

# So How Well Did We Do?

*A critical look at the Liberal Democrat performance in the 1997 election;  
by John Curtice.*

Taken by surprise at the scale of 'New Labour's' election victory, few media commentators have paid much attention to the Liberal Democrats' achievements in the 1997 general election. Yet with 46 seats, the party emerged from the election with its largest Westminster army since 1929. It was little short of the kind of outcome of which the SDP/Liberal Alliance had dreamed in the heady days of the early 1980s. So just what should we make of the Liberal Democrat performance in 1997? And where might the party go from here?

There is certainly much for the Liberal Democrats to cheer about in the election result. Some key elements in the party's election strategy were clearly successful. It benefited from tactical voting, aided and abetted by the strategy of targeting. Local election success helped to contribute to parliamentary success. And in apparently finally breaking the seemingly impregnable barrier posed by the single-member plurality electoral system, the party has helped to raise new questions about the value of a system which it has long wanted to change.

It is important to be aware just how much the party's haul of seats was far greater than could have been anticipated. If the movement of votes had been the same in every constituency, the Liberal Democrats would have won 28 seats, not 46. But the movement of votes was anything but uniform. Rather, voters tended to opt for whichever opposition party they reckoned could best defeat the local Tory.

The pattern is quite clear from Table 1. Here we look at what happened in those seats where the Tories started off with at least a third of the vote, and divide these seats up according to their tactical situation. (Seats where the Tories started off with less than a third of the vote experienced a

systematically lower swing against the government which has nothing to do with tactical voting.) It is easy, however, to miss the evidence of tactical voting. After all, Labour's vote rose by more than the Liberal Democrats' did in every kind of seat. But what matters is that Labour's vote rose on average by 2–3 points less in those seats where the Liberal Democrats started off in second place and not more than 30% behind Labour, while the Liberal Democrat performance was 2–3 points better. This clearly suggests that some voters in these seats who would otherwise have voted Labour opted instead to back the Liberal Democrats in order to defeat the Conservatives.

Not that tactical voting happened everywhere where the Liberal Democrats started off in second place. In those seats where the Conservatives had more than a 30 point lead, voters appear to have decided that the Liberal Democrats had little chance of winning. In seats too where Labour started off not far behind the Conservatives, such as Aberdeen South and Bristol West, voters often appear to have decided that Labour rather than the Liberal Democrats had the best chance of winning locally. Even amongst those seats where the Conservative lead was less than 30 points, tactical voting was by no means universal. It was evident in most seats where the Liberal Democrats started off less than 15% behind, but thereafter it was to be found in some places and not in others.

Where Labour started off second, in contrast, tactical switching from the Liberal Democrats to Labour occurred almost everywhere, irrespective of how far behind the Labour party started. Evidently voters took account of the position of the two opposition parties in the polls and came to the conclusion that Labour were worth backing almost anywhere. But they generally needed more convincing about

the effectiveness of voting Liberal Democrat. There is a clear lesson here; tactical voting is more difficult to stimulate if you are down in the national polls.

But what helped to convince voters that the party was indeed strong enough locally to defeat the incumbent Tory? Here two strategies, one traditional in the party, the other rather less so, both appear to have played their role. Tactical voting was notably more prevalent in those constituencies which had been targeted for up to four years beforehand by providing national support for the local campaign. In those

**Table 1: Tactical Voting**

Tactical Situation	Change in % voting			No. seats
	Con	Lab	LD	
Lab seats; Con >33.3%	-12.6	+9.6	-0.3	107
Con/Lab seats	-12.6	+13.0	-3.0	181
LD seats; Con >33.3%	-10.6	+9.6	+1.6	8
Con/LD; Con lead <30%	-11.8	+6.5	+1.9	80
Con/LD; Con lead >30%	-13.5	+10.0	-0.8	60
Three-way marginals	-11.6	+10.9	-2.3	18

*(Three-way marginals: Con 1st, LD 2nd in 1992, but Lab within 6% of LDs)*

seats where the party started off less than 30% behind the Conservatives, its vote rose by 4.0% on average in those seats it targeted, but fell by 2.3% elsewhere. Targeted constituencies were strongly encouraged to emphasise in their literature that the party was ahead of Labour locally, and it is notable that it was Labour rather than the Conservatives who under-performed in these seats.

Good local election performances also seem to have advanced the party's credibility as an effective challenger. For example, in the South of England, the party's local election record in the last parliament was generally far better south and west of a line from Bristol to Oxford to Brighton than immediately to the north and east of it. That pattern was also evident in the general election. In those seats in the south-western corner where the party started off between 15% and 30%, its vote rose on average by 0.4%; to the north and east it fell by 1.9%. Beyond the south of England, some of the party's most spectacular gains, such as Harrogate and Sheffield Hallam, followed upon significant local election achievements.

But if voters' willingness to vote tactically was influenced by the party's position in the national polls, then the party's success in raising its support during the campaign from just 11-12% at the beginning to 16% by the end (and 17% on polling day) also played an important role in the result. True, Liberal Democrat support often rises during an election campaign, but there is no inviolate rule that says this is always so. In 1987, for example, an ill-directed campaign stymied by the differences between Steel and Owen saw support fall. But in emulating the 1992 campaign with a pledge to increase taxes and spend more on education, the Liberal Democrats again cast doubt on the popular contention that voters will not vote for tax increases. Labour's pledge not to raise income tax rates failed to stop a significant slide in its support during the campaign.

Of course, one reason why in the past Liberal Democrat votes have not been translated into seats is that the party's vote was geographically evenly spread. Tactical voting and targeting have helped to counteract that tendency. Liberal Democrat support now varies more from one constituency to another than at any time since the Liberal Party first fought elections on a nation-wide basis in 1974. Meanwhile, the Conservatives' support has become more evenly spread, as its vote fell most in 1997 where it was previously strongest. Conservative support is now only a little less evenly spread than Liberal Democrat support.

These changes are helping to undermine one of the traditional defences of Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system. That system is meant to enable voters to choose

**Table 2: The Relationship between Seats and Votes**

Swing to Con	% Votes		Seats			
	Con	Lab	Con	Lab	LD	Other
0%	31.5	44.4	165	419	46	29
2%	33.5	42.4	187	403	41	28
4%	35.5	40.4	220	374	37	28
6%	37.5	38.4	252	345	33	29
6.5%	38.0	37.9	259	338	33	29
7.2%	38.7	37.2	270	329	32	28
8%	39.5	36.4	280	320	31	28
9.8%	41.3	34.6	301	300	29	29
10%	41.5	34.4	306	295	29	29
11.5%	43.0	32.9	330	272	27	30
12%	43.5	32.4	341	263	26	29
13%	44.5	31.4	352	254	24	29

(Others include 18 seats elected in Northern Ireland.)

between alternative governments. That implies that it should treat the two main parties, at least, in an even-handed fashion. But in 1997 the electoral system exhibited a strong bias against the Conservatives and in favour of Labour. This is shown in Table 2, which shows what the outcome in seats would be at the next election if there was a uniform swing from Labour to the Conservatives across the whole country. On this basis the Conservatives would secure an overall majority only if they were ten points ahead of Labour. Labour, in contrast, could still win an election while more than 1% behind the Conservatives. Such figures will raise new questions about the single-member plurality electoral system at a time when the government is committed to holding a referendum on its future.

Table 2 does, though, also indicate one reason for caution amongst Liberal Democrats about their 1997 performance. If it had been the Conservatives who had won 44% of the vote, and Labour were only on 31%, then even with votes geographically distributed as they actually were in 1997, the Liberal Democrats would have won just 24 seats. The party is still heavily dependent for its success on it being the Conservatives rather than Labour who are unpopular. Labour/Liberal Democrat contests barely exist. There are just seven seats where the Liberal Democrats came second and were within 30% of Labour in first place.

Moreover, while local election success may have had some beneficial impact on the party's ability to win parliamentary votes, it is also clear that voters are still happier to vote Liberal Democrat in local elections than in parliamentary elections. In much of England and Wales county council elections were also held on May 1st. The party may have lost 200 seats, but it still did better in the local elections than in the parliamentary contest. In a dozen constituencies where the results were collected by *The*



*Economist*, and where the local elections could be compared unambiguously with the parliamentary outcome, the Liberal Democrats on average won no less than 10% more of the vote in the local than in the parliamentary elections.

But there are other, tougher, questions to be asked about the Liberal Democrat performance in 1997 too. The party may have turned an inauspicious poll rating at the beginning of the campaign into a record haul of seats by the end, but that begs the question of why the party started off in such a weak position in the first place. After all, the party had achieved significant electoral progress when the Conservatives were removed from office in both 1964 and 1974. Why could it not repeat that performance when fighting the most unpopular Conservative government in electoral history? Why did the party instead see its national vote fall for the third election in a row, ending up with its second lowest share of the vote since 1974?

It is worth bearing in mind that the Liberal Democrats' prospects did not always look so bleak during the last parliament. After all, the party won both the Newbury and the Christchurch byelections in 1993. Those victories saw the party's national poll rating rise to well above 20%. But then along came Tony Blair, and the Liberal Democrats' poll rating fell. Indeed, it was the Liberal Democrats, not the Conservatives, who suffered from the advent of 'New Labour'.

Why was this so? It is worth remembering how the party reacted to Tony Blair's accession to the Labour

leadership. It largely welcomed it. It then got mired in incessant press questioning about whether the party was going to end its policy of 'equidistance' between Conservative and Labour – and took 12 months to find the answer. Little wonder the press declared the party both indecisive and irrelevant.

The contrast between the party's tactics then, when its support fell, and its stance during the election, when its support rose, could not have been more dramatic. Whatever the degree of agreement between the two parties on constitutional reform, the Liberal Democrats did not hesitate to attack Labour's reluctance to tax or spend. And despite the conventional wisdom that voters will not vote for higher taxation, Labour's support fell as that for the Liberal Democrats rose.

We should not, of course, jump to conclusions. But the contrasting experiences of 1994 and 1997 certainly raise some important questions. Was attacking 'New Labour' a more effective strategy for winning Liberal Democrat votes than embracing it? Might the party's share of the vote in the 1997 election been significantly higher if the former strategy had been adopted earlier? True, perhaps the closer relationship with Labour made it easier for Labour voters to switch to the Liberal Democrats. But it could also have been true that it was the Liberal Democrats' attacks on Labour for being too soft on tax and spend that made it easier for Labour partisans to switch to the Liberal Democrats and live with their conscience. As yet, answers to these vital questions awaits analysis of survey data from the British Election Study, which is only now becoming available.

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Of course we cannot ignore the wider picture either. Closer relations with Labour have inaugurated a process that could yet lead to the introduction of proportional representation for Westminster elections. The omens are certainly more promising than many believed possible, with proportional representation promised by the Labour government for European elections and seats at the Cabinet Committee table for Liberal Democrats. Even if it proved an ineffective electoral tool, closer relations may yet prove an important strategic lever. But the onus will be on the party leadership during the course of this parliament to deliver this benefit. Otherwise, attacking looks like good sense.

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