interventionist on economic issues. He also reminded the meeting that 'left-wing' voters were as likely as those on the right to back Brexit. Voters may, then, have seen the choice through a rather different prism to the one that is familiar to many Liberal Democrats.

By cutting across the traditional left–right divide, Brexit was a difficult issue for the major parties, Sir John said. 'Brexit played to your strengths,' he added. 'Opposing Brexit was a social liberal issue, a home-made issue for you.' But the party must face the harsh reality that a huge opportunity was squandered. Perhaps that is the greatest disappointment for the Liberal Democrats.

Neil Stockley is a former Policy Director for the Liberal Democrats and a long-standing member of the History Group.

Reviews

The shock of coalition

Edward Fieldhouse, Jane Green, Geoffrey Evans, Jonathan Mellon, Christopher Prosser, Hermann Schmitt, and Cees van der Eijk, *Electoral Shocks: The volatile voter in a turbulent world* (OUP, 2020)

Review by **Duncan Brack**

UNDERSTANDING WHAT HAPPENED during the 2010–15 coalition government, what the Liberal Democrats did and what they could have done differently, and how the electorate reacted, is essential to the party's future. Assuming it has any future prospect of a coalition, the party needs to manage the next one differently, whether through the negotiations leading up to it or the management of it or both.

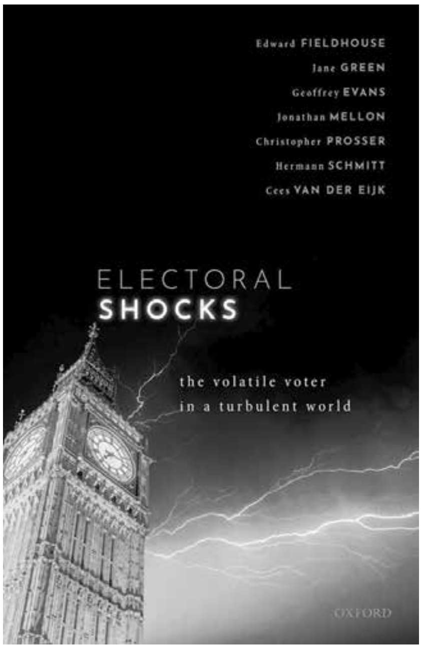
This book, *Electoral Shocks*, provides an essential part of the background. Based primarily on British Election Study (BES) data, it offers a new perspective on British elections, focusing on the role of 'electoral shocks'. It defines these as major political decisions, important events or political outcomes with three defining characteristics: they represent an abrupt and unanticipated change, usually coming at least partly from outside the political system; they are highly salient, so they are noticeable even to people not interested in politics and cannot be easily ignored; and they are relevant to party politics, so have the potential to change how parties are perceived.

Electoral shocks affect electoral politics in three main ways: they change how important or salient different issues are to voters; they change the extent to which different parties are seen to be competent at handling different aspects of government, such as the economy, or immigration; and they change the social or political image of the parties by altering who and what the different parties are seen to represent.

The five electoral shocks the book analyses are the rise in immigration after 2004, particularly from Eastern Europe; the global financial crisis of 2007–08 and its aftermath; the coalition government of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats between 2010 and 2015; the Scottish independence referendum in 2014; and the Brexit referendum in 2016.

The book's definition of an electoral shock is not totally convincing. I would have thought that Jeremy Corbyn's election as Labour leader would qualify, but it does not because 'the circumstances that enabled his victory originated from within the Labour Party' and should therefore be considered 'part and parcel of normal party politics' (p. 34). But arguably, the relevant parties' decisions to enter coalition in 2010 and to hold the two referendums of 2014 and 2016 also all originated within political parties – granted, they were clearly affected by external circumstances (Labour's defeat in 2010, UKIP's rise before the Brexit referendum), but, then Corbyn's election was affected by Labour's unexpected defeat in 2015 and the coalition's legacy of austerity.

Be that as it may, this is a fascinating book, and an interesting new approach to analysing election outcomes – particularly those of 2015 and 2017, on which it mainly concentrates. It demonstrates how these five shocks all changed the landscape of party competition. For example, although the nationalist side lost the 2014 Scottish referendum, the campaign and its outcome enabled the SNP to consolidate the pro-independence vote, involving detaching a sizeable number of voters from Labour; it demonstrated to these voters that they cared more about independence than they did about class (or whatever they thought the Labour Party stood for). Similarly, the Brexit referendum destroyed the case



for voting UKIP (or, later, the Brexit Party) and enabled the Conservatives to attract leave supporters – again, detaching a sizeable chunk of the Labour vote (Corbyn's incompetence played a major part too) who cared more about Brexit, and what they thought Brexit meant, than about class.

None of this would have been possible – or, at least, not to the same extent – if these shocks had not taken place against a background of increasing voter volatility, i.e. voters' preparedness to change the parties they voted for. The 2015 and 2017 general elections displayed the highest levels of individual-level voter volatility seen in modern times. In 2015, 43 per cent of people voted for a different party than they did in 2010, and there was the highest share of the vote on record for parties other than the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats. By contrast, 2017 saw the highest Conservative plus Labour share since 1970; 33 per cent of people changed their vote from 2015; and there was the highest switch of voters from Labour to Conservative and Conservative to Labour ever recorded in BES data. Across the three elections between 2010 and 2017, only 51 per cent of voters remained loyal to their original parties. This is a huge change from British politics as it was in the 1950s and 1960s, and still a substantial one from more recent political history.

The chapter of most interest to *Journal of Liberal History* readers will of course be that on the 2010–15 coalition and its impact on the Liberal Democrat vote in 2015. Although junior partners in coalition governments often come off badly – and this is probably exacerbated in an adversarial system like the UK's – the collapse in Liberal Democrat support in 2015 was particularly dramatic because of the nature of the party's vote. This had two main characteristics.

First, it was only very weakly partisan. In the 2010 election – at 23 per cent, the party's best performance since it was founded – only 30 per cent of Lib Dem voters identified very or fairly strongly with the party, compared to two-thirds of Labour voters and over half of Tory voters, and half of the party's voters didn't identify with the Lib Dems at all. This included a significant number of tactical voters who identified with other parties but were prepared to vote for the Lib Dems because of where they lived. In 2010, the majority of these were Labour identifiers – who, unsurprisingly, were not exactly overjoyed to see their votes put the Tories into government. But this weak level of partisanship was more serious than just the loss of tactical voters; the Liberal Democrats possessed a much smaller base of voters prepared to give their party the credit when things went badly: 'if the Liberal Democrats had started with a stronger partisan base in 2010 it is likely that their role in the coalition would have been seen favourably by a larger number of people and that more of their voters would have weathered the storms of coalition partnership' (p. 119).

Second, even those voters who did identify with the Liberal Democrats were mostly left-wing or centre-left in their political views – an outcome of the position systematically developed by the party's first two leaders, Paddy Ashdown and Charles Kennedy, after the formal abandonment of 'equidistance' in 1995. This was different from the Liberal Party and the Alliance premerger which, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, were seen to be closer to the Conservatives; in 1979, even after the Liberals had kept the Labour Party in power for eighteen months through the Lib–Lab Pact, voters still saw the party as slightly closer to the Tories. It was the most economically left-wing Lib Dem voters who most turned against the party in 2015, and who were most prone to see the coalition's record through the lens of Labour partisanship.

This combination of factors meant that the Lib Dems lost the bulk of their 2010 support within the first six months of the election, even before the tuition fees debacle. It was simply the fact of entering coalition with the Tories that did the damage rather than any individual policy or measure. And the party was then unable to recover from this position because it essentially became invisible; although plenty of Lib Dem policies made it into the coalition agreement, many of them were not on issues voters much cared about, the Lib Dems ceded control of the main planks of economic policy – which voters definitely did care about – to the Conservatives, and they controlled no high-profile spending departments. BES data showed that across six different policy areas three to four times as many respondents attributed responsibility to the Conservatives for policy successes than to the Liberal Democrats. Even Lib Dem partisans attributed more responsibility to the Tories in four of these six areas.

These two factors – the loss of support after the formation of the coalition and the party's invisibility in government – then reinforced each other to destroy the Liberal Democrats' credibility in terms of winning elections. The worse they did in local, Scottish and Welsh elections and in the opinion polls, the less they looked likely to be able to win in future elections, and the fewer tactical voters they attracted, and the more they lost, in 2015. The picture was largely the same in 2017, when the party was able to retain only 50 per cent of those who had voted for it two years before; less than a fifth of the party's supporters in 2017 had voted for them in 2010. The authors conclude that this was largely a problem with credibility (the election came too soon for much of a post-coalition recovery to have taken place), and also with the party's stance on Brexit alienating its more socially conservative tactical supporters, rather than with Tim Farron's weaknesses as leader.

The book does not extend to include the 2019 election, and its partial Liberal Democrat recovery amongst remain voters (see John Curtice's analysis in *Journal of Liberal History* 105, winter 2019–20), but even without that, all is not necessarily doom and gloom for the party. As the authors observe, it seems unlikely that voter volatility will fall, though there is some sign that voters are becoming more polarised – i.e. they may be more prone to change their vote but they are also more likely to see parties (at least, the big two) as more different from each other. In addition, other political identities

– mainly remain / leave – may be becoming more important. The future, therefore, is highly uncertain, and there is still plenty of opportunity for further electoral shocks to disrupt the established political landscape.

With respect to the potential for future coalitions, the authors conclude that the outcome of the 2015 election does not show that, as Disraeli put it, 'England does not love coalitions', but that the voters did not like that specific coalition. That was partly due to the fact that Lib Dem voters didn't like Conservatives, but also because Lib Dem participation in coalition didn't obviously deliver anything much that they cared about. As David Laws' and others' recollections of the 2010–15 government show, the Conservatives rarely missed a chance to bring in measures that directly benefited their own voters and to veto things that would hurt them. In contrast, Liberal Democrat ministers governed with a comprehensive disregard to what their voters were likely to want and think – probably at least partly because Lib Dem politicians are more likely to see politics as a competition of ideas rather than of social groups. As one Liberal Democrat minister put it in 2011, 'The Lib Dem base has been public sector workers, students and intellectuals. We have contrived to fuck them all off.'

Arguably, if the party had stuck to its manifesto commitment to abolish tuition fees – which was clearly identified amongst the public with the Liberal Democrats, and was a popular policy particularly with university graduates, one of the groups most strongly voting Lib Dem – instead of insisting on its manifesto commitment to raise the income tax threshold – which was not strongly identified with the party and in practice benefited only the Conservatives – the 2015 election might not have proved such an electoral shock. Liberal Democrat participants in any future coalition need to pay as much attention to politics as to policies.

Duncan Brack is the editor of the Journal of Liberal History.

Analysing the 2015 and 2017 elections

Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2015* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)
Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh *The British General Election of 2017* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018)
Review by **Michael Steed**

The cluster of UK general elections of 2015, 2017 and 2019 may appear to future historians as essentially one momentous juncture, comparable with that of the 1922, 1923 and 1924 elections. These, starting with the removal of the last Liberal prime minister and ending with the establishment of a new two-party dominance, transformed Britain's political landscape. Superficially, the 2015–19 trio confirmed the existing big-two-plus-others system, after a reshuffle of the smaller parties' cards. Dig deeper and maybe, just as the 1922–24 trio replaced an earlier political alignment with one based on socio-economic class, the three recent elections have dumped class and substituted a new mix of age and cultural values as the denominator of the British party system. If so, that alone would be a profound, once-a-century political realignment.

Or, perhaps, future historians will add in the first Scottish independence referendum of 2014 (surely not the last), along with the second European referendum of 2016, to make a set of five seismic popular votes which shook the United Kingdom: a shaking that will maybe finish off the Union – or perhaps just end the extraordinary dominance that the Conservative Party has exercised since the Disraelian realignment of 1874. Indeed, might a future Trevor Wilson be debating whether the Conservatives' demise following their last-ever victory of December 2019 was accident, old age, or the inevitable outcome of the suicidal insanity that gripped the party in 2010s?

Whatever the perspective, all such historians will need to consult these two comprehensive and meticulous accounts of the 2015 and 2017 British general elections. Their strength is that each looks at one specific election framed by the expectations and actions of those who took either part in that event or were assessing and defining its significance as it was happening. The authors follow a pattern laid down originally in 1945 and developed by many authors since then, most notably David Butler: what were known as the Nuffield election studies when I contributed (1964–2005) now proclaim themselves the Palgrave Macmillan election studies, these two being the nineteenth and twentieth in that series.

They also mark a turning point in authorship. Butler retired with the 2005 election; by then his co-author for nine volumes, Dennis Kavanagh, had taken the brand forward. Philip Cowley has now moved firmly into the saddle. A more earthy style, a decision to quote the exact words of interviewees under the stress of party infighting or unexpected setbacks (no expletives deleted), and quirky speculative asides have spiced up the Butler offering of clinical detachment. Anthony Howard reviewed Butler's 1970 election volume under the headline 'Taking the life out of politics',[1] somewhat unfairly – but it was a widespread view among the commentariat. Cowley may be criticised for using 'industrial language', but not for what Howard termed Butler's 'rigid and austere standards'.

These volumes also now appear later in the electoral cycle than Butler's used to. I well recall the rush to get my material on the 28 February 1974 election into print in time to inform commentators on the expected second election, in October 1974. Butler