

1945 and All That....

The 1945 election was a stunning Labour victory, but what did it mean for the Liberal Party? Mark Egan continues the debate.

In 1995 two articles were published which have subsequently sparked debate in the Liberal Democrat History Group Newsletter about the Liberal performance in the 1945 general election.¹ In issue 9 of the Newsletter, I described the election as being a ‘grim defeat’ for the party. Michael Steed responded in issue 11 of the Newsletter, arguing that in 1945 there was ‘a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies.’ Steed made a number of observations concerning the areas in which the Liberal vote increased in 1945. He stated that:

- ‘In most of the country [Liberal] support rose a bit.’
- ‘The 1945 Liberal election campaign was notably successful in its appeal to voters in suburban growth areas.’
- ‘In the areas in which there had been the greatest population growth in the inter-war period the Liberal vote rose most.’

Mark Pack continued the debate in issue 12 of the Newsletter. Examining Steed’s claim that there was ‘a significant increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal in a substantial number of constituencies’, Pack concluded that any increase in the willingness of people to vote Liberal was more than offset by the increased number of Liberal candidatures, which forced the party to seek votes in electorally less promising areas. Either ‘the increase was not great, or the number of constituencies in which it occurred was very limited.’

In order to explore which of these conclusions is correct it is necessary to examine the results of the 1945 general election at constituency level.² Only then can we accurately summarise the success of the Liberal Party’s election campaign in terms of its ability to attract votes to the party.

Analysis of the Liberal Vote

It is difficult to compare the results of the 1935 and the 1945 general elections because of the differing number of Liberal candidates in each. In total Liberals contested 325 constituencies in either 1935 or 1945. Seven of these have been ignored,³ and the other 318 can be separated into five separate types, each to be analysed separately. The types are organised as follows:

- 1 Seats which the Liberal Party contested in both 1935 and 1945, and in which the same number of major party candidates were present in both elections. This group includes seats which witnessed three-cornered fights in both elections, and seats in which the Liberals enjoyed straight fights in both elections.⁴ 99 constituencies in total.
- 2 Seats which witnessed three-cornered fights in 1935 but in which one major party withdrew, giving the Liberal a straight fight in 1945. 5 in total.
- 3 Seats in which the Liberal enjoyed a straight fight in 1935, but in which three-cornered contests occurred in 1945. 25 in total.
- 4 Seats which the Liberals did not contest in 1935 but which were fought in 1945, and were three-cornered contests. 163 in total.
- 5 Seats which the Liberals did contest in 1935 and which were three-cornered fights, but from which the Liberals withdrew in 1945. 26 in total.

First, it is necessary to look at the 99 constituencies of type 1. The Liberals’ share of the vote increased in 45 seats and decreased in 54. Table 1 examines these constituencies in greater detail.

The 45 constituencies in which the Liberal vote rose in 1945 were, as a group, below par performers in the 1935 election. Few of these seats held out any prospect of a Liberal victory. In only 6 of these seats did the Liberal vote exceed 25% in 1935. Of these, one, Buckrose, was a Liberal gain in 1945. Two more, Cardiganshire and North Cornwall, were held by the Liberals at that election. More revealing, however, was that only one of these six seats, Camborne, was fought by all three major parties in both 1935 and 1945. The Liberal strength

Table 1: 99 Type 1 Liberal contests

	Average Liberal vote 1935 (%)	Average Liberal vote 1945 (%)
All seats contested by Liberal candidates	23.9	18.6
Seats where Liberal vote rose between 1935 and 1945 (n=45)	16.15	20.68
Seats where Liberal vote fell between 1935 and 1945 (n=54)	28.39	20.79

other five was thus augmented by one of the major parties staying out of the contest.

It may be possible that these average statistics hide some very large increases in the Liberal vote which might point to areas in which the Liberals made rapid progress in 1945. This is not the case. The largest increase in these 45 constituencies was 10.49%, in Halifax. The Liberal vote increase exceeded 50% of the average figure in just 12 seats, and these seats tended to be amongst the Liberals' weakest in 1935. The average Liberal vote in these 12 seats in 1935 was a deposit-losing 10.6%

The Liberal advance in 1945 was concentrated in those seats in which the Liberals had polled badly in 1935 and the worse the Liberal vote in 1935 the larger the increase in 1945 tended to be. The Liberals gained just one seat from this set of constituencies and that was as a result of the failure of the Labour Party to nominate a candidate.

The 54 seats in which the Liberal vote decreased in 1935 were, conversely, above average performers in the 1935 election. The Liberal vote exceeded 25% in 31 of these seats, and exceeded 40% in 6 seats. All but one of these six seats witnessed three-cornered fights in both elections. Two seats – Birkenhead East and Wolverhampton East – were lost as a result of a decreased Liberal vote.

Whereas the Liberal vote tended to increase in seats which could not be won, the vote decreased in seats which were winnable. Furthermore, in the 11 seats where the Liberal vote dropped by more than 50% of the average decrease, the average 1935 vote was 35.4%.

The Liberals tended to do worst in the seats in which they had the best chance of winning.

The Liberal Party also suffered as a result of the reduced number of straight fights they were allowed against one of the other parties. In the type 2 seats the Liberals started from a strong base – an average 1935 vote of 37.95%. On average the Liberal vote increased by 12.91% in these seats. Two were gained – Dorset North and Carmarthenshire – and 2 held – Pembrokeshire and Anglesey.

However, in the 25 type 3 seats the Liberal performance was almost uniformly disastrous. The drop in the Liberal vote in these seats averaged 22.60%. In only 2 of the 25 seats did the Liberals retain 35% of the vote – Berwick

and Bethnal Green South West. 8 of these constituencies had returned Liberal MPs in 1935. None did in 1945 and the average Liberal vote then stood at only 22.17% in 1945, only slightly above the national average.

Steed commented that 'in most of the country [Liberal] support rose a bit'. This is clearly not true. Overall, the Liberal vote rose in just 50 constituencies, and fell in 79. Furthermore, not only did the Liberal vote fall in most of the country, as far as comparisons can be made, but it fell in the best Liberal areas and rose in the worst.

The pattern of Liberal interventions and withdrawals in the 1945 election offers more clues about the success or otherwise of the Liberal campaign in that contest. The average Liberal vote in type 3 constituencies, where Liberals intervened in 1945, was 14.85%, below the party's average vote per candidate. 55 deposits were lost and in only 36 seats did the Liberal vote surpass the party average, 18.6%. In only five constituencies, the Western Isles, Lincoln, Richmond (Yorkshire), Penrith and Cockermonth, and St. Ives, did the Liberal vote exceed 25%.

The average Liberal vote in 1935 in the type 4 constituencies, where the Liberals withdrew, was just 11.63%. 16 deposits had been lost in that year. Only one seat in which a Liberal had polled over the party's average of 23.9% in 1935 was abandoned – South Shields, where the local party backed a Liberal National.

The Liberal Party clearly did move into electorally more challenging territory in 1945 offering few chances of adding to the total of Liberal MPs. However, the party did tend to withdraw from a few of its most hopeless contests. 10 seats in which the Liberal candidate lost his deposit in both 1935 and 1945 were fought, including Glasgow Kelvingrove which provided the worst Liberal poll of both elections.

Population Change and the Liberal Vote

Steed's claim that the Liberal Party thrived in areas of rapid population increase during the inter-war period is difficult to examine without a detailed study of census returns and constituency boundary changes during the period in question. However, a rough and ready assessment of Steed's postulate can be made by examining the changes in the size and distribution of the electorate between 1935 and 1945.

In the following analysis only the 262 constituencies classified as type 1 or type 4 will be considered. These seats can be split into three groups, each depending on the change in the size of the

Table 2: the Liberal vote in borough seats, county constituencies and London 1935

(all figures % Liberal votes)	Type 1 seats where Liberal vote increased (n=45)	Type 1 seats where Liberal vote decreased (n=54)	Type 5 seats
Average 1935 vote in borough seats	16.37	26.83	12.88
Average 1935 vote in county seats	20.08	28.05	14.01
Average 1935 vote in London seats	10.10	-	5.95

constituencies' electorate between 1935 and 1945. First, there were 21 seats which the Liberals contested in 1945 and which had been seriously altered by the Redistribution of Seats Act, 1944. The Act was introduced to deal with seats which had expanded so greatly during the previous ten years that they were no longer tenable as individual constituencies. These seats thus represent the areas of most rapid population growth, although it has not proved possible to quantify the exact scale of that growth. The average Liberal vote in 1945 in the 21 relevant seats was just 13.74%, well below the Liberals' national average vote. In only six of these constituencies did the Liberals contest the predecessor seat in 1935. The Liberal vote rose in five and fell in the other, but a detailed comparison is not worth making because of the scale of the changes to the seats in question.

Secondly, the size of the electorate increased in 149 seats whose boundaries were largely unaffected by the Act. The average Liberal vote in 1945 in these seats was 17.90%, slightly below the overall average. The Liberals stood in both the 1935 and 1945 elections in 56 of these constituencies. The Liberal share of the vote fell by 4.12% in these seats.

The seats in which the size of the electorate grew by over 20% between 1935 and 1945 can be analysed to assess whether the Liberal Party performed better in areas of rapid population growth. There are 57 such type 1 or 4 seats and the average Liberal vote in them in 1945 was 15.37%, below the average for seats in which the electorate grew as a whole. The Liberals stood in 24 of these seats in both 1935 and 1945 and the Liberal vote fell by 4.56% on average.

Thirdly, there are 71 seats whose electorate decreased in size between 1935 and 1945. The average Liberal vote in these seats was just 14.92% in 1945. The Liberals stood in 30 of these seats in both the 1935 and 1945 elections and the average fall in the Liberal vote was only 0.82%.

In 35 type 1 or 4 constituencies the size of the electorate decreased by over 10% during the 1935-45 period. The average Liberal vote in 1945 in these mostly inner-city constituencies was a deposit-scraping 12.50%. However, in the 9 seats contested by the Liberals at both elections the Liberal vote rose on average by 1.33%

Steed suggested that 'in areas in which there had been the greatest population growth in the inter-war period the Liberal vote rose most'. This does not appear to be the case. The Liberal vote fell most in seats whose electorate had grown in size most between 1935 and 1945. The Liberal vote fell least in seats whose electorates had shrunk in size between 1935 and 1945. In seats where the size of the electorate had declined most dramatically, the Liberal vote actually rose.

The Harmonisation of the Liberal Vote

The small number of constituencies in which the Liberal Party stood in both 1935 and 1945 makes detailed regional analyses of the results difficult. Table 2 examines the Liberal performance in borough seats, county constituencies and in London.

Table 2 illustrates the strength of the Liberal vote in county constituencies, when compared to urban areas. Prior to 1918, the Liberal Party was particularly weak in the shire counties. In 1923, however, it won a number of seats in the counties which had not even turned Liberal in 1906. This post-First World War bias towards rural areas was still evident in 1935. The average 1935 Liberal poll both in county seats where the Liberal vote increased and where it decreased was higher than in corresponding borough seats. Table 3 shows that the gap between the two types of constituency was still there in 1945.

Tables 2 and 3 also illustrate the harmonisation of the Liberal vote across the country.

The Liberal vote tended to increase in constituencies in which it had been below average in 1935, and tended to fall in constituencies in which it had been above average.

This explains why the Liberal vote rose in more borough seats than county seats, and fell in more county seats than boroughs. The net effect of these changes was to even out the distribution of the Liberal vote across the country, around the national average. There were, of course, still areas where the Liberals polled over 50% of the vote in 1945, and areas where the Liberals polled under 10%. However, the trend towards harmonisation is clear.

Tables 2 and 3 also offer some further insights into the pattern of Liberal withdrawals. The Liberal Party withdrew from 6 London constituencies in which it had polled particularly badly in 1935. However, only 3 deposits were saved from the 12 seats in which a Liberal candidate intervened in 1945. In both the county and borough constituencies withdrawals tended to take place in seats in which the Liberal candidate saved the deposit in 1935. The Liberal Party did tend to intervene in territory which was more promising than that vacated in 1945, but it is not possible to tell whether this is as a product of conscious decisions taken at constituency level or of improved electoral fortunes.

Table 3: the Liberal vote in borough seats, county seats and London, 1945

(all figures % Liberal votes)	Type 1 seats where Liberal vote increased	Type 1 seats where Liberal vote decreased	Type 4 seats
Average 1945 vote in borough seats	21.16	19.39	14.17
Average 1945 vote in county seats	24.28	21.38	17.06
Average 1945 vote in London seats	14.15	—	10.66

The Suburbanisation of the Liberal Party

In table 4 the net balance of seats in which the Liberal vote has increased and decreased in the different regions has been set out, alongside the net change in the number of seats contested. As before, the various anomalous cases have been excluded from the analysis.

First, table 4 again confirms that the Liberal vote tended to rise where it was lowest and fall where it was highest. The Liberal vote fell in more seats than it rose in the areas where the Liberals tended to poll best – the southwest, the northwest and Yorkshire. The only area in which the number of seats in which the Liberal vote rose significantly exceeded the number in which the vote fell was London, where the Liberal vote was especially weak.

Secondly, the large number of Liberal interventions compared to withdrawals ensures that the balance of the former over the latter is positive throughout the nation. However, there was a substantial net increase of Liberal contests in the southeast of England, outside of London. Clearly there had been a revival of Liberal Associations across the southeast, both in suburban constituencies and in more rural areas. Anecdotal evidence supports this contention.

Steed infers that the 1945 campaign could have 'laid the seeds for the Party's revival a decade later'. That the party contested more southeastern seats in 1945 than in 1935 does not imply that the Liberal Party was attracting suburban voters. The best performance of an intervening Liberal candidate in the southeast in 1945 was 20.76% at Ilford North. No fewer than 17 southeastern interventions led to a lost deposit. Steed quotes a selection of London suburbs in which the Liberal vote was substantially increased in 1945. The common factor in all of these suburbs is that the Liberal vote was especially low in 1935; what Steed has demonstrated is that large vote increases tended to take place in areas where the Liberal vote was low in 1935.

However, Steed may be correct in a different way in associating the development of Liberalism in suburban areas with the 1945 election. The end of the Second World War brought a number of new activists into the Liberal Party, attracted by the Liberals' opposition to appeasement in the late 1930s and the association of Keynes and Beveridge with the party. Another wave of new recruits entered the party in the late 1940s, as a result of the organisational improvements which followed in the wake of *Coats Off For the Future!* It

may be that the party expanded most in the southeast of England, in constituencies in which the Liberals had been weak even in their heyday and in which there was little organised trade unionism.

There is no evidence to support Steed's claim that the Liberal Party was 'notably successful in its appeal to voters in suburban growth areas'. However, the increase in the number of Liberal candidatures in the southeast of England does suggest that the party was attracting new activists to the Liberal cause, especially in suburban constituencies.

Conclusion

A crude analysis of the results of the 1935 and 1945 general elections at the constituency level has shown that:

- 1 The total Liberal poll increased because of the large net increase in Liberal candidatures. There was a moderate increase in the Liberal vote in a number of constituencies where the Liberals polled badly in 1935, but this was more than offset by a sharper decrease in the Liberal vote in a similar number of seats where the Liberals polled well in 1935.
- 2 The number of seats the Liberal Party could conceivably win was dramatically reduced as a result of these changes. The Liberals finished first or second in 83 constituencies in 1935; but in only 36 constituencies in 1945. This occurred as a result of the reduced number of straight fights enjoyed by the party and because the Liberal vote tended to fall in the Liberals' best constituencies. More than anything else this made the Liberals' performance at the 1945 election 'grim'.
- 3 The distribution of the Liberal vote across the country became more even.

In 1935 the Labour Party remained very weak in a significant number of constituencies. It was in these constituencies, mostly county seats or seats in which Liberal MPs had been recently elected, that the Liberal Party remained a credible force. At the 1945 general election the realignment of the party system was finally confirmed. The Labour Party became a more credible political force as a result of their involvement at a senior level in the coalition government. Most importantly, as Franklin and Ladner have noted,⁶ a new

Table 4: the regional story⁵

	North	Yorks	NW	WMid	EMid	EAng	SE	Lond	SW	Wales	Scot
Net balance of rising and falling Liberal vote	-2	-4	-3	+1	0	-1	0	+4	-5	0	+1
Net effect of interventions and withdrawals	+1	+23	+15	+13	+11	+5	+44	+6	+8	+4	+7

A Liberal Democrat History Group fringe meeting

Religion and the Liberal Party

with
**Alan Beith MP
and Jonathan Parry**
Chair: **Lord Tope**

'The Liberal policy,' stated one nonconformist minister late last century, 'makes for the establishment of the Kingdom of God.' Our two speakers examine the role that religion and religious movements played in the history of the Liberal Party. Jonathan Parry (Pembroke College, Cambridge; author of *The Rise and Fall of Liberal Government in Victorian Britain*) will examine the 19th century, while Alan Beith MP (Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrat MPs) deals with the 20th.

Lady Violet Room, National Liberal Club

1 Whitehall Place, London SW1

7.00pm, Monday 7 July

(following the History Group AGM)

generation of voters was able to participate in the election of a government for the first time in 1945. The new cohort's political education took place during the 1920s and 1930s, decades when the Liberal Party was weak and declining. As older voters, survivors of the Liberal Party's halcyon days, died, the new voters replacing them had no experience of the Liberal Party other than of a weak and divided party, unable to form a government unaided.

In 1945 the Liberal Party could claim the support of just one-sixth of the electorate, spread evenly across the country and across the social classes. The harmonisation of the Liberal vote was a curse under a first-past-the-post electoral system which gravely restricted the number of seats the Liberals could possibly win, further reducing the party's credibility in the eyes of voters. The number of Liberal candidatures in 1945 was higher than at any election since 1929, and this provides some evidence that the party had been able to attract activists into the party in advance of the election, particularly in the southeast of England. However important these activists were to prove to the party in the

years to come, it is not possible to argue that the Liberal Party proved as equally attracted to ordinary voters.

Mark Egan is a Ph.D student at University College, Oxford, and a member of the Liberal Democrat History Group committee. He served as guest editor for Newsletter 14, a special issue on the postwar Liberal revival.

Notes:

- 1 Both articles were called *The Liberal Party and the 1945 General Election*, being written by M. Baines, *Contemporary Record*, Vol. 9, Issue 1; and Peter Joyce, for the Liberal Democrat History Group, September 1995.
- 2 In the following analysis: university constituencies are ignored; in double-member constituencies the vote of the first candidate for each party is taken as that party's total vote; in the 3 constituencies included in this analysis which were divided immediately prior to the 1945 election – Hendon, Blackpool and Chislehurst – the 1935 results in all 3 have been compared with the summations of the results of the 6 new constituencies formed from them; any 'Liberal' candidates who used the terms 'national' or 'Conservative' as part of their description are counted as Conservatives.
- 3 In 2 seats – Montgomery and Eye – the sitting Liberal National MP defected to the Liberals and fought under that label in 1945. 2 seats – Bewdley and Petersfield – were Con/Lab fights in 1935 and Con/Lib fights in 1945. In 3 seats – Bristol North, Kincardine & West Perthshire and Bishop Auckland – the Liberals enjoyed straight fights in 1935 but withdrew entirely in 1945.
- 4 5 of the 99 constituencies – Buckrose, Kincardine and West Aberdeenshire, Leominster, North Cornwall and North Cumberland – were straight fights between the Liberals and the Tories in 1935 and 1945. 1, Cardiganshire, was a straight fight between Labour and the Liberals at both elections.
- 5 I have followed the standard regions as then defined by the General Register Office. London is not included in the southeast.
- 6 'The Undoing of Winston Churchill: Mobilisation and Conversion in the 1945 Realignment of British Voters', M. Franklin and M. Ladner, *British Journal of Political Studies*, Volume 25, pp. 429–52

The Liberal Democrat History Group aims to promote the discussion and research of historical topics, particularly those relating to the histories of the Liberal Party and the SDP.

Membership of the Liberal Democrat History Group costs £7.50 (£4.00 unwaged rate); cheques should be made payable to 'Liberal Democrat History Group' and sent to Patrick Mitchell, 6 Palfrey Place, London SW8 1PA.

*Contributions to the Newsletter – letters, articles, and book reviews – are invited. Please type them and if possible enclose a computer file on 3.5 inch disc. The deadlines for issue 16, 17 and 18 are **8 July, 7 October and 16 December** respectively; contributions should be sent to the Editor, Duncan Brack, at the address below.*

For more information on the Liberal Democrat History Group, including details of back issues of the Newsletter, tape records of meetings, our 'Mediawatch', 'Thesiswatch' and Research in Progress services, see our web site at:

<http://www.users.dircon.co.uk/~dbrack/ldhg/index.html>

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