWP 40.1) or the “warm response” (WP 53.10) their candidates and supporters received from voters (see Table 3). This terminology is nicely ambiguous, because it *implies* popular support but without explicitly claiming its existence. Furthermore, the notion of a “sympathetic hearing” can help undermine the threatening idea that radical left arguments attracted so few votes because people rejected them out of hand. On the contrary, according to these texts, radical left views attracted “widespread support” (SWP 38.2).

Allied to this argument is the theme that votes are a poor measure of attitudes. According to the Socialist Equality Party, their hard left critique of Labour policies was “shared by millions of working people” (9.1). This phrase is interesting on two counts: first it deals with low vote share, not by avoiding any reference to numbers, but rather by juxtaposing a far more impressive number, the “millions” who share the party’s viewpoint. Second, instead of referring to ‘voters’, the ‘people’ or the ‘electorate’ the reference is to “working people”, language designed to demonstrate the relevance of

Marxist class categories, and by implication, the Marxist worldview of which they form an integral part. In similar vein, Socialist Workers Party texts asserted, or hinted at, a huge discrepancy between votes and attitudes: the numbers who sympathise with Trotskyist rejection of public spending cuts is “far greater” (SWP 51.4) than the number who voted for Trotskyist candidates.

Opposition to government policy is significant because as several texts asserted, “working class confidence and struggle matters more than elections” (SWP 31.1) and is more important than electing “representatives into parliament” (WP 52.2). In these remarks we can find an echo of Lenin’s (1917: 270) famous (or infamous) dismissal of parliamentary democracy as a process in which voters are allowed “to decide once every few years which member of the ruling class is to repress and crush” them. But this is only an echo and the text is more subtle: elections and parliament are not irrelevant, they can bring about some change but radical change, “real change”, comes about when people “stand together”, say “enough is enough” and engage in collective action to “fight for another world” (WP 52.2). The effect of this type of discourse is to redirect the reader’s attention, away from the paucity of votes, the election and the parliamentary process and onto a different terrain, that of mobilization for collective action. This terrain has a number of appealing attributes: it 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 final discursive strand woven around the theme of popular support for the far left support is a direct challenge to the claim that the millions of votes recorded for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats constitute a mandate for draconian austerity policies, and a rebuff to their Trotskyist critics. The major parties “concealed plans for major cuts” (SEP 10.1 and also WP 53.2) and chose to “lie about their policies” (SWP 48.1). By implication therefore “no party has a mandate to impose cuts” (SWP 51.2) since voters can be hardly be said to endorse policies of which they were never made aware.

Whilst these texts display considerable efforts to reinterpret poor vote totals and to reappraise their significance, low vote shares are not entirely discounted. As the SWP National Secretary observed “Elections are cruel...if you get a really bad vote, it’s very crushing.” (Interview 7 February 2014).

*The vote was not that bad under the circumstances*

The second major theme in the election texts recapitulates the argument that votes do not necessarily reflect attitudes. According to the Socialist Party, 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” (SP 22.7). The language used in these texts portrays powerful emotions at work. Even though workers may have given Trotskyist ideas a “sympathetic hearing”, the prospect of another Conservative government “alarmed” and “terrified” them (SP 21.2), it induced “visceral fear” (SEP 9.2), it triggered a “gut hatred” of Conservatism (SWP 49.2). On the one hand the language evokes the idea of overwhelming forces propelling workers into voting Labour. At the same time the strong

language used to describe their reactions to the Conservative Party sets up an affinity between workers and the Trotskyist parties, because both share a deep and powerful antipathy to a common enemy. One qualification to the shared discourse of leftist workers reluctantly voting Labour is an argument that conveys the sectarianism for which the Trotskyist movement is famous. According to the SEP, since most of the other Trotskyist groups, dismissively referred to as the “pseudo-left” (12.2) or the “ex-left” (10.4), encouraged workers to vote Labour in the absence of a Trotskyist candidate, they were therefore instrumental in “shoring up the Labour vote” (SEP 13.1). The SEP was not unusual in wanting to promote the case for an independent revolutionary political party. What distinguished the SEP from its Trotskyist rivals is the radical conclusion that it must therefore oppose all other parties in the election, Labour included.

A second strand of the idea that votes don't necessarily reflect attitudes refers to the novelty and unfamiliarity of the Trotskyist party names: our name was “previously absent from elections” (AWL 4.2); the Trade Unionist and Socialist Coalition was “a very new organisation” and voters “had never heard of it before” (SWP 43.4). People declined to vote for Trotskyist candidates then not because of ideological antipathy – on the contrary, their policies often evoked “a good response” – but for more prosaic reasons: the party labels were new and unfamiliar. Once again this line of argument serves to undermine any connection between vote share and the popularity of Trotskyist policies, in this case by the interjection of purely contingent variables. The logic of the argument is that once party labels have become more familiar to workers, through party campaigning and publicity, then the Trotskyist vote share should rise. As with the discourse about mobilization, this type of argument touches on factors that are to some

degree under the control of party activists, and by implication serves to reinforce their sense of both agency and efficacy.

Finally the two largest organizations both declared that “all capitalist parties [were] losers” (SP 21.1), that it was the election “where everyone lost” (SWP 51.1). This claim seeks to undermine the notion that parties with small vote shares (in particular, the Trotskyist parties) are “losers” whereas those with large vote shares – Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat – are “winners”. The binary divide between winners and losers is submerged in the theme that “everyone lost”, albeit in different ways.<sup>5</sup>

*Votes are important but there are other positive features of the election campaign*

The third component of the election discourse switches focus, away from votes as the central outcome of the election, and it does this in two ways: by turning to inputs, in other words the campaign itself, and by counterposing a set of more positive outcomes: membership, literature sales and organizational capacity. A pervasive theme was the self-congratulatory idea that the election campaigns and the candidates were “excellent” (SP 23.1, SWP 50.1, WP 53.9), reflecting a substantial amount of work and activity. Activists “distributed thousands of leaflets” (AWL 1.1), “spoke to some 900 people” (CL 7.3), “leafleted over 80 per cent of the constituency” (SWP 43.1). The message here is arguably about organizational loyalty and commitment: activists are being publically praised for their efforts as a way of acknowledging and maintaining their loyalty. Yet it is worth noting the element of risk in this discursive move: if the campaign was so good, if so many people received party literature and were spoken to, then why were the votes so poor? To put the point differently, an impressive campaign that yields such poor results

could trigger criticism of the party and demoralization among its activists. It is therefore important to underline the point that the different elements of electoral discourse are all intertwined so that activists can refer to other themes in order to explain why a good campaign produced such poor outcomes: for example, the party name was “unfamiliar” or voters were “scared” of a Conservative victory.

Turning to outcomes, several organizations reported substantial benefits from their election campaigning: “260 copies” of a key book were sold (CL 5.1) and “440 papers” were sold; the organization was strengthened as “25 people have applied to join” (SP 27.5) and “many new recruits were made” (WRP 55.2). For organizations with relatively few members, even when compared to other ‘minor’ parties such as the BNP, Greens or UKIP, additional recruits are extremely valuable because of their potential contribution to organizational capacity (McGuinness 2012). That is the final theme which appears in the narratives around electoral outcomes: notwithstanding the poor vote, party activists were “educated and trained in doorstep and street stall discussions” (AWL 4.6) and the party built links with “local trade unionists” and helped create “networks of resistance and solidarity” (SWP 31.2). The Socialist Party interviewee reiterated the same theme:

“that’s not to say that we’re indifferent to votes, but...the most important thing is to encourage the idea that in organizations of the working class, above all the trade unions but also in community campaigns and so on they should take control of their own political destiny....” (Interview 10 February 2014)

The theme of capacity has a twofold significance: firstly, it points to outcomes other than votes and therefore reinforces the discursive strategy of backgrounding poor electoral

performance. Secondly, it also helps background the vote by alluding to the future and to the prospects of greater political success, thanks to higher membership and to the development of more resources through links and networks with other activists and organizations.

Taken as a whole the thrust of Trotskyist discourse around the 2010 election is to downplay the potentially unsettling and threatening reality of dismal vote totals by constructing a complex, alternative discourse. It aims to uncouple votes and popularity, stresses evidence of the popularity of far left policies, contextualises Labour support as situationally specific and outlines a range of positive outcomes beyond mere votes. Poor electoral performance is not denied as such, but is reconfigured within a discourse that provides an optimistic message for party activists and sympathisers.

Although Trotskyist parties are clearly marginal within the British political system, they constitute a theoretically significant case study for two reasons: first, party systems in Europe have become increasingly fragmented in recent years and are now populated by significant numbers of parties with low vote shares, in particular Green, far right and far left parties. The issue of how party leaders respond to chronic or acute low vote share is not confined to the leaders of tiny Trotskyist organizations but has become salient for a wide range of parties and their leaders: the Progressive Democrats and the Greens in Ireland, the Christian Democrats in Denmark, the Communist Party in France, to name only a few examples (Mair and Marsh 2004; Bille and Pedersen 2004; Knapp 2004). The challenge for party leaders of explaining low vote share is unlikely to diminish in the foreseeable future. Second, parties can respond to poor electoral performance both behaviourally, by changing their structures, leaders and/or policies, and

discursively. The latter mode of response has received very little attention in the literature but may well be worth further investigation and the British Trotskyist case study presented here may provide a useful template for such research.

## **6. Conclusions**

This article set out to examine the responses of far left parties in the UK to their dismal performance in the 2010 general election. The literature on party responses to problems and threats in ‘electoral markets’ has mainly concentrated on behavioural responses, such as changes in party leadership, structures or policies. Discursive responses, the use of language and rhetoric, to promote particular interpretations of electoral results is an underdeveloped area of work but is important for two reasons: first, the way in which a party leadership understands and represents electoral setback is likely to have a strong influence on its subsequent behavioural responses. Secondly, parties with a well-developed ideology may find it difficult to emulate the kind of policy flexibility displayed by mainstream rivals, especially ‘catch-all’ parties. Constraints on behavioural responses may encourage party leaders to focus on discursive responses to electoral setbacks.

The Trotskyist organizations that contested seats in the 2010 UK general election obtained a median vote share of just 0.45 per cent. Whilst most of them acknowledged this was a poor result, they produced a set of discourses that offered a very different representation of their electoral participation. The dominant theme turned on a challenge to 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 were so fearful of a Conservative victory that they reluctantly voted Labour instead of far left. In any case the electoral campaign itself produced other benefits, such as party recruits, newspaper sales and increased organizational capacity through the links built with other organizations.

This discursive response to electoral setback constitutes a ‘positive’ representation of the electoral outcome and provides party activists with a narrative they can use to challenge the debilitating ideas of electoral failure and unpopularity. This line of argument suggests the discursive response to electoral setback is organizationally beneficial insofar as it maintains activist loyalty and commitment. The downside however is that it discourages any more critical reflection on why organizations that claim to represent the ‘working class’ as a whole are unable to secure more than one per cent of the popular vote.

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Table 1 Trotskyist organizations in Britain contesting the 2010 General Election

| Name                               | Foundation Date | 2010 membership (approx) | Resources   |
|------------------------------------|-----------------|--------------------------|---|
| Socialist Workers Party (SWP)      | 1950            | 6,600                    | Weekly newspaper; monthly magazine; quarterly journal; website    |
| Socialist Party (SP)               | 1964            | 2,000                    | Weekly newspaper; monthly magazine; website                       |
| Workers Revolutionary Party (WRP)  | 1950            | 250                      | Daily newspaper; bimonthly magazine; website                      |
| Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL) | 1966            | 100                      | Fortnightly newspaper; website                                    |
| Socialist Resistance (SR)          | 1962            | 100                      | Bimonthly magazine; website                                       |
| Socialist Equality Party (SEP)     | 1986            | 50                       | Website   |
| Workers Power (WP)                 | 1975            | 50                       | Monthly newspaper; website  |
| Communist League (CL)              | 1988            | 30                       | Weekly newspaper published by the US parent organization; website |

Sources: Party websites and archives.

Table 2 Trotskyist\* General Election results, England and Wales 1974-2010

| Election     | Median votes per candidate** | Median vote share (%)** | Number of candidates |
|--------------|------------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|
| 28 Feb 1974  | 309                          | 1.01                    | 10                   |
| 10 Oct 1974  | 359                          | 0.85                    | 10                   |
| 3 May 1979   | 192                          | 0.55                    | 65                   |
| 9 June 1983  | 169                          | 0.38                    | 26                   |
| 11 June 1987 | 201                          | 0.41                    | 21                   |
| 9 April 1992 | 104                          | 0.29                    | 18                   |
| 1 May 1997   | 267                          | 0.71                    | 33                   |
| 7 June 2001  | 465                          | 1.25                    | 108                  |
| 5 May 2005   | 447                          | 1.22                    | 62                   |
| 6 May 2010   | 184                          | 0.45                    | 44                   |

\*The category includes both individual parties and electoral coalitions dominated by Trotskyists such as the Socialist Alliance and the Trade Union and Socialist Coalition but excludes the Respect Party from the 2010 election results as this is no longer a Trotskyist organization.

\*\*Medians are calculated on the basis only of those constituencies contested by Trotskyist candidates.

Sources: Electoral Commission; House of Commons

<http://www.parliament.uk/documents/commons/lib/research/rp2001/rp01-054.pdf>

Rallings and Thrasher (1993, 1998); Craig (1984, 1989).

Table 3 Themes in the coverage of the General Election

| Main themes  | Sub-themes   | Examples (sources)   |
|--|--|--|
| <b>1. The vote was poor</b>                            | Poor vote<br>6 out of 8 organizations  | “The Socialist Equality Party received a small vote” ( SEP 10.2)<br>“the results were generally disappointing.” (SWP 50.2)<br>“the votes of candidates to the left of Labour were poor” (WP 53.4)  |
| <b>2. The vote underestimates our level of support</b> | Voters share our concerns and support our policies<br>41 items<br>7 organizations        | “Our ideas get a sympathetic hearing among wide circles of working-class people” (AWL 4.1)<br>“Our verdict on Labour is also shared by millions of working people” (SEP 9.1)<br>“where people have been able to hear the arguments, we are the winners.” (SP 18.1)<br>“Despite our modest result... where we had the opportunity to explain our ideas... we had a very good response.” (SP 25.1)<br>“Campaigners report that ...people are giving them a good hearing.” (SWP 40.1)<br>“the radical left, and the audience that wants to resist the cuts, is far greater than the number who voted for parties to the left of Labour last week.” (SWP 51.4) |
|  | Public spending cuts will radicalise people into action<br>11 items<br>6 organizations   | “As the truth becomes clear, many more will be attracted to, and support actively, the socialist alternative” (SP 24.6)<br>“Working class confidence and struggle matters more than elections” (SWP 31.1)<br>“Getting representatives in parliament is important. But real change comes when millions of ordinary people say “Enough is enough” and stand together to fight for another world.” (WP 52.2)  |
|  | Mainstream parties lied about cuts so they have no mandate<br>9 items<br>4 organizations | “all the official parties have concealed plans for major cuts” (SEP 10.1)<br>“After the general election no party has a mandate to impose cuts.” (SWP 51.2)<br>“Tory, Labour and Liberals... all sought to conceal the real scale of the cuts ahead during the election campaign.” (WP 53.2)   |

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p><b>3. The vote was not that bad under the circumstances</b></p>                                  | <p>Workers stayed with Labour due to fear of Conservatives<br/>15 items<br/>6 organizations</p> | <p>“many workers who would have voted for us felt they had no choice but to vote New Labour in order to stop the Tories.” (SP 22.7)<br/>“the fear of the Tories returning to power meant that ...working people voted Labour” (SR 28.2)</p>   |
|   | <p>Our party was new and unfamiliar to many voters<br/>9 items<br/>4 organizations</p>          | <p>“To establish our name, “Alliance for Workers’ Liberty”, previously absent from elections....was always going to be difficult.” (AWL 4.2)<br/>“TUSC is a very new organisation and the vast majority of voters had never heard of it before.” (SWP 43.4)</p>   |
|   | <p>All parties lost<br/>2 items<br/>2 organizations</p>   | <p>“Electoral deadlock: all capitalist parties ‘losers’ (SP 21.1)<br/>“Britain’s general election: no winner and no mandate. It was the election where everyone lost.” (SWP 51.1)</p>   |
| <p><b>4. Votes are important but there are other positive features of the election campaign</b></p> | <p>We ran a good campaign<br/>22 items<br/>6 organizations</p>                                  | <p>“We have already distributed thousands of leaflets,..held estate meetings, contacted union branches and talked to hundreds of people about the case for a working-class voice in politics and for socialism.” (AWL 1.1)<br/>“Communist League candidates have spoken to some 900 people in seven hustings...They have also talked with hundreds of workers at factory gates” (CL 7.3)<br/>“Despite our modest result of 133 votes for TUSC,...we had the opportunity to explain our ideas, on campaigning stalls, at a series of public events and on the doorstep” (SP 25.1)<br/>“Activists leafleted over 80 percent of the constituency on Monday of this week.” (SWP 44.3)<br/>“we...ran an energetic campaign, putting out scores of thousands of leaflets, with a clear political message, and an excellent candidate who spoke particularly well at hustings” (WP 53.9)</p> |
|   | <p>We recruited members and sold literature<br/>9 items</p>                                     | <p>“we focused our efforts on making political contacts, selling papers and so on.” (AWL 4.10)<br/>“campaign supporters in London sold 11 copies of the book and 12 subscriptions to Militant.”</p>   |

|  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  | 4 organizations   | (CL 6.1)<br>“over 25 people have applied to join the Socialist Party....440 papers were sold in the campaign”<br>(SP 27.5)  |
|  | We built<br>organizational<br>capacity that will<br>help resistance<br>against the<br>cuts<br>23 items<br>4 organizations | “We ..educated and trained ourselves in<br>doorstep and street-stall discussions.” (AWL 4.6)<br>“Even modest results could be a stepping stone<br>towards broader left unity, and help create<br>networks of resistance and solidarity. If socialists<br>get a good vote, or are elected, it can give<br>workers more confidence.” (SWP 31.2)<br>“we have met important people in the<br>community and created some networks that will<br>matter now.” (SWP 50.4) |



## **Appendix: Organizations, sources and documents used in data analysis**

### **Alliance for Workers Liberty - Solidarity**

- 1 AWL 2010 election campaign in Camberwell and Peckham, 28 February.
- 2 Camberwell and Peckham: housing, jobs and pay on people's minds in election, 16 April.
- 3 Camberwell and Peckham: union hustings feeds debate, 29 April.
- 4 Camberwell and Peckham: what we achieved in the election, and what we failed to achieve, 7 May.

### **Communist League – The Militant**

- 5 Communist candidates run in United Kingdom, 19 April.
- 6 UK: communist candidates oppose cuts, 26 April.
- 7 UK communist: 'can't reform banks to be fair', 17 May.

### **Socialist Equality Party – World Socialist Web Site**

- 8 SEP participates in Oxford East hustings on electoral reform, 19 April.
- 9 After the General Election: where is Britain going?, 6 May.
- 10 Political instability follows inconclusive British elections, 8 May.
- 11 Britain: David O'Sullivan replies to election correspondence, 10 May.
- 12 The task facing British workers, 15 May.
- 13 Britain: how the ex-left groups politically disarm the working class, 22 May.

### **Socialist Party – The Socialist**

- 14 Voters face 'slash and burn' policies whoever wins election, 14 April.
- 15 Left candidates excluded from media, 21 April.
- 16 Vote for a socialist alternative, 28 April.
- 17 Press try to gag socialists in Walthamstow campaign, 28 April.

18 Cleaning up in Cardiff, 28 April.

19 A beacon of hope in Gateshead, 28 April.

20 Greenwich and Woolwich: 'That makes real sense to me', 28 April.

21 Electoral deadlock: all capitalist parties 'losers', 7 May.

22 General election results 2010: TUSC stands for socialism and prepares for the battles ahead, 7 May.

23 Election results in Swansea put down a marker for the future, 12 May.

24 Coventry: strong socialist support, 12 May.

25 Anti-Tory mood dominated in Stoke, 12 May.

26 Spelthorne election campaign, 12 May.

27 Huddersfield: forging a socialist campaigning tradition, 12 May.

### **Socialist Resistance – Socialist Resistance**

28 A disappointing election for Respect and other smaller parties, 8 May.

29 Resist government by the rich, for the rich, No. 60, June-July.

### **Socialist Workers Party – Socialist Worker**

30 Socialist election campaign is an alternative to Labour, 3 April.

31 Socialists, elections and class struggle, 10 April.

32 Election campaigning in Manchester for TUSC, 10 April.

33 Vote against cuts and organise to fight, 17 April.

34 Left election campaigns hit the streets running, 17 April.

35 Ex-mayor of Carlisle says, 'Labour is no longer a vehicle for social change', 17 April.

36 TUSC – a socialist alternative in Manchester, 24 April.

37 Socialist campaigns tap into the bitterness with Labour, 24 April.

- 38 Vibrant TUSC rally in Tottenham, 1 May.
- 39 TUSC round up: taking the socialist message across the country, 1 May.
- 40 TUSC: socialists stoke anger with mainstream politics, 1 May.
- 41 Manchester TUSC reaches out to workers, 1 May
- 42 Vote left and prepare to fight after election, 1 May.
- 43 The left and the election, 8 May.
- 44 Socialists put the case for election alternative, 8 May.
- 45 Karen Reissmann's TUSC campaign in Manchester, 8 May.
- 46 Jenny Sutton's campaign: a solid basis to fight the cuts, 8 May.
- 47 TUSC tapping the anger against Labour, 8 May.
- 48 Organise now to stop cuts, 8 May.
- 49 Voters refuse a mandate for cuts, 8 May.
- 50 The left in the election: good campaigns but TUSC vote squeezed, 15 May.
- 51 Britain's general election: no winner and no mandate, 15 May.

### **Workers Power – Workers Power**

- 52 Anti-capitalist Workers Power standing in British general election, 26 April.
- 53 British general election 2010: workers vote Labour to stop Tories, 9 May.

### **Workers Revolutionary Party – The News Line (54-57); Marxist Review (58)**

- 54 Vote WRP, forward to the socialist revolution!, 7 April
- 55 Support growing for WRP candidates, 26 April.
- 56 WRP campaign steps up a gear, 5 May.
- 57 Vote WRP – keep the Tories out, 6 May.
- 58 After the election: the historic exhaustion of reformism, 25(6), June.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Some revolutionary groups have joined broad left electoral coalitions, e.g. the Revolutionary Left Front is part of the Left Bloc in Portugal, whilst others have operated as factions inside leftist parties e.g. Marx 21 and Socialist Alternative are Trotskyist factions inside Die Linke.

<sup>2</sup> Internal documents from the Alliance for Workers Liberty (AWL), International Marxist Group (IMG, forerunner of Socialist Resistance, SR), the Socialist Party (formerly the Militant Tendency) and the Socialist Workers Party are available at the London School of Economics and the Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick.

<sup>3</sup> Because of the significant differences between the party and electoral systems in England and Wales compared to Scotland and Northern Ireland, this paper confines itself to the English and Welsh parliamentary constituencies.

<sup>4</sup> Poor electoral performance is not unique to Britain: at the eleven post-2007 elections contested by independent Trotskyist organizations, they have also performed badly. At elections held in Austria (2008, 2013), Belgium (2010), France (2012), Germany (2009, 2013), Greece (2009, May 2012 and June 2012), Italy (2013) and Sweden (2010) – 17 out of 21 organizations obtained less than one per cent of the vote in the constituencies they contested. The exceptions to this trend are in Germany, where Trotskyists work as factions within the leftist party Die Linke, and in countries where they have joined broad left electoral coalitions: Red-Green Alliance (Denmark), Syriza (Greece), United Left Alliance (Ireland), Left Bloc (Portugal) and United Left (Spain).

<sup>5</sup> There were several other themes, under this broad heading, although each of them was cited by only one or two organizations. The Socialist Party frequently complained they

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received “virtually no coverage” (24.4), that they were “kept off” (16.2) television and radio (and see Socialist Resistance 28.1 which complained the left was “squeezed out of the picture”). Surprisingly, only one organization referred to the UK’s majoritarian electoral system, Workers Power arguing that “the first-past-the –post system...blocks the way to revolutionary anti-fascist candidates” (WP 53.5).