

Election analysis

Professor John Curtice examines the Liberal Democrat performance in the general election of June 2017.

The 2017 Election: A



THERESA MAY'S UNEXPECTED announcement on 18 April 2017 that she wanted to hold an early general election must have seemed to the Liberal Democrats at the time like a heaven-sent opportunity. The party's success in the Richmond by-election, held in December 2016, and some improvement in its position in the opinion polls after the June 2016 EU referendum suggested that its distinctive policy position on Brexit – that the UK should not leave the EU until a second referendum has been held on the outcome of the withdrawal negotiations – was capable of winning over some of the substantial body of Remain voters who are not reconciled to the prospect of the UK no longer being part of the European club. Consequently, the early election, called explicitly by the prime minister to secure a mandate for her vision of Brexit, looked like an unexpectedly early opportunity for the Liberal Democrats to reverse some of the catastrophic electoral damage the party had suffered two years previously in the 2015 general election.

Yet in the event the election, held on the 8 June, saw the party make very little progress. Indeed, at 7.6 per cent, the party's share of the Britain-wide vote was actually half a point below what the party secured in 2015. It represented the lowest share of the vote for the Liberals/Liberal Democrats at any election since 1970 – and in 1970 the party fought only just over half of all the constituencies, rather than, as in 2017, all bar three. Indeed, once we take into account the number of seats fought, the performance in 2017 was probably second only to the 1951 election in the league table of worst Liberal/Liberal Democrat performances. True, the party did secure a modest increase in its tally of seats, from eight to twelve, but, 2015 apart, this still left the party with fewer seats than at any election since 1970. No less than half of the seats the party was defending were actually lost, as was the by-election gain in Richmond. Meanwhile, although a collapse in UKIP support meant that the party was restored once more to its position as the third largest party in

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England, it still found itself conceding to the SNP the position of third largest party in the House of Commons.

Any analysis of the party's performance in the 2017 election is thus essentially a study in apparent failure – why did the party do little more than tread water rather than achieve a significant advance? Of course, explaining why change did not happen is more difficult than accounting for a trend that actually did occur. We have to try and identify what was missing in the campaign that might otherwise have made a difference, an inevitably somewhat speculative enterprise. Still, as we shall see, there is certainly no shortage of potential candidates.

The backdrop

After five years in coalition with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats' vote fell precipitously in the 2015 election from 23 per cent to just 8 per cent, with the number of seats falling from fifty-seven to eight. Many a voter never seemed to forgive the party either for forming a coalition in 2010 with the Conservatives in the first place or else for making a dramatic U-turn in the autumn of 2010 on the question of English university fees. Meanwhile, as the country headed immediately after the 2015 ballot into a referendum on its membership of the European Union, there was little immediate sign of recovery. The party's rating in the polls continued to hover at around the 8 per cent mark. At the same time, although, latterly at least, less unpopular than his predecessor, Nick Clegg, had been, the party's new leader, Tim Farron, seemingly struggled to make much of an impression on voters. Moreover, although the party was more successful than either the Conservatives or Labour in persuading its much-diminished band of supporters to vote to remain in the EU, it was still the case that as many as around one in four voted to leave.¹

However, in line with its long-standing position as the most pro-European of the parties in Britain, the party reacted to the narrow vote in favour of leaving the EU by adopting the position that the UK should only leave the EU following a second referendum held on completion of the

negotiation of the terms of the UK's withdrawal. If a majority of voters were to reject those terms, the UK would stay in the EU. That, of course, meant that those who voted against the proposed deal on the grounds that the terms were inadequate (rather than because they opposed withdrawal) would find themselves voting to stay in the EU. It thus looked like a device designed to favour the status quo – and the Liberal Democrats' preferred option – of EU membership. The party was evidently hoping and anticipating that this second referendum would serve to reverse the initial decision to leave the EU.

By the autumn this distinctive stance on Brexit looked as though it was beginning to reap dividends. The party's poll rating began to climb into double figures, albeit only just; this progress was both underlined and reinforced by the party's success in winning a by-election in Richmond Park – a seat in which it had long been relatively strong and where nearly three in four had voted to remain in the EU. The increase in support in the polls occurred almost wholly amongst those who voted to Remain, amongst whom, according to YouGov, support for the party increased from 13 per cent in the summer of 2016 to 19 per cent by January 2017. (In contrast, support amongst those who voted to Leave stayed constant at just 3 per cent.) This progress, which seemed to be made primarily at the expense of a Labour Party that had adopted a much more ambiguous stance on Brexit, was then maintained during the winter. By the beginning of April one-fifth of Remain voters in YouGov's polls said that they were now backing the Liberal Democrats.

True, the party was seemingly aiming for a niche market of those who were most opposed to leaving the EU. At the turn of the year, polls conducted by ComRes, Opinium and YouGov all suggested that only around a third of all voters – and no more than two-thirds of those who voted to Remain – supported the idea of a second referendum. But, if the party could attract the support of just half this group, that would enable it to double the share of the vote it won in 2015 and put it discernibly back on the road to recovery. Given many of these pro-second referendum voters were young, socially liberal graduates, a demographic

Left: Tim Farron with Layla Moran (candidate for Oxford West & Abingdon) and supporters, 3 May 2017 (photo: Liberal Democrats)

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group amongst whom the party has always performed relatively well, and given too that the party typically thrives on the oxygen of the extra publicity that it secures in a general election campaign, such an ambition seemed not unreasonable.

The campaign

But if this strategy was to work voters needed not only to approve of the party's position but also to recognise it. In this it is far from clear that the party was successful. Table 1 shows where, in the course of the election campaign, those who voted Remain thought the four main GB-wide parties stood on Brexit. Only just over a quarter of the Liberal Democrats' target audience recognised the party wanted a second referendum, albeit that another quarter recognised that it was opposed to Brexit. Meanwhile almost two in five (39 per cent) either felt that the party did not have a clear policy or said they were not sure what it was.

True, many a Remain voter was none too clear where Labour and the Conservatives stood either. But more Remain voters recognised that the Conservatives were in favour of a 'hard Brexit' and, equally, more such voters identified Labour with a soft Brexit position than stated that the Liberal Democrats were in favour of a second referendum. Given that the second referendum was meant to be the party's central message in the

campaign, this was potentially a serious weakness in its attempts to win over Remain voters.

Perhaps, just as importantly, Remain voters did not necessarily recognise where the party stood on one of the central issues in the Brexit debate, immigration. In the same YouGov poll, just 34 per cent of Remain voters said that the Liberal Democrats wished to maintain the current level of immigration, considerably less than the 45 per cent who reckoned that was where Labour stood, let alone the 62 per cent who associated the Conservatives with a reduction in immigration. No less than 48 per cent said that they either were not sure what the party's stance on immigration was or that it was not clear. It seems as though one of the central reasons why the party wanted the UK to stay in the EU – to retain freedom of movement – was not appreciated by many voters. In those circumstances, it is perhaps not surprising that the party's stance on Brexit did not have the resonance that the party anticipated.

In practice, of course, elections are rarely about one issue, as indeed Theresa May discovered to her cost during the election campaign. If they were to win voters over, the Liberal Democrats would need some other popular tunes too. These were largely notable by their absence.

In Table 2 we show how both Remain voters in particular and all voters in general reacted to some of the key proposals in the party's manifesto

Table 1: Perceptions of the Brexit stances of the parties amongst Remain voters (percentages)

	<i>Conservatives</i>	<i>Labour</i>	<i>Lib Dems</i>	<i>UKIP</i>
They are opposed to Brexit and would like Britain to remain in the European Union	4	12	26	1
They opposed Brexit and would like to have a second referendum once negotiations are complete	2	9	28	0
They accept Brexit, but would like Britain to have a 'soft Brexit' and retain the benefits of the single market	21	37	6	1
They support Brexit and would like Britain to leave the European Union completely and negotiate a new trade deal	41	4	1	70
They do not have any clear policy.	20	23	11	14
Not sure	11	15	28	14

Source: YouGov 9–10 May 2017

Table 2: Attitudes towards Liberal Democrat manifesto policies (percentages)

	<i>Remain voters</i>		<i>All voters</i>	
	<i>Good idea</i>	<i>Wrong priority</i>	<i>Good idea</i>	<i>Wrong priority</i>
Increase the basic rate of income tax from 20% to 21% and spend the money raised on the NHS and social care	66	22	56	28
Ban the sale of diesel cars and vans by 2025	45	36	35	42
Allow cannabis to be sold legally through licensed outlets	40	47	35	52
Hold a second referendum on the EU after negotiations are complete, to decide if Britain accepts the deal or wants to remain in the EU after all	58	31	34	54
Reduce the voting age to 16	42	47	29	60

Source: YouGov 18–19 May 2017

shortly after it was published in the middle of the election campaign. One proposal that does appear to have been relatively popular was to increase the basic rate of income tax by a penny in the pound in order to spend more on health, a proposal that was first aired at the party's autumn conference in 2016. Even so, it might have been thought to represent a rather sharp gear change for a party that had spent its time in coalition pushing for reductions in income tax. Otherwise, although rather more popular amongst Remain voters than amongst voters in general, none of the party's other policy positions was backed by a majority of voters. In contrast, when YouGov undertook a similar exercise in respect of the Labour manifesto, four of the six policies that were tested had more supporters than opponents, including increasing income tax on those earning more than £80K and nationalising some public utilities. The Liberal Democrats seem to have been outperformed by Labour when it came to finding a medley of popular policy tunes.

Meanwhile, elections are not just about policy. They are also about personnel. Britain's third party has long been reliant on charismatic leaders and effective communicators, such as Jeremy Thorpe, Paddy Ashdown and (in the 2010 election at least) Nick Clegg, to grab the attention of the media and thereby the public. However, Tim Farron struggled to make an impression. In five polls conducted by Opinium between the beginning of the year and the calling of the election, on average just 15 per cent said that they approved of his performance as Liberal Democrat leader, while 34 per cent indicated that they disapproved. A half simply said that they neither approved nor disapproved. The increased exposure that came with the general election did nothing to turn these numbers around. In eight polls that the company conducted during the election campaign, the proportion who told Opinium that they approved of Mr Farron's leadership simply oscillated between 14 per cent and 18 per cent and in the company's final poll stood at 16 per cent, little different from what it had been before the election was called. Meanwhile the proportion who said they disapproved, which varied between 35 per cent and 40 per cent and ended up on 37 per cent was, if anything, slightly higher than it had been immediately before the election. This was not a backdrop that was conducive to a Liberal Democrat revival.

The dynamics of the campaign

Indeed, far from reviving, the party's support actually fell back during the campaign. An initial average poll rating of 11 per cent had by the end of the campaign fallen to just 7 per cent, only a little below the party's actual tally in the ballot boxes of 7.6 per cent. This was the first time since 1987 that the party had seen its support end up lower at the end of an election campaign than it had been at the beginning. The drop was not the result of

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Leave voters taking fright at its support for a second independence referendum. According to a large poll conducted by YouGov immediately after the election, at 3 per cent the party's level of support amongst such voters was exactly the same on polling day as it had been when the election was called. Rather, the party lost ground amongst the very group to which it was trying to appeal, that is, those who voted to Remain in the EU. Just 12 per cent of this group voted for the party, well down on the 20 per cent who, according to YouGov, were minded to do so when the election was first called. ICM identified much the same pattern, with support for the party amongst Remain voters falling from 16 per cent in March and early April to 12 per cent during the last fortnight or so of the campaign.

It was Labour, not the Liberal Democrats, who gained ground amongst Remain voters during the campaign. When the election was called, just 35 per cent of Remain voters (according to YouGov) said they intended to vote Labour. By polling day that figure had increased to no less than 55 per cent. Although Labour also made gains amongst those who voted to Leave, the increase in support amongst this group, at eleven points, was little more than half the 20 point increase amongst Remain supporters. Moreover, Labour's successful pitch to Remain voters appears to have had a direct impact on Liberal Democrat support. At the outset of the campaign, just 11 per cent of those who said they voted for the Liberal Democrats in 2015 indicated that they would now vote Labour; by polling day, no less than 34 per cent had decided to make that switch. Equally, whereas when the election was called 13 per cent were minded to switch from having voted Labour in 2015 to voting Liberal Democrat this time around, in the event just 5 per cent did so.

In short, it was not just Theresa May's hopes for the election that were scuppered by the dramatic increase in Labour support during the 2017 election campaign – so also were those of the Liberal Democrats. Labour, who we have seen was quite widely regarded as being in favour of a relatively soft Brexit, made a successful pitch for the very kind of voter that the Liberal Democrats had been targeting. Indeed, it looks as though during the campaign Labour reclaimed from the Liberal Democrats much of the support amongst Remain voters that Jeremy Corbyn's party had seemed to lose to the Liberal Democrats during the previous autumn. The hopes generated by the Richmond by-election were well and truly dashed.

The outcome in perspective

Indeed, in the event, the party proved to be barely any stronger amongst Remain voters than it had been amongst such voters in 2015. According to YouGov the 12 per cent support that the party secured amongst Remain voters was just one point above what it had secured amongst the same

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group of voters two years previously, while the 3 per cent support registered amongst Leave voters represented just a two-point drop. Similar polling conducted on and around polling day by Lord Ashcroft suggests the party made even less relative progress amongst Remain voters. His data suggest the party had the same level of support, 14 per cent, amongst Remain voters as it had had in 2015, while its popularity slipped just a little, from 5 per cent to 4 per cent, amongst Leave supporters.

Much the same pattern emerges if we look at the party's relative performance in different kinds of constituency. On average its share of the vote fell back by 1.1 points in seats where it is estimated that 55 per cent or more of the EU referendum vote went to Leave, its vote dropped a little less, by half a point, in seats where the Leave vote was between 45 per cent and 55 per cent, while it just increased – by 0.3 of a point, in the most pro-Remain constituencies where Leave won less than 45 per cent. Although, as we shall see below, there were some kinds of pro-Remain constituencies where the party did make a notable advance, across Britain as a whole the party made no more than slightly more progress in Remain voting areas.

In other respects too, the party's vote looks much as it did two years earlier. There is, for example, little consistent evidence that it made particular progress in those demographic groups, such as younger voters and university graduates, where support for Remain was highest. True, Ipsos MORI's collation of all the polls they conducted during the election campaign suggests the party's vote increased by a point or two amongst the under-35s, while falling back slightly amongst those aged 45 and over, but none of the exercises conducted by Lord Ashcroft, Opinion or YouGov on or shortly after polling day replicate this finding. The party did perform relatively well amongst university graduates, but the 11 per cent support amongst this group registered by YouGov is exactly the same as the company obtained in an equivalent exercise immediately after the 2015 election – as is the 5 per cent support registered amongst those whose highest qualification is a GCSE or less. Equally all the polling evidence suggests that the party performed rather better amongst middle-class voters than their working-class counterparts, but again to no greater extent than it had done two years previously.

That said, the party did perform relatively well in seats with relatively large numbers of graduates. On average its vote increased by 1.6 points in constituencies where more than a third of the adult population have a degree (according to the 2011 census), whereas elsewhere it fell on average by just over a point. In part (though only in part) this reflects the fact that such constituencies were also more likely to have registered a relatively large Remain vote in 2016. In addition, as Table 3 shows, the party also performed relatively well in London and the South East – and to a lesser extent in the South West and the Eastern region too

– regions with relatively large numbers of graduates and of Remain voters (especially so in the case of London), though none of these regional differences can simply be accounted for by the distinctive demographic composition or referendum histories of the regions in question. These regional patterns help illustrate why all four of the seats that the party lost were in North West, Yorkshire or Wales, while five of the eight that it gained were in London, the South East and the South West, with the remaining three gains coming in Scotland where the party was able to profit from a sharp decline in SNP fortunes.

Gains and losses

However, the key to understanding why the party won some seats but lost others is to be found above all by looking at the political character of the seats in question. The first clue lies in the fact that all five of the gains that the party made in England were at the expense of the Conservatives while two of the three losses were to Labour. This suggests that perhaps the party prospered relatively well in constituencies where the Conservatives were strong. This is confirmed by Table 4 which breaks down the change in the Liberal Democrat vote between 2015 and 2017 by (a) the outcome of the EU referendum and who won the seat in 2015, and (b) the proportion of graduates and who won the seat in 2015. In both cases the party performed relatively well in seats that were being defended by the Conservatives as compared with those with a similar demographic mix or referendum vote being defended by Labour. However, this is above all the case in seats with a relatively large number of graduates and, above all, those with a large Remain vote in 2016. The party may not have advanced much in general in seats with large numbers of Remain voters, but it did do so in Conservative-held seats that contained many a Remain voter.

This distinction between Conservative and Labour held seats also proves to be important when we look at the impact of another phenomenon that we might expect to be important in accounting for where the party was and was not able to win. Votes won on the basis of the personal popularity of the local candidate have long been important to the party's ability to win and defend seats. Although in the event the personal popularity of its incumbent MPs only helped the party to retain a handful of seats in 2015,² the drop in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote in seats that it was defending at that election was still markedly lower than it was in seats where the party had put in a strong performance in 2010 but where the local party candidate was not the incumbent MP – in these seats the party's vote often plummeted.³ We thus might anticipate that in seats where the former incumbent Liberal Democrat MP was trying to regain a seat they lost in 2015 – as nineteen of them were trying to do – the party might

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Table 3: Liberal Democrat performance by government region

	% vote 2017	Change in % vote since 2015
Scotland	6.8	-0.7
North East	4.6	-1.9
Yorkshire & Humberside	5.0	-2.1
North West	5.4	-1.1
East Midlands	5.3	-0.3
West Midlands	4.4	-1.1
Eastern	7.9	-0.2
London	8.8	+1.1
South East	10.5	+1.0
South West	15.0	-0.1
Wales	4.5	-2.0
Great Britain	7.6	-0.5

Note: The party did not contest two seats in the South East (one in 2015) and one in Yorkshire & Humberside

Table 4: Change in Liberal Democrat share of constituency vote 2015–17 by proportion graduates and EU referendum vote

Mean change in % Liberal Democrat vote 2015–17	Con seats	Lab seats	All seats
<i>Leave vote 2016</i>			
Less than 45%	+5.0	-1.6	+0.3
45–55%	-0.1	-1.3	-0.5
More than 55%	-0.5	-2.0	-1.1
<i>Graduates</i>			
Less than 25%	-0.5	-1.9	-1.1
25–33%	-0.4	-1.6	-1.1
More than 33%	+3.4	-1.3	+1.6
<i>All seats</i>			
	+0.3	-1.8	-0.5

Con seats: Seats won by the Conservatives in 2015. Lab seats: Seats won by Labour in 2015.

The presence of a substantial Remain vote, the existence of a large number of university graduates, and the presence of a current or former Liberal Democrat MP all only proved conducive to a relatively strong Liberal Democrat performance in seats where the party was in competition locally with the Conservatives.

perform relatively well, thanks to the ability of the ex-MP to register once again their local, personal support (especially as they had only stopped being the local MP quite recently). Equally, the party might also be expected to perform relatively well in the seven constituencies where the current incumbent Liberal Democrat MP was seeking re-election. Conversely, the party might struggle to maintain its vote in seats where a former incumbent Liberal Democrat MP was no longer trying to retain their seat after having lost it in 2015, or indeed in the one seat (Southport) that was no longer being defended by the existing Liberal Democrat MP.

However, these expectations were only partially realised (see Table 5). In seats where the party was battling things out locally with Labour, both incumbent and ex-incumbent Liberal Democrat MPs struggled to maintain their share of the vote. Indeed, in seats that the party lost to Labour in 2015, the Liberal Democrat vote fell heavily irrespective of whether or not the former Liberal Democrat MP was trying to regain the

seat. In contrast, in seats where either a current or former Liberal Democrat MP was doing battle with a Conservative challenger, the party's vote on average increased by between three (in the case of incumbent MPs) and six (ex-incumbent MPs) points. In both cases this performance was much better than it was where a new candidate was attempting to recapture a seat from the Conservatives; in these instances the party's vote on average fell back slightly (and, indeed, especially so – by 3.2 points – where the incumbent Liberal Democrat MP had defended the seat in 2015), while in the one seat (Southport) in which a new candidate was attempting to defend a seat the party already held, the party's vote fell back by 4.6 points.

So, the presence of a substantial Remain vote, the existence of a large number of university graduates, and the presence of a current or former Liberal Democrat MP all only proved conducive to a relatively strong Liberal Democrat performance in seats where the party was in competition locally with the Conservatives. Perhaps this means that the party was at least able to win over

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Table 5: Mean change in Liberal Democrat share of the constituency vote 2015–17 by status of Liberal Democrat candidate and the Liberal Democrats' principal challenger

Mean change in % Liberal Democrat vote 2015–17	Principal challenger		
	Conservatives	Labour	All seats
Seat being fought for Lib Dems by:			
Incumbent MP	+3.3	-3.6	+0.4
Ex-incumbent MP	+5.7	-11.2	-1.4
New candidate in seat lost in 2015	-0.6	-10.6	-4.7
New or old candidate in seat not won in 2010	+0.1	-1.2	-0.3

Principal challenger: the party that won the seat in 2015 or which was second to a Liberal Democrat victor at that election.

Table 6: Mean change in parties' share of the vote 2015–17 by status of Liberal Democrat candidate and the Liberal Democrats' principal challenger

Seat being fought for Lib Dems by:	Change in % vote since 2015 in Lib Dem/Con battlegrounds			Change in % vote since 2015 in Lib Dem/Lab battlegrounds		
	Con	Lab	Lib Dem	Con	Lab	Lib Dem
Incumbent or ex-incumbent MP	+4.6	+4.1	+5.2	+4.9	+14.9	-9.5
New candidate in seat won in 2010	+7.8	+8.5	-0.8	+6.8	+16.2	-10.6
New or old candidate in seat not won in 2010	+4.5	+10.1	+0.1	+5.8	+10.6	-1.2

some disaffected, pro-Remain Conservatives, in places where it was locally credible? However, Table 6 casts doubt on this explanation. On average the Conservative vote increased just as much in Liberal Democrat/Conservative battleground seats where an existing or former Liberal Democrat MP was standing as it did in Conservative-held seats that the Liberal Democrats did not win in 2010. Rather it is Labour that made relatively little progress in seats where the Liberal Democrats were primarily in competition with the Conservatives. At just over four points the average increase in the Labour vote in these seats was some six points below what it was in seats that the Liberal Democrats did not hold before the 2015 election.

There were then, it seems, some circumstances in which the Liberal Democrats were able to stem the advancing Labour tide: that is, seats where potential Labour supporters faced a choice between voting for a Labour candidate who was starting in third or fourth place and a relatively well-known local Liberal Democrat standard bearer who might be able to defeat the local Conservative. Here the Liberal Democrats were able to take advantage of their strategic position locally (and to do so even in seats where there was a large Leave vote in 2016). Further analysis also suggests that the party's relative success more generally in Tory held seats in which there was a relatively large Remain vote and/or many graduates was also founded on being able stem the extent of the Labour advance locally. But the fact that the party's relative successes was often the product of a weaker Labour performance underlines our earlier argument that the party found itself at this election primarily in a battle for votes with

Labour, a battle that in all but limited circumstances the party lost.

The ability of ex-MPs to stem the Labour tide locally was crucial to the party's ability to recapture Kingston and Eastbourne. It was also central to the party's success in gaining a strongly pro-Remain seat, Oxford West and Abingdon, that had been lost as long ago as 2010. The advance in the Labour tide was also stemmed in Twickenham, also recaptured by an ex-MP, Sir Vince Cable, though in this case what proved to be a fall in Conservative support (a common occurrence in seats with a large Remain vote) would have been enough to deliver the seat to the Liberal Democrats anyway. This is also the position in Bath where the seat was regained even though the ex-MP was not defending the seat (but, equally, had not done so either in 2015).

Of course, the party was not just attempting to win seats from the Conservatives and Labour. In Scotland all of its hopes rested on winning seats from the SNP, while Plaid Cymru were the principal challenger in the party's remaining Welsh fiefdom, Ceredigion. In both cases their nationalist opponents shared the Liberal Democrats' antipathy to leaving the EU. In practice, current and former Liberal Democrat MPs neither did particularly well nor particularly badly in these circumstances; on average their vote fell by 1.3 points, just a little below the 0.6 point increase the party enjoyed in nationalist-held seats in Scotland and Wales that it did not hold before 2015 – but well above the average 9.8 point drop that the party suffered where a former incumbent was no longer representing the party in a seat lost to a nationalist in 2015. But given that SNP support was falling quite heavily, even hanging on to the

party's 2015 vote could be enough to win back a seat. It is this pattern that accounts for the party's ability to gain three seats in Scotland (one secured by an ex-MP and another by an ex-MSP) on the back of what were no more than modest increases in support, while a seven point drop in support in Ceredigion was enough to ensure the seat was lost to Plaid Cymru.

Conclusion

The outcome of the 2017 election must be regarded as a considerable disappointment for the Liberal Democrats. Far from marking the beginning of a recovery from the severe electoral fall-out from the 2010–15 coalition, in many respects the party actually went backwards. Its attempt to win over Remain voters who were upset at the prospect of Brexit by promising a second referendum largely fell flat. Too few voters were aware of a policy stance that, perhaps, focused too much on process rather than substance. Meanwhile, the party had little else to offer that the electorate regarded as attractive, and was hampered by a leader who, despite his best endeavours, proved unable to make much impact on the electorate. As a result, many of the voters whose support the party hoped to gain switched to a Labour Party that was thought to favour a soft Brexit, had a range of popular policies, and a leader who did succeed in showing during the election campaign that perhaps he was not so bad after all. Only in very limited circumstances – seats where Labour locally was weak and where there was a large

pro-Remain constituency and/or one a current or former Liberal Democrat MP was standing – did the party enjoy some apparent measure of success in stemming the Labour tide. Still, that limited success did help provide a silver lining in the form of a slightly enlarged parliamentary party, including the swift return to the Commons of three MPs with extensive experience of government, Sir Vince Cable, Edward Davey and Jo Swinson. It is in their hands that responsibility for the very considerable task of reviving the party's fortunes now lies.

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- 2 J. Curtice, S. Fisher and R. Ford, 'Appendix 1: The results analysed', in P. Cowley and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2015* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).
- 3 J. Curtice, 'The Liberal Democrats and the 2015 election', *Journal of Liberal History*, 88 (2015), pp. 64–9.

Mothers of Liberty Women who built British Liberalism

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