

THE 2015 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

The result of the 2015 election was a catastrophe for the Liberal Democrats: a collapse from 23.0 per cent of the vote to 7.1 per cent. This article will analyse the results in detail, while **Mark Pack** looks at what happened to the Liberal Democrats' campaign.

The Liberal Democrats and the 2015 election

John Curtice

THE PORTENTS HAD not been encouraging for a long time. No sooner was the ink dry on the coalition agreement than support for the party began to fall away in the polls – only to drop further as it became apparent in the autumn of 2010 that the party was to do an about-turn on its policy of abolishing university tuition fees. Even a subsequent apology from Nick Clegg for that decision failed to bring about any reversal of fortune. Rather, support fell back yet further in the spring of 2014 after Mr Clegg took on the UKIP leader, Nigel Farage, in broadcast debate – and was widely judged by the audience to have lost.

Nevertheless, the party remained hopeful. After all, many of its MPs had only ever been

elected in the first place because of their personal popularity and that of the party locally, and not because of the party's national message and appeal. So whatever these MPs' voters may have thought of the party's role and performance in the coalition, there was every reason to anticipate that they would remain loyal to their local MP, and thereby enable many of those MPs to defend their seat against the tide. Indeed the party had already managed to retain its seat in Eastleigh in a by-election fought in rather difficult circumstances. Meanwhile, the economy was looking up, the tax cuts that the party had promised had been made, and that surely would eventually persuade some voters that the party did not deserve a kicking after all.

Yet there was always reason to believe that these hopes rested on weak foundations. There was after all a very simple arithmetical problem with the suggestion that the party's vote would hold up better where it was already strong. The 8 per cent of the Britain-wide vote to which the polls were pointing as the election campaign approached represented as much as a 16-point drop in the party's support as compared with what it had achieved 2010. But in no fewer than 170 constituencies the party did not win as much as 16 per cent of the vote five years ago – and thus it was impossible that the party's vote could fall by as much as 16 points in these constituencies. Consequently, somewhere the party's vote must be falling by more than 16 points – and that

7 May 2015:
Vince Cable
loses his seat in
Twickenham,
one of 48 Liberal
Democrat losses
on the night



CAMPAIGN AND ITS OUTCOME

of the vote and 57 MPs in 2010 to just 7.9 per cent and 8 MPs in 2015. **John Curtice** and **Michael Steed** are the authors of *The Liberal Democrat Voting Machine*.

somewhere had to be places where the party's vote was relatively strong. Meanwhile, as regards the possibility of an increase in that 8 per cent vote, there was an obvious risk that, however much the party tried to persuade voters otherwise, any credit for economic improvement and tax cuts would be given to the Conservatives rather than their junior coalition partners. The Conservatives had, after all, long been associated in voters' minds with a wish to put more money in voters' pockets, whereas for the Liberal Democrats it was a relatively recent rallying cry.

In the event, 8 per cent was indeed all that the party was found to have achieved when the ballot boxes were opened. This represented its lowest share of the vote at any general election since 1970 – that is, at any time since the party had re-established itself (in 1974) as a party capable of fighting more or less every seat in the country and in so doing consistently win around a fifth or so of the vote. Leaving aside the unusual circumstances created by the electoral pacts and party divisions at the 1918 and 1931 general elections, the drop in the party's share of the vote was the biggest ever to have been suffered by any party at a UK election. The retreat was almost as much in evidence in Scotland (7.6 per cent of the vote, down 11 points on 2010) as it was in England and Wales (8.1 per cent, down 16 points), making it the only party to experience much the same fate on both sides of the border. At the same time, the party lost to UKIP the position as the third most popular party in British politics. Such an outcome can only be regarded as a calamitous reverse.

And it was one in which there was apparently no silver lining

Leaving aside the unusual circumstances created by the electoral pacts and party divisions at the 1918 and 1931 general elections, the drop in the party's share of the vote was the biggest ever to have been suffered by any party at a UK election.

when it came to the party's ability to win seats. Hopes that the local popularity of individual MPs might mean that there would be still be twenty, maybe even thirty Liberal Democrat parliamentarians, in the new House of Commons came to naught. The party was left with just eight – again the lowest tally since 1970. While this was perhaps just enough to avoid a revival of the old jibe that all of its MPs could be fitted into one taxi, it is not enough to require the payment of more than two fares. The tally was certainly insufficient to stop the party also being displaced for the first time as the third party in seats, albeit not to UKIP but to the Scottish National Party, who, following a dramatic advance north of the border, secured no less than fifty-six of Scotland's fifty-nine seats. In short, just one short stint as a party of power had not only cost the party all the fruits of nearly forty years of electoral progress, but also its hitherto undisputed position as the third party of British politics.

Not least of the reasons for the failure to retain more than a handful of seats was that arithmetical problem that the party had steadfastly ignored. As Table 1 shows, the stronger the Liberal Democrats were locally, the more the party's vote fell. On average the party's vote only fell by 10.4 points in those 170 seats where the party won less than 16 per cent of the vote in 2010. Indeed, it fell a little less than average in those seats where the party won less than 22 per cent last time around. In contrast, although proportionately a somewhat smaller drop,¹ at nearly 20 points the drop was well above average in those seats where the party had won over 28 per cent of the vote in 2010.²

Not that the local popularity of those Liberal Democrat MPs who were trying to defend their seats did not make any difference. Of the fifty-seven incumbents, forty-six were standing again, while the remaining eleven had opted to leave the Commons voluntarily (or in one case had been expelled from the party). In those forty-six seats, the party's share of the vote fell on average by 14.3 points, a little less than the average nationwide drop. Elsewhere, where the party had previously won over 28 per cent of the vote, the party's vote fell on average by no less than 22.1 points – with the average drop in the eleven seats where the incumbent stood down (21.8 points) little different from the drop in those seats where the party had performed relatively well in 2010 but had not come first (22.1 points). In short, all that the undoubted local popularity of incumbent Liberal Democrat MPs did was to compensate them for the otherwise remorseless tendency for the party's vote to fall more heavily where it had previously been strongest. Still, in the absence of that pattern, at least four of the eight MPs who did manage to retain their seats would have failed to do so.

So the party had not been wrong to put some faith in the popularity of their incumbent MPs. It was just that it badly overestimated the likely dividend it would bring at a time when support for the party nationally was leeching away. Furthermore, it was, as we might anticipate, a somewhat variable dividend. At one end of the spectrum, in eleven of the seats being defended by a Liberal Democrat MP, the party's vote fell by less than 10 points; at the other end, in seven seats, it fell by more than 20 points.

Table 1. Change in Liberal Democrat share of the vote since 2010 by Liberal Democrat share of the vote in 2010

<i>Liberal Democrat % share of the vote 2010</i>	<i>Mean change in Liberal Democrat % share of the vote 2010–15</i>	<i>(No. of constituencies)</i>
Less than 16%	-10.4	(170)
16–22%	-14.4	(179)
22–28%	-17.8	(121)
More than 28%	-19.8	(161)
All seats	-15.4	(631)

Such wide variation suggests that some MPs were a lot more personally popular locally than others.

One consideration though that we should bear in mind is that some incumbent MPs had been in Parliament for longer than others and thus had had longer to develop a personal vote.³ Indeed, those who were first elected in 2010 would not have previously had the opportunity at all to enhance their personal popularity by demonstrating that they were an effective local MP. However, these new MPs may have been able to develop a new personal vote during the last five years, in which case we would expect the drop in their support to be especially low. That is indeed what we find. The eight MPs who were defending their seats for the first time saw their vote fall on average by just 9.0 points, well below the average drop of -15.4 points suffered by their more long-standing colleagues.⁴

However, the fate of these newer MPs also appears to have reflected how closely they were associated with the coalition. The four who were relatively frequent rebels in the division lobbies on average experienced a remarkably small drop in support of just 4.4 points; in contrast, the four who were more loyal to the coalition saw their vote fall on average by as much as 13.7 points, only a little less than that suffered by those MPs who had been in the Commons before 2010.⁵ That said, being a regular rebel proved less helpful to more long-standing MPs, though the drop in support amongst those who had been backbenchers throughout the 2010–15 parliament and who had been a regular rebel (-14.2 points) was rather less than suffered on average by those MPs who had at some point at least served in the coalition as a minister (-16.1 points). (The 2.4 point

drop suffered by Jo Swinson in East Dunbartonshire, the lowest drop anywhere in the country, was a marked exception to this tendency.) In short, even when it comes to the ability of individual MPs to withstand the outgoing tide, voters' largely adverse reactions to the party's role in the coalition still sometimes seems to have made a difference.

Still, that role might have been expected to be beneficial in some circumstances at least – where the party was trying to fend off a challenge locally from Labour. In these circumstances, third-placed Conservative supporters might now be expected to be more willing than they had been previously to vote tactically for the local Liberal Democrat incumbent in order to try and keep Labour out. Of this there is indeed some sign. On average Conservative support fell by 5.8 points in seats being defended by an incumbent Liberal Democrat MP against a Labour challenge,⁶ a far worse performance than the Conservative average of a 1.0 point increase in support, or indeed the 0.6 point average increase in Tory support seats where a Liberal Democrat incumbent was trying to hold their seat against a second-placed Conservative challenger. In contrast, the average increase in Labour's vote in these Liberal Democrat/Labour contests was, at 1.4 points, in line with the 1.5 point increase in Labour's share of the vote overall, and only a little below the 3.1 average increase it secured where a Liberal Democrat incumbent was under challenge locally from the Conservatives.⁷ Thanks to this apparent tactical switching by third-placed Conservative supporters, on average Liberal Democrat incumbents facing a Labour challenge endured a somewhat smaller drop in their support (-12.8) than did those facing a Conservative one

(-15.3),⁸ even though in other seats where the Liberal Democrats had previously been relatively strong (that is winning over 28 per cent of the vote but either not coming first or where the incumbent was not standing again), the party's support fell more heavily where its principal competitor (that is the party that won the seat in 2010) was Labour (-24.4) rather than the Conservatives (-21.2).⁹ So the coalition did deliver a bit of a dividend in some seats at least.

In fact, it was not just third-placed Conservative supporters who appear to have voted tactically. So also, seemingly, did a few in seats where their party had been second in 2010, but where in each case the Conservatives' hold on second place was relatively tenuous. In four seats being defended by a Liberal Democrat incumbent in which a second-placed Conservative had been less than 10 points ahead of Labour in 2010, Conservative support fell on average by no less than 9.2 points, while the Liberal Democrat tally fell by just 8.0 points. The decision to vote tactically in these seats seems to have been an astute one. In the three of these four located in England, Labour mounted an unusually strong challenge locally, increasing its vote on average by no less than 13.5 points, though in the fourth constituency (Argyll), it was the SNP that moved strongly ahead, in line with the dramatic movement to the nationalists throughout Scotland. And while in the event it is not clear that tactical voting by third-placed Conservative supporters enabled the Liberal Democrats to retain any seats they would otherwise have lost, it did help save two (Leeds North West and Nick Clegg's seat in Sheffield Hallam) of the four seats in which previously second-placed Conservatives appear to have voted tactically.¹⁰

But if the formation of the coalition with the Conservatives opened up the prospect of winning tactical support from Conservative supporters, it also seemingly potentially put at risk the not insubstantial support that the party had previously garnered from third-placed Labour supporters in many a seat in recent years. Yet, perhaps surprisingly, there is little sign that this tactical support unwound. If it had done we

should find that Labour did particularly well in seats where it was previously placed third. Yet, as we have already noted, in those seats being defended by a Liberal Democrat incumbent where Labour started off in third place, the average increase in Labour support (3.1 points) was only a little above that across Britain as a whole (1.5 points). Equally, if we look at those seats where the Liberal Democrats won 28 per cent or more of the vote in 2010 but still came second to the Conservatives, that is seats where typically the party's vote fell especially heavily in 2015, Labour again did not do especially well. True, at 4.3 points the average increase in Labour support in such seats was nearly 3 points above the Britain-wide average (though only a point above that for England and Wales alone). But the 3.8 point average increase in Conservative support was also nearly 3 points above that party's Britain-wide average (+1.0) – and 2.6 points above the England and Wales average of 1.2 points. In other words, Labour did no better in these seats than the Conservatives. It appears that despite five years of coalition with the Conservatives, some voters were still willing to back the Liberal Democrats as a means of trying to ensure that the Conservatives did not win locally.

In the event, however, this time around it was usually the Conservatives who did win locally. The Liberal Democrats lost no less than twenty-seven seats to their coalition partners, compared with just twelve to Labour, a pattern that doubtless made the pill of catastrophic defeat particularly bitter to swallow. Indeed, winning those twenty-seven seats was vital to the Conservatives' ability to secure an overall majority this time around and thereby avoid the need to form a second coalition. However, these losses to the Conservatives were simply the remorseless consequence of the fact that the Conservatives started off second in most Liberal Democrat seats and were thus well placed to profit from the collapse in Liberal Democrat support. Despite the fact that the Conservatives focused much of their campaigning effort in Liberal Democrat seats in particular, the party did not do especially well in such seats. On average, Conservative support

increased by 2.1 points in those seats that were being defended by a Liberal Democrat incumbent and where the Conservatives themselves started off second to the Liberal Democrats and more than 10 points ahead of Labour – that is just a point or so above the national average increase in Conservative support. The one exception to this observation is the south-west, where the Conservative increase in support in such seats averaged no less than 4.0 points. However, the Liberal Democrats might well still have suffered what was a notable wipeout in what had long been one of the party's areas of traditional strength (it had not been unrepresented in the region since the 1958 Torrington by-election) even if the Conservative challenge had not been rather stronger there than elsewhere.

The Conservatives did not only take many a previously Liberal Democrat seat, but they also appear to have taken most of the credit for the economic recovery. Certainly the Conservative performance was stronger the more buoyant the economy locally. Conservative support increased on average by 2.8 points in those seats where the unemployment count represented less than 1 per cent of the electorate, whereas it fell back by 1.1 points where it represented more than 2.5 per cent of all those registered to vote. In contrast, Liberal Democrat support fell away rather more in places with relatively low unemployment (–17.4) than where there was relatively high unemployment (–14.2). True, this inverse relationship disappears once we take into account the strength of the Liberal Democrats locally – unemployment was typically low in places where the Liberal Democrats had previously been strong – but the party's apparent inability to claim the credit for a locally buoyant economy certainly did nothing to help it defend its existing seats. Mind you, the party also did not especially take the blame for the impact of the public spending cuts either. Whereas Conservative performance was typically weaker in constituencies with a relatively large public sector workforce, the size of the public sector seems to have made little or no difference to Liberal Democrat fortunes. In short, there is little sign that

The fate of these newer MPs also appears to have reflected how closely they were associated with the coalition. The four who were relatively frequent rebels in the division lobbies on average experienced a remarkably small drop in support of just 4.4 points; in contrast, the four who were more loyal to the coalition saw their vote fall on average by as much as 13.7 points ...

the party was associated in voters' minds with the fiscal and economic record of the coalition; for most that was simply Conservative territory.

On the other hand, the one coalition decision that did appear to be associated with the Liberal Democrats in the public mind is, of course, the decision to allow tuition fees to increase to up to £9,000. That decision might have been expected to have caused the party particular difficulty in seats with relatively large numbers of students. Of this there is some sign, at least in those seats where the party had previously been relatively strong, and thus where it may well have been particularly successful in winning support from students. Amongst those seats where the party won over 28 per cent of the vote in 2010 and which were not being defended by an incumbent MP, the party's vote fell on average by 24.0 points in seats where more than 9 per cent of 16–74 years olds were recorded by the 2011 census as being in full-time education – compared with 20.6 points where that proportion was less than 6 per cent. A similar, though smaller gap (a drop of 17.7 points versus one of 19.3 points) is also evident in those seats where the party won between 22 per cent and 28 per cent of the vote last time. Not that having a large student population necessarily made it impossible for an incumbent Liberal Democrat MP to do relatively well – indeed on average the drop in party support in seats with relatively large numbers of students that were being defended by an incumbent was, at –14.0 points, slightly less than that in those with relatively few (–15.4 points). However, as it happens many of the instances where the party did relatively well in such circumstances were places where the party apparently profited from tactical voting by Conservative supporters, and this may have helped mask any the loss of student support in these instances.

One seat where the presence of a relatively large number of students would seem to have contributed to the local MP's difficulties is Bristol West, where the 29.2 point drop in Stephen Williams' support was the biggest suffered by any incumbent MP. But the result in Bristol West was notable for another

reason – it also represented by far the largest increase in support (23.1 points) for the Greens anywhere. Although exceptional, the Bristol West result reflected a wider pattern whereby it was the Liberal Democrats who suffered most from the Greens' unprecedented success in winning nearly 4 per cent of the Britain-wide vote. For a start, the Greens typically performed best in seats where the Liberal Democrats have performed best in the past. On average the party won 5.2 per cent of the vote in seats in which the Liberal Democrats won more than 28 per cent of the vote last time, representing on average an increase of 4.1 points in those seats that the Greens also contested in 2010. The equivalent figures in seats where the Liberal Democrats won less than 16 per cent of the vote in 2010 were just 2.9 per cent and 1.8 points respectively. At the same time, in those seats where the Liberal Democrats were previously relatively strong, the stronger the Green advance the worse the Liberal Democrats did. In those seats where the Liberal Democrats won over 28 per cent of the vote in 2010, support for the party dropped on average by 16.1 points in seats where the Green performance represented less than a 2 point increase on the party's vote in 2010, but by as much as 24.6 points where it represented more than a 6 point increase.¹¹ In contrast, Labour actually performed relatively well where the Greens advanced most, while there is little discernible relationship between Green performance and that of the Conservatives.

The initial rise in support for the Greens coincided with the further decline in Liberal Democrat support in the run up to the European elections in spring 2014 we mentioned earlier. That coincidence, together with survey evidence as to where the Greens were acquiring their support, strongly suggested that the Greens were profiting in particular from the Liberal Democrats' difficulties. The relative liberalism of the Greens on social issues and the relatively high concern about the environment amongst many Liberal Democrats suggests the two parties are always likely to do relatively well amongst similar voters and in similar places. And the pattern of the actual election results lends further weight to that

supposition. On the other hand, there is little sign that support for UKIP, which actually displaced the Liberal Democrats as the third party in votes, came at the Liberal Democrats' particular expense. Not that nobody switched from Liberal Democrat to UKIP, despite the fact that the parties might be thought to represent very different ideological outlooks, but simply that Liberal Democrat voters were not especially likely to do so.

Of course the question that now faces the party is where it goes from here. Recovery will certainly not be easy. For not only has it lost votes, seats, power and parliamentary position, but also one of its signal achievements of recent years, that is to buck the first-past-the-post electoral system by developing bridgeheads of local strength. That success was reflected in a measure of how the party's percentage share if the vote varied from constituency to constituency that is known as the standard deviation. Since 1992 that measure has consistently been between 10 and 11 points. But as we have seen, at this election the party's support fell most heavily in places where it was previously strongest. The bridgeheads have been heavily eroded. As a result the standard deviation of Liberal Democrat support has fallen back to 8.4, similar to the level of the 1970s and 1980s when, for example, even as much as 26 per cent of the vote left the then SDP–Liberal Alliance with just twenty-three seats. Unless those bridgeheads can be rebuilt, converting any future gains in votes into seats in the House of Commons will prove to be very difficult.

Indeed apart from retaining just eight seats, there are now only sixty-three seats in which the party is in second place, fewer than at any time since 1970. Of these no less than forty-six are constituencies that are currently held by the Conservatives, suggesting that rebuilding the party's parliamentary strength will be especially difficult while David Cameron's party is relatively popular. Meanwhile, the seats in which the party now looks truly competitive are few and far between – there are just sixteen that it lost by less than 10 percentage points. In all but one case, these are all seats that were lost this time by an incumbent MP who may

well decide not to stand again in five years' time, thereby putting at risk any personal popularity they may still have. In any event there will inevitably be a question mark over whether all the local parties in these seats will have the resilience required to recover from defeat and rebuild their position locally during the course of this parliament.

Junior coalition partners often suffer at the polls, though the experience of the party after eight years of coalition with Labour in the Scottish Parliament between 1999 and 2007 suggests that heavy losses are not inevitable. But it did not help that having acquired a measure of power at Westminster for the first time in over sixty years, the party immediately did an about-turn on what many had come to regard as one of its unique selling points, the abolition of tuition fees, and then engaged in a seemingly futile attempt to claim a coat of tax cuts and economic competence that was always going to fit more easily on their coalition partners' shoulders. In any event the party has paid a heavy price for its five years in office. It now faces a severe test of its resilience and of its ability to regain voters' trust and confidence in what is now a much more crowded electoral marketplace. Whether it can pass that test will determine whether it ever gets a second chance to show that it is up to the challenge of being a party in power.

John Curtice is Professor of Politics, Strathclyde University.

It was the Liberal Democrats who suffered most from the Greens' unprecedented success in winning nearly 4 per cent of the Britain-wide vote ... the Greens typically performed best in seats where the Liberal Democrats have performed best in the past ... In contrast, Labour actually performed relatively well where the Greens advanced most.

- 1 The 10.4 point average drop in seats where the party won less than 16 per cent in 2010 represents 80 per cent of the 12.9 per cent of the vote that the party won in those seats in 2010. The equivalent proportion for those seats where the party won between 16 per cent and 22 per cent in 2010 is 77 per cent, in those where it won between 22 per cent and 28 per cent, 72 per cent and in those where it won more than 28 per cent, only 52 per cent. Even if we leave aside those constituencies where an incumbent Liberal Democrat MP was trying to defend their seat, the loss of support in the seats where the party won more than 28 per cent is still no more than 63 per cent.
- 2 This pattern also largely accounts for the somewhat lower level of support

in Scotland, where the party won less than 16 per cent of the vote in nearly two-thirds of all seats in 2010. Once we take into account the prior level of Liberal Democrat support, there is no systematic evidence that the average drop in support north of the border was lower than that in England and Wales.

- 3 I am grateful to Michael Steed for drawing this point to my attention.
- 4 Note that this calculation excludes Eastleigh, where the incumbent MP first won the seat in a by-election held between 2010 and 2015. Here any personal vote gained by the new incumbent might have been counter-balanced by the loss of the previous MP's personal vote. Indeed at 20.7 points the drop in the Liberal Democrat vote was relatively high in this seat.
- 5 A rebel is defined as an MP who voted differently from the majority of Liberal Democrat MPs in at least 2 per cent of all those divisions in which the MP participated between 2010 and 2015. Data from www.publicwhip.org.uk.
- 6 Though in practice in Scotland, where 40 per cent of these seats were located, the challenge came from the SNP, the apparent consequences of which for the pattern of tactical voting north of the border are examined in subsequent endnotes.
- 7 In practice these measures of Labour performance are very different on the two sides of the Anglo-Scottish border. In England and Wales, Labour's vote actually increased on average by no less than 11.5 points in seats where the party was challenging a Liberal Democrat incumbent, well above its performance across all seats in England and Wales and in seats where the Conservatives started off in second place to a Liberal Democrat incumbent (an average increase of 4.4 points). In Scotland, in contrast, Labour's vote fell on average by 13.6 points in Liberal Democrat/Labour contests, though this is somewhat less than the 17.7 point drop Labour suffered across Scotland as a whole. However, once we take into account the fact that, like the Liberal Democrats, Scottish Labour's vote fell more heavily in seats where the party was previously strongest (and given Labour was relatively weak in many of these Liberal Democrat/Labour seats), Labour's performance was in fact typically rather worse than it was in other seats with comparable levels of Labour support in 2010. Thus,

It did not help that ... the party immediately did an about-turn on what many had come to regard as one of its unique selling points, the abolition of tuition fees, and then engaged in a seemingly futile attempt to claim a coat of tax cuts and economic competence that was always going to fit more easily on their coalition partners' shoulders ...

- 8 This pattern is particularly evident in Scotland where the Liberal Democrat vote fell on average by just 9.7 points in seats being defended by a Liberal Democrat incumbent against a nominal challenge from Labour, but in practice one from the SNP. Here the Conservative vote dropped on average by as much as 6.5 points, perhaps because the party's voters were even more willing vote tactically against the SNP than their counterparts in England were against Labour. This willingness even seems to have extended to the one Liberal-Democrat-held seat where the SNP were already second in 2010, even though in this instance the seat was not being defended by the incumbent MP (i.e. Gordon, where the SNP leader, Alex Salmond, was standing). Here the Conservative vote fell by 7.0 points

while the 14.2 point drop in Labour support was also relatively high given that the party was relatively weak there in 2010. The Liberal Democrat vote fell by just 3.3 points.

- 9 At 28.6 points, the collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote in seats where the party was previously relatively strong and started off second to Labour was typically particularly marked in Scotland. In these circumstances the Liberal Democrats appear to have been the loser from the apparent willingness of some voters to vote tactically against the SNP. In particular, the 30.3 point drop in the party's vote in Edinburgh South, together with a 4.1 point drop in Conservative support, may well have been instrumental in enabling Labour to retain the one seat it still won in Scotland.
- 10 Apart from Argyll, which the SNP captured, the party also still lost out (to Labour) in Cambridge.
- 11 In making this calculation, the Green performance is measured by the party's share of the vote in 2015 in those seats that the Greens did not contest in 2010.

2015: disaster – or darkness before dawn?

Michael Steed

ANYONE WITH THE slightest awareness of the Liberal Party's history knew that entering any form of coalition (or national working agreement) with another party involved serious electoral risk. If the 1918–22 Lloyd George coalition was in such different circumstances as to be ignored, the harmful electoral impact of the 1931 coalition was clear, if effectively spread over two elections (1931 and 1935). The party, and its leader in government, Sir Herbert Samuel, was given temporary importance. However, as Baldwin's biographers nicely put it, 'Liberals were flattered, cajoled and bullied, and finally taken for a ride, at the end of which they knew neither where they were nor where they had begun.' The party dropped from 59 seats in 1929 to just 21 in 1935.

The 1931–32 National Government, the 1977–78 Lib-Lab Pact and the 2010–15 Cameron-Clegg coalition were all both a response to a national economic crisis and to the absence of an overall Commons majority. The Pact also hit

the party hard in votes and seats – straightaway at the 1977 county council elections and in by-elections. Following some fifteen months of electoral purgatory, David Steel took the party out of the Pact and after nearly a year of rebuilding in opposition, he was able to lead it to a better outcome in 1979 than the results and polls of a year earlier had predicted – though with some loss in both votes and seats.² That post-Pact recovery period, rather than the form of the agreement and the party with which it was made, is arguably the most significant difference to the 2010–15 experience (see below).

The Liberal Democrats fought the May 2015 election, as it had defended itself throughout the previous five years, on its effectiveness in coalition and the prospect of forming another one. The popular verdict on this message broke records for the scale of a party's loss, as John Curtice explores in the preceding article, and produced, on any conceivable basis of comparison, the worst Liberal result since

1970. It was as if the adhesion of SDP voters from the Alliance years, and the steady growth of local strength for more than four decades, had never happened.

My own analysis, extending further back, shows that it was much worse than that. Although the party has now two more MPs than in 1970, the party's vote in the seats fought was much higher then. Of the 618 British seats, people had the chance in 1970 to vote Liberal in only 328. In these seats the Liberal vote was 13.7 per cent, and in the vast majority where direct comparison can be made between 1970 and 2015, the vote was lower this year, usually by around 3–4 points. In 2015, the party lost deposits in over half the country by polling under 5 per cent; in 1970 the Liberal share had been lower than 5 per cent in only seven seats.

We have to go back to the early 1950s to find a level of popular Liberal support as low as it was on 7 May 2015. Direct seat-by-seat comparison with 1950 and 1959 shows that Liberal support was clearly higher in both years than it was in 2015. Only in 1951 and 1955 was the party as unpopular as it was this year.³ No wonder the actual 2010–15 drop in support, from 24 per cent to 8 per cent, was hard to believe or to anticipate, despite the spot-on predictions of the polls.

The most striking feature of this loss was just how remorselessly Britain-wide and uniform it was. No region, no type of constituency and almost no tactical situation was exempt from the national rejection of the party by the majority of those who had voted for it five years earlier.

No calamity like this has ever hit British Liberals before. The 1970 result was bad nationally, yet between 1966 and 1970 the vote still shot up by over ten points in four seats, each with a strong local councillor candidate (Birmingham, Liverpool, Rochdale and Southport), while in North Devon Jeremy Thorpe saved the seat he would lose on the national swing by increasing his share slightly. In 1951, the party's worst ever result, a handful of the 109 seats fought still put up their share (notably Honiton, North Dorset and Orkney). The 1989 European Parliament disaster, when the Greens polled better than the newly merged Social & Liberal

Democrats almost everywhere, was bucked by Paul Tyler's good result in Cornwall & West Plymouth. These exceptions offered hope and comfort, in the evidence that a strong candidate, a local government base or a regional Liberal tradition could withstand national unpopularity and provide a platform for recovery. The 2015 results, far from that, indicate in their detail that not only is the party less popular than at any time since the early 1950s, it is in as bad a position for winning back seats.

To see just how and why, we have to be careful how we measure performance. This is discussed systematically by Curtice (see especially table 1); as the drop in the Liberal Democrat vote share in 2015 was greater than the party's 2010 starting point in many seats, the traditional measure of percentage point change in share necessarily appears non-uniform. (This happened, incidentally, with the measure of swing to Labour in the 1997 landslide – it had to be smaller in the areas where the Conservatives were very weak.⁴) Let us explore what that means for identifying where the Liberal Democrats did less badly.

On the normal measure, the party held its ground best in the tiny number of seats where the vote share fell by less than 5 points. Of these eight 'good' performances, six were in Scotland and just two in England – apparent evidence of a better Scottish performance. Yet the more significant distinction is that six were in held seats, and just two were not – and of course from 1964 to 2015, the party has done better in winning seats in Scotland. As for the 'best' result in a non-held seat, it was in Glasgow East, where the vote share dropped by only 4.3, to 0.75 per cent!

The point is reinforced if we examine the 80 seats where the vote share dropped by less than ten points. With one exception,⁵ all these cases fall into one of two categories. The party stemmed its loss to under ten points in 12 out of its 57 held seats, the vote dropping in that dozen from 40.2 per cent to 34.4 per cent.⁶ At the opposite end of the scale, the same cut-off point picks out 67 seats in weak Liberal Democrat areas, where the average vote dropped from 10.6 per cent to 2.5 per cent. Scotland accounts for

29 of these seats (2015 vote 2.1 per cent, drop 7.5), London for a fifth (2.6 per cent, drop 8.7), with the rest in Wales (2.4 per cent, drop 8.3) or other, mostly old-industrial, parts of England (3.5 per cent, drop 8.1). The hint that Scottish votes held up better effectively evaporates when we compare numerical like with like. The really significant findings are (I) the party did a lot better in some, but not all, held seats, and (II) in the four-fifths of the country where it was neither very strong nor very weak, there is only one solitary case of a drop of under ten points. Outside held seats, once allowing for prior strength, the loss of ground really was quite extraordinarily uniform.⁷

Not only is such even change historically most unusual for Liberal performance, it was not how voters were otherwise behaving in 2015. English and Scottish Labour performed poles apart, and indeed Labour gained some ground from the Conservatives in London whilst losing ground in old-industrial, small-town, mixed and rural provincial England. The national Tory advance did not extend to the Liverpool city region,⁸ where Cameron lost both his sitting MPs, including a junior minister; his must be the first UK government in history not to have anyone from this part of England on its Commons benches. In contrast Conservatives fared better in Wales than in England;⁹ Cameron holds areas in south-west Wales not won in living memory.¹⁰ Both the UKIP and Green advances were markedly uneven according to type of constituency.

For Liberals, so long the party of local campaigners and regional diversity, the experience of such a relentless uniformity is totally new – the failure to anticipate this behaviour helps to account for the failure to foresee how many seats would be lost for the vote share that was so accurately predicted. As for the variation that occurred, clearly we must examine held seats. Table 1 shows these broken down by type of incumbency, in my judgement the main reason why some votes dropped less than others.

Even without an incumbent, the credibility (and greater campaigning resources) of having won in 2010 produced a benefit. The 15.8 drop in all 57 held seats compares

We have to go back to the early 1950s to find a level of popular Liberal support as low as it was on 7 May 2015. Direct seat-by-seat comparison with 1950 and 1959 shows that Liberal support was clearly higher in both years than it was in 2015. Only in 1951 and 1955 was the party as unpopular as it was this year.

favourably with the 57 non-held seats which had the highest vote share in 2010 (over 31.3 per cent) then. In this latter 57 (many formerly held, with strong local government bases or a historic Liberal tradition), the drop was a massive 24.7 on average, and only five managed to do better than the held-seat average.¹¹ Conversely, only seven of the held seats saw a drop as big as 24.7; in all but two of these (both ministers) the MP stood down. So across the board, the party's vote dropped by 9 points less where it had won in 2010 than in the strongest seats not won then.

Most of the best results were achieved by MPs newly elected in 2010, who had used the five years to dig in locally. Other causes of variation are fully explored by Curtice, with a clear interaction with incumbency, as Liberal Democrat ministers were naturally drawn from those already elected before 2010, while consequently the newer MPs, as backbenchers, had more chance of distancing themselves by rebelling. But even though Liberal Democrat ministers appear to have paid some penalty for their association with government, all but two performed better than the average candidate in the strongest non-held seats.¹²

The other distinction in table 1 is the Scottish factor. This reflected the much more limited losses in a few seats where there was clearly tactical voting by voters of the three non-separatist parties against the SNP – especially against the former SNP leader in Gordon (at 3.3 by far the lowest drop result for a non-incumbent) and in middle-class urban areas. Such tactical voting meant that 2010 Liberal Democrat voters deserted in record numbers where another party had that advantage.¹³ If we compare like situation with like, there is very little evidence that 2010 Liberal Democrat voters deserted differentially north and south of the border.¹⁴

Put together, Scottish tactical voting and new incumbency explain almost all the better results achieved by Liberal Democrat MPs; the only two who managed, outside those situations, to stem the drop to under ten points were Tim Farron in Westmorland and Andrew George in St Ives, both well-known and both having successfully distanced themselves from some

Nature of incumbency	2015 Challenger			
	Conservative	Labour	SNP	All
No incumbent standing	22.8 (6)	31.3 (2)	8.2 (2)	21.6 (10)
MP 1st elected 2010 standing	13.9 (4)	7.6 (4)	2.8 (1)	9.8 (9)
Pre-2010 MP standing	15.7 (19)	17.1 (8)	12.9 (8)	15.4 (36)
All LD held seats	17.3 (31)	16.4 (14)	11.1 (11)	15.8 (57)

The figure for each category is the mean percentage point drop in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote, with the number of seats in brackets. Ceredigion (Plaid challenger) is included in the final column only. Eastleigh and Portsmouth South (complex incumbency) are included in the bottom row only.

government policies. Looking forward to 2020, we cannot predict whether Scottish political developments will help or hinder Liberal fortunes, but the implications of what we have established about both held seats and incumbency for the party's chances of winning more seats then is grim indeed.

Leaving aside the likely damaging effect of boundary change,¹⁵ the party will no longer have these advantages in the seats it has just lost. Most of those defeated in 2015 had served several terms and will not stand again. One has only to scan the 2015 results in seats lost in 2010 like Chesterfield, Hereford, Richmond Park, Rochdale or Romsey to see how much the party's vote can plummet in such cases. If we take the seats, on present boundaries, where the 2015 vote still looks a good base, we find that all those within 15 per cent of victory have now lost the advantage of being held, and mostly that of incumbency. Even if we extend the range to 20 per cent, which gives us 42 'winnables', only in two is the party's apparent strength not bolstered by these inevitably waning assets.¹⁶

However, the extent and extraordinary uniformity of the 2015 debacle, in the wider context of the new British political landscape, does offer a glimmer of hope in another form.

With the adoption of the community politics strategy in 1970, the evidence of the 1980s that Liberals had firmer local bases than the SDP, the growth of systematic targeting in the 1990s, the doubling in Commons seats in 1997 despite a slippage in votes and the holding of around fifty to sixty seats at each of the following three elections,

the party had come to believe that it had found a formula to get round the massive obstacle of the single-member (uninominal) electoral system. There was always a flaw in the assumption that it could seek to exercise power at Westminster on this basis. Winning in a uninominal contest meant normally squeezing someone else's vote; but power could only mean working with another party, which would necessarily offend some squeezed voters. Any choice made by the party in 2010 would almost certainly have lost it a good chunk of its voters and some of its seats.

The actual choice made was not only with which partner to work, but what message to send about the party's achievements and future relevance. Ignoring the evidence that the party depended for representation on building up pockets of support in geographically concentrated groups, the leadership chose to pitch its appeal nationwide in terms of its impact on the country's economic policy. There was a total mismatch between that message and the localism of its attempt to hold seats on a uninominal basis. Yet the faith of enough of its MPs that they knew how to buck the harsh logic of the uninominal system was shown in their decision that, rather than using their leverage in 2010 to seek an advance towards a more proportional system, the party would go for tweaking the existing system with the alternative vote.¹⁷

So can we conclude other than that a coalition is fatal poison to a Liberal party in Britain? Curtice's evidence shows the lack of any electoral dividend from the party's contribution to the coalition government's economic achievement.

THE 2015 ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND ITS OUTCOME

Date	By-election in:	2010	2011–14	2015
Jan 2011	Oldham East & Saddleworth	31.6	32.0	12.9
May 2011	Leicester South	26.9	22.5	4.6
Mar 2011 – Mar 2012	Four other seats	14.0	4.2	2.5
Nov 2012	Manchester Central	26.6	9.4	4.1
Nov 2012	Five other seats	18.9	6.6	3.6
Feb 2013	Eastleigh	46.5	32.1	25.8
May 2013 – 2014	Six seats	18.1	2.7	3.0

He does pick up signs of heavier losses due to its neglect of its higher education constituency. My interpretation differs a little on this point; the timeline of the party's loss suggests that the damage done by the fees U-turn (though real enough) may be exaggerated.

The opinion polls recorded a clear drop in support in autumn 2010, associated with that issue. In turn this was confirmed by the widespread losses at the 2011 district elections, and anecdotal evidence from many who went out on the doorstep then. Yet the further losses in district seats in 2015, when the seats won in 2011 (despite the student fees issue) came up again, shows that there was a further loss of support as that issue should have faded. It is instructive to examine the party's by-election track record to pursue the evidence, as shown in table 2, where results in seats with less than a quarter of the vote in 2010 are grouped together.

This shows that the 2015 level of support sank below the vote in most by-elections; the haemorrhage of Liberal Democrat votes became greater as the five years went by. However, by the last cluster, starting with South Shields in May 2013, the drop had already reached its 2015 level. Although opinion polls showed that Clegg's challenge to Farage in the 2014 European elections failed, the party's by-election performance was no worse after than before that event (or the bad result in the Euro election).

Interpretation of this interesting pattern needs to be melded with evidence of the motivation of former Liberal voters that election surveys may reveal. Table 2 suggests that the massive scale of rejection of the party in 2014–15 was caused not so much by the decision itself to form the coalition or by the fees debacle as by a failure over

time to convince its voters. It hints that if Clegg had followed Steel's 1978 example and left the coalition a year or six months before the election, more seats could have been saved. The party needed an exit strategy.

The party asked to be judged on its national message, and was so judged. That message did not fit its localism, its community bases, its historic role in regions where it had maintained credibility as the main anti-Tory party or the priorities of particular groups of its supporters. The 2015 election outcome demonstrated conclusively that the party did not know how to play the unimonominal system.

British politics has changed, becoming more national (whether British, English or Scottish) and distinctly multi-party. The Conservatives now benefit from a more favourable distribution of their vote,¹⁸ and have been able to win an overall majority of seats on 36.9 per cent of the vote. Britain no longer has a balanced two-party system.

The lesson for the Liberal Democrats could not be clearer. Attempting to build on the basis of localising support to beat the unimonominal hurdle has ended in disaster. The deck has been cleared for the party to rebuild by looking for national messages which make strategic political sense.

Michael Steed wrote (or co-wrote with John Curtice) the analytical appendix to the Nuffield series of general-election studies 1964–2005, and stood as a Liberal parliamentary candidate seven times between 1967 and 1983.

- 1 Keith Middlemas & John Barnes, *Baldwin: A Biography* (London, 1969), p. 641.
- 2 See *Journal of Liberal History* 60 (Autumn 2008) p. 25 for full details; during the 1974–79 Parliament, the pre-Pact by-election loss rate

averaged 5.5; during the Pact period it was 10.1; the post-Pact rate was 6.0, while in 1979 it was 4.4.

- 3 Most seats fought in 1951 or 1955 can be compared directly with a near equivalent seat in 2015, with three-cornered fights in the 1950s and multi-cornered ones in 2015. The majority of 1951–2015 comparisons show the 2015 vote higher, while the majority of 1955–2015 comparisons show the 1955 vote higher.
- 4 See John Curtice & Michael Steed in David Butler & Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1997*, p. 302.
- 5 Montgomeryshire at 8.6. This could indicate that the weakness of the 2010 incumbent depressed the vote then. Montgomery was one of just three seats where the party's traditional vote enabled it to hold the seat in 1951 and 1955; the other two, then called Cardigan and Orkney & Zetland, elected Liberal Democrat MPs in 2015.
- 6 Westmorland & Lonsdale was the only one of these twelve best performances where the seat was saved. The other seven re-elected MPs experienced on average (16.2) as bad a drop as the MPs who lost; they are back in the Commons due to the party's prior strength in their seat, or to the weakness of their opponents.
- 7 Two individual campaigns or candidates in stronger areas stand out for what, in this general context, was a really good result with small drops – Bosworth (11.0) and Maidstone & The Weald (11.9). The second of these two candidates was seen as close to Clegg, the other as associated with his Social Liberal Forum critics.
- 8 These are the 15 seats in Merseyside metropolitan county, together with four adjacent ones in Cheshire and Lancashire. Esther McVey, Minister of State for Employment, lost her seat in Wirral West. This sharp regional Conservative slump helped John Pugh hold Southport despite suffering a more than typical drop in the Liberal Democrat vote. Next door the once safe Tory seat of Crosby, won by Shirley Williams in 1981 and now disguised as 'Sefton Central', has turned into a safe Labour seat.
- 9 I can find no precedent for this; the traditional (Butler) swing was 1.1 to Labour in England but 0.3 to Conservatives in Wales.
- 10 The Gower peninsula has a Conservative MP for the first time since a Tory took one of the two Glamorganshire seats in 1852; western

- Carmarthenshire acquired a Conservative MP in 2010 for the first time since a Tory took one of the two Carmarthenshire seats in 1880.
- 11 In addition to those mentioned in notes 5 and 7, Oxford West & Abingdon and Watford.
 - 12 The two were Bristol West (29.2 drop), where the local Green surge clearly damaged Stephen Williams badly, and Berwickshire, Roxburgh & Selkirk (26.7), where tactical unionist voters seem to have decided that the Conservative had the better chance of blocking the SNP; or perhaps Michael Moore paid a special penalty for his role in office.
 - 13 In addition to Berwickshire, notably Edinburgh North & Leith (29.3 drop), Edinburgh South (30.7) and Glasgow North (28.6).
 - 14 As the registered electorate in Scotland rose in 2014 (referendum effect) and turnout rose sharply in 2015 (in contrast to the rest of Britain), actual numbers of Liberal Democrat votes cast in Scottish constituencies could be higher in 2015 despite the drop in vote share.
 - 15 This assumed harmful effect does not predict that new boundaries will be drawn with a view to harming Liberal Democrats. The reality is that the new, mathematically rigid, rules (voted through by Liberal Democrat MPs in 2010) will necessarily make both for more artificial boundaries and for more frequent disturbance, both more easily handled by parties with more national resources and a national or class appeal, while undermining the Liberal capacity for building up support in distinct, identifiable communities.
 - 16 Montgomeryshire and Oxford West & Abingdon. Enlarging the net to include all seats within 25 per cent of victory in 2015 adds three more non-held seats – Bosworth, Maidstone and Newton Abbott.
 - 17 The Electoral Reform Society calculates that with AV there would have been nine, not eight, Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 2015; see its *The 2015 General Election Report* p. 34. My estimate is a little larger, some 12–15 seats. ERS also calculates that with AV, the 36.9 per cent first-preference vote would have given the Conservatives double the overall Commons majority they actually secured.
 - 18 It has often been misleadingly claimed that Labour was advantaged, and the Conservatives disadvantaged, by the constituency boundaries. That encouraged the coalition government to change the rules in a way that will probably slightly help the Conservatives in 2020. But the big advantage for Labour prior to 2015 was that the distribution of its vote helped it to win more seats than the Tories at an equal level of support. The dramatic voting changes in 2015 have now handed that advantage to the Conservatives, without any boundary change. This effect is intrinsic to the uninominal system. That makes the feasible coalition for radical electoral reform potentially greater and more realisable than it has been at any time since the early twentieth century.

8 per cent but only 8 MPs: the death of the fabled Liberal Democrat grassroots campaigning machine?

Mark Pack

THESE WERE TWO elements in the disaster that was the 2015 general election result for the Liberal Democrats: just 8 per cent of the vote and also just eight MPs. Many of the other articles in this edition of the *Journal of Liberal History* explain the 8 per cent vote share. However, the fact that even such a low vote as 8 per cent turned into only eight MPs also needs explanation, both because it was well below prior expectations

– inside and outside the party – and also because in the past the party had consistently won more seats than the percentage of the vote it secured.

Indeed, up until the 2005 general election, the Liberal Democrats had been starting to learn to live with the bias that first past the post (FPTP) imposes on smaller parties who do not have a very strong geographic concentration in one part of the country.

The lesson for the Liberal Democrats could not be clearer. Attempting to build on the basis of localising support to beat the uninominal hurdle has ended in disaster. The deck has been cleared for the party to rebuild by looking for national messages which make strategic political sense.

As I set out in ‘The Liberal Democrat approach to campaigning’,¹ from the 1970s through to 2005 the Liberal Democrats became progressively better at turning votes into seats at Westminster elections. This is best illustrated by the party’s seats to vote share ratio.

With about 650 seats in parliament² but only a maximum of 100 per cent of voters to be won, a proportional result would mean a ratio of around 6.5:1. The party has never got close to that, but from the early 1970s its predecessors’ results, and then the Liberal Democrats’, consistently improved, rising from a low of 0.7 to 2.9 by 2005. To put flesh on that ratio, had the party still been at 0.7 in 2005, it would have won fifteen seats, not the sixty-two it actually secured. This was not trivial progress.

However, after the 2005 peak things slipped back in 2010 before plummeting in 2015, returning the ratio to its pre-merger levels.

As I wrote of the 2010 slippage for the *Journal* in 2014,³ the 2010 seats to votes ratio made it the then worst for the party since 1992: a poor reflection on the campaign machine’s ability to turn national vote share into actual seats. For pessimists this was the result of the Conservatives in 2005 having largely cottoned on to how to do intensive target seat campaigning, and by 2010 Labour doing so too, leaving the Liberal Democrats’ ability to outperform the national picture in selected constituencies hugely reduced. For optimists, there were specific mistakes in 2010 which could be remedied in the future. One was the weakening of the focus on target seats in the heady wake of Nick Clegg’s first TV debate victory and the resulting poll surge. Another was that the party called several seats wrongly in the last few days before polling day, misdirecting resources as a result. For example, a great deal of effort was directed to Oxford East on polling day, which Labour held on to by a significant margin – 4,581 votes – whereas, had the effort been directed instead to neighbouring Oxford West & Abingdon, Evan Harris would not have ended up losing by just 176 votes.

The party’s own official review into the 2010 general election, chaired by James Gurling,⁴ was a relatively low-key affair. Some of

THE 2015 ELECTION CAMPAIGN AND ITS OUTCOME

Table 1: Liberal, Alliance and Liberal Democrat general election performance

Election	Seats won	% share of the vote	Seats:votes ratio
1970	6	8	0.8
1974 Feb	14	20	0.7
1974 Oct	13	19	0.7
1979	11	14	0.8
1983	23	26	0.9
1987	22	23	0.9
1992	19	18	1.1
1997	46	17	2.7
2001	52	19	2.8
2005	62	22	2.9
2010	57	23	2.5
2015	8	8	1.0

the causes of the party's failure to win more seats in 2010 it ascribed to specific one-off factors such as the failure of the party's immigration message and the old 'you can't win' argument (both of these factors came through strongly in the party's post-election private polling). It made many detailed recommendations, and some significant organisational ones – particularly that the party should change its computer database software for fighting elections. In addition, the increasing emphasis in the Labour Party on the virtues of canvassing rubbed off on the Liberal Democrats, with a switch from viewing canvassing as a data-gathering opportunity, where a virtue is made of talking to each person for as little time as possible, to an attempt to get into longer conversations about issues.⁵

It was hoped that these organisational improvements, plus the fact of being in coalition government giving a completely different spin to the 'you can't win' argument, would allow the party to regain its local campaigning edge. However, given the 2015 result, those hopes were not only not met but the seats to votes ratio crashed catastrophically. What went wrong?

During the 2010–15 parliament, the Liberal Democrats certainly put in a considerable effort to target campaigning activity at winnable Westminster constituencies. This included a 'Dragon's Den' style application process for support, whereby constituency teams had to make the case that their seat was winnable and their applications were assessed with the assistance of an extensive constituency polling

programme. The process was far more ruthless than in previous parliaments, with the party willing to withdraw support even from seats held by long-standing Liberal Democrat MPs⁶ – something that had been a bone of contention in some previous parliaments where, regardless of the constituency campaigning performance of an MP, the party would always end up putting in outside support to sort things out.

Those seats that made it through the process received, despite the party's low poll ratings throughout the parliament, generously funded support thanks to the efficacy of the party's fundraising operation. It was a regular feature of the quarterly donation figures published by the Electoral Commission for the party's fundraising from individuals to be more successful than that of Labour.

They also received more effective targeting of volunteer resources than in previous parliaments.⁷ This was partly due to a widespread understanding in the party of how few seats were truly winnable in 2015 and therefore a greater willingness on the part of volunteers to travel to help elsewhere.⁸ It was also due to the increasing use of telephone canvassing via an easy-to-use web system (called VPBs, or Virtual Phone Banks). VPBs made it easy for people to help a seat without having to travel to it, and replaced the previous reliance on printing and posting back and forth paper canvass sheets, which had been a rather cumbersome mechanism even when the arrival of the fax machine and later digital scanning/

photography brought a little IT relief.

VPBs were possible due to the party's migration, as recommended by the Gurling review, to a new web-based electoral database, called Connect. Supplied to the party by the American firm NGPVAN, Connect was based on the same technology as used by the 2008 and 2012 Obama presidential campaigns (and the Canadian Liberals).⁹ In addition to investing in Connect, the party also commissioned micro-targeting research to score uncanvassed voters on their likelihood of being Liberal Democrat, Conservative or Labour in order to prioritise canvassing and to allow the more accurate targeting of campaigning such as direct mail to otherwise uncanvassed voters.

Although Connect had a severe slow-down on polling day in 2015, resulting in some features being scaled back, even in the midst of the post-election dismay there has been no call to abandon it or blame it from the result. Rather VPBs, scoring and Connect were to varying degrees successful.

Unsuccessful, however, was the party's constituency polling. This had been inaccurate in places in 2010 (see above) and was even more so in 2015, leading the party to believe it would return far more than eight MPs and hence to Paddy Ashdown's promise on live TV on election night to eat his hat if the exit poll prediction of the party winning just ten seats turned out to be right. That so many public pollsters got their polls wrong too provides some cover for the party's error, and indeed some of the criticisms of the party's polling methodology (such as question order) do not stack up as a similar methodology was followed by other, successful pollsters.¹⁰ More likely, the problem with the polling was that it was asking about one sort of election but the public decided to vote in a different sort. That is, the polling accurately captured how people would vote if they were not thinking about who would be prime minister (such as if it was a foregone conclusion); however once worrying about the prime minister came into consideration, they switched away from the Liberal Democrats to other parties.

That would fit with a broader pattern of the party doing best

(1997, 2001, 2005) when the name of the prime minister after polling day is little doubted and doing worst (1992, 2010, 2015) when there is real doubt over who will be prime minister. This change in voter perspective also helps explain why the hoped for Liberal Democrat incumbency boost was muted: the more people worried about who the prime minister was, the less their love of their MP mattered. Hence the strong polling results for the party's MPs during the parliament¹¹ were not enough to save most of them.¹²

Three other factors, however, contributed to the party's dreadful seats to votes ratio aside from the strategic political landscape. One was the abortive attempted major restructuring of staff at party HQ in 2012. It produced some positive results, with the turnaround in the party's membership figures starting following the renewed focus on membership services. However the attempt to change the campaign staffing structure was very controversial. The idea was to move from primarily geographically based staff to skills-based staff, but the handling of the axing of the geographically based posts led to widespread protests through the party. The eventual structure that emerged was very similar to the pre-restructure one, but with a greater emphasis on monitoring performance standards¹³ than on collaboration with seats, and with those staff with geographic responsibilities covering huge areas and so spending very considerable amounts of time travelling. Moreover, there was widespread bad feeling – and some rather complicated wrinkles, to cater for particular personality clashes and differences. This contributed to a significant cadre of highly skilled and experienced staff deciding to move on from party employment, often also dropping out of voluntary party activity too.

A second factor was that, despite the attempt to move to a more skills-based structure, the party did very little in the way of testing out alternative campaign tactics in the field, such as by splitting voters into two different groups and trying a different direct mail design on each. In the US, such A/B split-test field experiments have been the norm for political campaigners for

many years now¹⁴ and are spreading to other parties, but the Liberal Democrats almost never carried out A/B split testing except for online campaigning and the party's campaigning tactics changed little from ten years previously. More broadly, the party's development of campaign tactics had in many areas stalled.

The final factor is one, however, also outside the party's direct control: the death of constituency election expense limits. Although campaigning in constituencies in the months running up to polling day is nominally tightly controlled by constituency expense limits, there is very large scope for campaigning to be done that is targeted at swing voters in marginal seats but which does not count against the local limit. A mailshot from David Cameron, for example, to soft Lib Dem voters in a Lib Dem MP's seat did not need to count against the constituency limit. As a result, the Tories were able to spend millions of pounds extra on 'national' campaigning in Liberal Democrat-held seats, outgunning the Liberal Democrat campaigns and undermining the party's traditional incumbency advantage.¹⁵ This regulatory death played into the hands of the Conservatives not only because of the parties' relative finances but also because the key messages to such swing voters for Tories were national ones (be afraid of Ed Miliband in hock to the SNP), yet for the Lib Dems were local ones (praise for the local MP). Therefore even when the Liberal Democrats spent money on 'national' campaigning in key seats, it was not as effective for the party

as the equivalent Conservative campaigning was.

The lessons for the future, then, are twofold. Wider political circumstances – not only the party's overall popularity but also the degree to which the election result is seen as a forgone conclusion – matter, as do regulatory issues the party cannot unilaterally influence. Nevertheless, in addition to pushing for the revival of meaningful constituency expense limits, there are other factors under the party's control which can be altered ahead of 2020, including a revised approach to polling and a reinvigoration of campaigning tactics, fuelled by a belief in testing and experimentation.

Dr Mark Pack worked at party HQ from 2000 to 2009, heading up the party's online operation for the 2001 and 2005 general elections. He is author of 101 Ways To Win An Election and the party's election law manual, as well as co-author of the party's general election agents' handbook.

The author would like to thank Neil Fawcett and Ed Maxfield for their comments on an earlier draft of this piece.

- 1 *Journal of Liberal History* 83 (Summer 2014).
- 2 The number has varied with boundary reviews and devolution. During the period in Table 1, the Liberals, then Alliance and subsequently Liberal Democrats contested nearly every seat, with a few exceptions such as the Speaker's constituency and, in 1997, Tatton.
- 3 *Journal of Liberal History*, 83 (Summer 2014).

concluded on page 83

Liberal Democrat History Group online

Website

See www.liberalhistory.org.uk for details of our activities and publications, guides to archive sources, research resources, and a growing number of pages on the history of the party. (Please note that we are currently upgrading our website, and there may be some delay in making all content available.)

Email

Join our email mailing list for news of History Group meetings and publications – the fastest and earliest way to find out what we're doing. Fill in the form at: <http://bit.ly/LDHGemail>.

Facebook page

News of the latest meeting and publications, and a discussion forum: www.facebook.com/LibDemHistoryGroup.

Twitter

A daily posting of Liberal events on this day in history. Follow us at: [LibHistoryToday](https://twitter.com/LibHistoryToday).

Liberalism

The ideas that built the Liberal Democrats

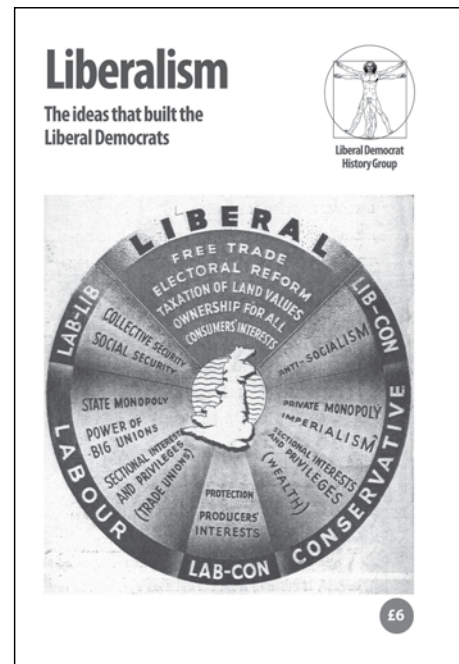
The political ideology of the Liberal Democrats draws on the philosophies of two reformist traditions, liberalism and social democracy, and possesses a distinctive approach to concepts such as freedom, equality and social justice.

This booklet is an accessible guide to the key ideas underlying Liberal Democrat beliefs, including entries on environmentalism, internationalism, the rule of law and community politics, together with contemporary and historic currents of thought, including social and economic liberalism, social democracy, Keynesianism, radicalism and more.

Essential reading for every thinking Liberal.

Liberal Thinkers is available at a special discounted price for subscribers to the *Journal of Liberal History*: £5.00 instead of the normal £6.00. Copies can be purchased:

- At the History Group's stand at the Liberal Democrat conference (see back page); or
- Via our website, www.liberalhistory.org.uk; or
- By sending a cheque (made out to 'Liberal Democrat History Group') to LDHG, 54 Midmoor Road, London SW12 0EN (add £1.00 P&P).



8 per cent but also only 8 MPs: the death of the fabled Liberal Democrat grassroots campaigning machine?

concluded from page 75

- 4 In his role as chair of the party's Campaigns and Communications Committee (CCC). He discussed his review at the Liberal Democrat History Group's fringe meeting at the autumn 2010 party conference. See the meeting report at <http://www.markpack.org.uk/16887/the-2010-election-in-historical-perspective/>.
- 5 One cause for this renewed emphasis on canvassing – and canvassing, moreover, as more than just brief data-gathering conversations – was the Obama 2008 election campaign which was a high-profile example, widely reported in Britain, of the resurgence of doorstep canvassing in the United States.
- 6 Although there was some controversy over whether such decisions were made soon enough.
- 7 With lower membership and fewer councillors in 2015 than in 2010, the total volunteer base available was smaller. Hard data is not yet available as to whether the net result of fewer volunteers used better was more or less activity in key seats.
- 8 The contrast with 2010 was especially notable, when the Cleggmania poll surge resulted in more activists thinking their own seat was winnable and so damaging the party's attempt to target efforts.
- 9 A small number of local parties continued to use the previous database system EARS, which had bid for the new party contract but lost out to Connect. This number of local parties declined steadily during the parliament, and the central party's influence on the target seats operation helped push any slow movers over to Connect.
- 10 For details on this, see Mark Pack, 'What went wrong with the Liberal Democrat polling and key seat intelligence?', revised August 2015: <http://www.markpack.org.uk/132249/what-went-wrong-with-the-liberal-democrat-polling-and-key-seat-intelligence/>.
- 11 For example, see the research by Phil Cowley and Rosie Campbell, using polling data from July 2013: <http://www.totalpolitics.com/opinion/416802/polling-not-love-actually.shtml>.
- 12 Another factor was the number of Liberal Democrat MPs retiring in 2015. See <http://nottspolitics.org/2014/07/29/lib-dem-incumbent-mp-retirements-could-cost-the-party-four-seats-in-2015-before-any-votes-are-cast/>.
- 13 The value of the key performance indicator (KPI) framework used to monitor seat progress and help determine allocation of resources is thrown into severe doubt by the 2015 results as seats which were consistently rated as performing in the top tier on the KPIs ended up being lost heavily.
- 14 On which the seminal work is Donald P. Green and Alan S. Gerber, *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout* (Brookings Institution, 2004).
- 15 For more details on this see Mark Pack, 'Constituency expense limits are dying off in the UK, but neither politicians nor the regulator will act', March 2015: <http://www.markpack.org.uk/130283/internet-speeds-up-the-killing-off-of-expense-controls-in-marginal-seats/>.