

THE 2010

HAS THE MOULD OF BRITISH



ELECTION

POLITICS FINALLY CRACKED?

Of one thing we can be sure: the 2010 election will acquire a large entry in the annals of Liberal Democrat history. The campaign came alive for the party when, following the first-ever televised prime ministerial debate in the UK, the party's poll rating reached the 30 per cent mark for the first time during the course of a general election. However, on polling day itself the party's hopes were dashed, and, instead of making a breakthrough, it actually found itself with slightly fewer seats than before. **John Curtice** analyses the 2010 election.

Nick Clegg and Vince Cable face the cameras in Bradford, 13 April 2010 – between them, David Ward, who went on to win the Bradford East seat (photo: Liberal Democrats)

DESPITE DISAPPOINTMENT on the night, the overall outcome was a hung parliament, and, following largely unexpected concessions from the Conservatives on electoral reform, Liberal Democrat MPs found themselves sitting on the Treasury front bench for the first time since 1945. After more than sixty years in the political wilderness, the party acquired a role on the centre stage of British politics.

Less certain, however, is what that entry on the 2010 election will eventually say about the significance of these events. Will it state that the 2010 election was the decisive moment when the mould of Britain's two-party political system was finally cracked? Or might it record, instead, that the election was but a brief moment of apparent success that ultimately, much like the polls during the campaign, proved to be a mirage – or even a poisoned chalice? Which of these entries comes to be written will, of course, depend in part on how the electorate reacts to the record of the coalition government and of the Liberal Democrat ministers within it. Nevertheless, there is much that can already be revealed by taking a closer look at the rollercoaster ride that the 2010 election proved to be for the party.

Let us begin with that 'surge' in party support in the campaign opinion polls. Table 1 provides details of the average rating of the parties during each of the key phases of the 2010 election

campaign, beginning with the budget unveiled by Alistair Darling shortly before the election date was formally announced. Even before the first leaders' debate on 15 April there had been some sign that the party might be managing to push its support above the 20 per cent mark, a level below which it had been stuck for much of the previous five years. Even so, the impact of that first debate on the party's poll rating is clear. In the week following the first debate, the party's average rating was nine points higher than it had been the week before. With the party three points ahead of Labour and only two behind the Conservatives, it appeared that for the first time ever in polling history a UK general election was a three-horse race. Inevitably there was much talk of a Liberal Democrat 'breakthrough'.

However, there were always warning signs in the polls that this sudden surge of support might not be sustained through to polling day. More than one poll found that those who said that they were going to back the Liberal Democrats were also more likely than Conservative or Labour supporters to indicate that they might change their mind by the time they came to vote. Liberal Democrat support also appeared to be relatively high amongst those who said they did not vote last time – including many younger people – and the strength of whose commitment to vote this time might be doubted. Meanwhile fewer voters said they thought that the

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	Con %	Lab %	LD %	Others %
Post-budget	37	30	19	14
NI/C4 debate	38	30	20	12
After Easter	39	30	19	12
Manifesto launches	37	31	21	11
Post 1st leaders' debate	32	27	30	11
Post 2nd leaders' debate	34	27	29	10
Post 3rd leaders' debate	35	27	28	10
Final polls	36	28	27	10

Chart based on all published polls, conducted wholly or mostly between the following dates: Post-budget, 25–29 March; NI/C4 debate, 29 March–2 April; after Easter, 4–10 April; manifesto launches, 10–15 April; post 1st leaders' debate, 15–22 April; post 2nd leaders' debate, 22–29 April; post 3rd leaders' debate, 29 April–3 May; final polls, 3–5 May.

First party/second party 2005	Mean change in Liberal Democrat share of vote since 2005
Conservative/Labour	+3.3
Labour/Conservative	+0.6
Conservative/Liberal Democrat	+0.5
Labour/Liberal Democrat	+0.4
Liberal Democrat/Conservative	-0.4
Liberal Democrat/Labour	-0.9
ALL SEATS	+0.8

Seats where any party other than Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat was first or second in 2005 are not shown separately, but are included in the calculation for 'All Seats'.

Liberal Democrats had the best policies on any particular issue than said they were going to vote for the party. In truth, the surge appeared heavily dependent on Nick Clegg's newfound personal popularity and his apparent ability to tap into the disenchantment with politics many people felt in the wake of the MPs' expenses scandal. These always looked like potentially relatively fragile foundations on which to build a breakthrough

Certainly, as polling day approached it was becoming increasingly clear that the surge was slowly receding: Nick Clegg proved unable to outshine his rivals in the second and third leaders' debates, and after each one the party's support fell by a point or so. By the time that the final opinion polls were published on polling day, it appeared that the party was at risk of losing the race for second place in votes.

And so proved to be the case. At 23.6 per cent, the party's share

of the vote cast across Great Britain represented just a one-point increase on its tally at the last election in 2005. Far from challenging for second place in votes, the party still trailed Labour by as much as six points. Meanwhile, with fifty-seven members, the parliamentary party now contained five fewer members than it did immediately after the 2005 contest. After the high expectations generated by the campaign, the eventual outcome came as a bitter blow.

Indeed, it was a blow more bitter than might reasonably have been expected even on a pessimistic reading of the opinion polls. Even if the trend of declining support had continued further in the final hours of the campaign, the party might still have expected to win at least a quarter of the vote. The extent of the discrepancy between the eventual outcome and the final polls clearly raises questions as to whether the opinion polls exaggerated the scale of the surge in the first place.

There is certainly a degree of evidence that some of the weighting of their samples undertaken by the polls to improve their accuracy may have helped contribute to their apparent overestimating of Liberal Democrat support. However, it also seems that a significant number of voters who had told the pollsters that they did not know how they were going to vote eventually swallowed their reservations and voted Labour anyway, thereby helping to open up the gap between the two parties. In any event, it seems likely that the annals will have to record that, although during the 2010 campaign the Liberal Democrats mounted what at the time appeared to be the most serious challenge yet to the dominance of the Conservative and Labour parties, in reality that challenge – built on the back of a just a single television performance – was based on support that was too soft, sudden and insubstantial.

Yet there is also a danger that the high expectations generated by the opinion polls lead us to undervalue what the Liberal Democrats' achieved in 2010. Set against the longer-term historical record, the performance still appears highly impressive. The party secured the second highest share of the vote to be won by the Liberal Democrats or any of its predecessor parties at any election since 1923 – only the Liberal/SDP Alliance vote of 26 per cent in 1983 outranks it. Similarly, although the party's tally of fifty-seven seats was five less than in 2005, it still represented the party's second highest total since 1929 (when, leaving aside two university seats, the Liberal Party also won fifty-seven seats). In short the party's performance in 2010 was one of its best since it lost its status as the principal competitor to the Conservatives in the 1920s.

That such a performance should have been greeted with an air of disappointment is in truth an indication of the significant longer-term progress that the party has made and is now regarded as part of the country's political fabric. The party has now won over fifty seats at three general elections in a row. Between 1945 and 1992 it had never managed to win as many as two dozen.

Although the first-past-the-post electoral system may still make life difficult for the party, the 2010 result confirms not only that it is able routinely to garner somewhere between a fifth and a quarter of the vote, but also that it is better able than in the past to turn those votes into seats.

Nevertheless, it might still be asked why the party ended up with fewer seats than in 2005, even though it won slightly more votes. After all, if the changes in the shares of the vote won by the different parties had been uniform across the country as a whole, the Liberal Democrats would have secured sixty-four seats, two more than in 2005, so votes were certainly not converted into seats as effectively as five years ago. Table 2 gives us an initial clue. It shows that the party's vote typically advanced most strongly in seats where it was least likely to bring the party a reward, that is in constituencies where it started off in third place. Meanwhile, the party's vote actually fell back somewhat in those seats it was attempting to defend. Such a pattern is of course the very opposite of what is needed if votes are to be turned into seats.

The party struggled above all in those seats that were not being defended by an incumbent Liberal Democrat MP. In the ten seats where this was the case (including York Outer, a new seat that it was estimated would have been won by the Liberal Democrats if it had been contested in 2005), the party's vote fell on average by no less than 4.7 points. Six of these seats were lost. In the remaining fifty-two seats that the party was defending, the party's vote increased a little on average, by 0.6 of a point. Only seven of these fifty-two seats were lost, albeit including the most spectacular defeat of all, of Lembit Opik in Montgomery, a seat that the party had previously only lost once in 130 years.

This loss of support where the incumbent MP stood down suggests that the personal local popularity of individual candidates still plays an important role in enabling the party to win and retain seats. Other evidence points to the same conclusion. The one group of Liberal Democrat MPs that did manage to increase their

support quite substantially comprised those who first captured their seat in 2005 and were thus defending it for the first time. On average their vote increased by 3.1 points – doubtless many of them had managed to use their first few years as the local MP to boost their local profile and thus their support. Only one such 'new' MP was defeated: Julia Goldsworthy in Camborne & Redruth, where a 1.6 point increase in her vote proved insufficient to stem an even stronger pro-Tory tide.

Equally, a glance at the eight seats that the party gained in partial compensation for the thirteen that it lost also indicates the importance of personal local popularity in achieving success. Two of these 'gains' were in fact achieved by existing Liberal Democrat MPs – Lorely Burt in Solihull and Sarah Teather in Brent Central – who, on account of boundary changes, found themselves fighting seats that it was estimated the party would not have won in 2005. Both secured substantial increases in their support of 3.5 and no less than 13.1 points respectively. Meanwhile five of the six remaining gains were secured by candidates who had also stood locally in 2005 (if not also earlier) and who doubtless had devoted considerable time and effort to getting themselves known locally. Strong performances by the party leader on television may help create a favourable backdrop for achieving electoral success, but it appears that the party cannot afford to forget the importance of sustained local activity if votes are to be turned into seats.

In any event, it is now clear why the party ended up with fewer seats at Westminster. Well-established sitting Liberal Democrat MPs whose personal vote was first accrued some time ago were typically able to do little more than hold their own – and not always that – while the party often lost ground where the incumbent MP stood down and his or her personal vote was lost. Meanwhile, scattered local successes elsewhere proved insufficient to compensate for the seats that were lost as a consequence.

However, apart from a tendency for the party to advance less

where it could profit most, Table 2 suggests there was another notable variation in the pattern of the Liberal Democrat performance – that the party found it easier to gain ground in areas of Conservative strength than in those where Labour was relatively strong. This was indeed the case. Apart from doing relatively poorly in those seats where Labour were weakest of all in 2005 (most of which were places where the Liberal Democrats are relatively strong) the stronger Labour were in 2005, the less likely it was that the Liberal Democrat vote increased between 2005 and 2010. Thus, in seats where Labour won between 20 and 40 per cent of the vote in 2005, the Liberal Democrat vote increased on average by just under two and a half points, while in seats where Labour won more than 40 per cent in 2005, the increase in the Liberal Democrat vote averaged just under half a percent. The party performed especially poorly in one traditional Labour stronghold in particular – Scotland. Here the party's vote actually fell back by no less than 3.7 points, while, in sharp contrast to the position in England and Wales, Labour's vote increased by 2.5 points.

This is the very reverse of what happened in the 2005 election. Then, the party advanced most strongly in areas of relative Labour strength, areas that had hitherto often been relatively barren for the party and a pattern that helped it make record gains at Labour's expense at that election. Voters in areas of Labour strength who were disaffected with Labour demonstrated an unprecedented willingness to vote Liberal Democrat – and especially so in seats with relatively large numbers of Muslims and students, as the issues of Iraq and tuition fees in particular took their toll on Labour support. While not all the party's relative advance in Muslim and student seats in 2005 was reversed, most of the relative progress secured in Labour territory was in fact lost in 2010.

As a result, although the party made five gains at Labour's expense in 2010 – more than it had done in all elections between 1945 and 2001, though less than the eleven secured in 2005 – the

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party still finds itself fighting the Conservatives locally in more places than it fights Labour. Whereas there are now forty seats where the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives share first and second place and are within 10 per cent of each other, there are only twenty-six where Labour and the Liberal Democrats are in the same position – even though nationally Labour performed poorly in 2010. The party thus remains more vulnerable to a Conservative than to a Labour advance in the polls.

Yet it is with the Conservatives that the party now shares power, following the failure of any party to secure an overall majority for only the second time in the post-war era. It was an outcome that few had anticipated. Whatever else the two parties had in common, there appeared to be one major obstacle to the possibility of the two parties doing a deal: the Conservatives' apparently resolute defence of the first-past-the-post electoral system that the Liberal Democrats have long regarded as unfair. Labour, in contrast, had signalled a renewed interest in electoral reform, with a promise in its manifesto to hold a referendum on the introduction of the alternative vote. Meanwhile many a Labour and Liberal Democrat activist feels that the two parties have a natural affinity that some hope might eventually result in some kind of 'realignment of the left', the first stage of which might be the formation of a coalition government between the two parties.

However, the parliamentary arithmetic presented David Cameron with a dilemma. His party might be the clear 'winner' of the election, but Labour and the

Liberal Democrats between them potentially had just enough seats together with their allied parties in Northern Ireland to be able to sustain a government. Between them these parties had 319 seats, only four short of an effective majority given the failure of five Sinn Fein MPs to take their seats. True, such a government would be reliant on the support of the Scottish and Welsh nationalists, Caroline Lucas of the Greens and the Independent MP, Lady Hermon, but all of them had good reason to prefer such a government to a Conservative one – and especially so if it were to be committed to significant electoral reform.

Faced with the danger of being denied power, Mr Cameron proved unexpectedly flexible on his attitude to the electoral system. His opening offer to the Liberal Democrats – of a commission on electoral reform – may have been obviously too little to form the basis of an agreement, but it signalled an appreciation of the importance of the issue to the Liberal Democrats. Eventually, after a long weekend of negotiations, the Conservatives signed up to the Labour proposal that they had hitherto opposed: a referendum on the alternative vote, a referendum that has now been scheduled to take place at the beginning of May next year. In contrast, Labour's divisions on the subject of electoral reform were laid bare as a number of its prominent members, most notably David Blunkett and John Reid, indicated on the air waves that they felt doing a deal with the Liberal Democrats on electoral reform was a price not worth paying in order to stay in power.

'The more they argue, the more they sound the same' – Nick Clegg in the first TV debate, 15 April 2010; and voters show their approval

Two key lessons from the party can be drawn from this experience. The first is that its opportunity to exercise influence does not simply depend on how many MPs it has, but also on the balance of its opponents' forces. The party's influence is at its maximum when not only does no single party have a majority, but Conservative and Labour have roughly the same number of MPs such that a deal with either party would produce an overall majority. The outcome of the 2010 election was far from perfect in that regard – the arithmetical foundations of any Labour/Liberal Democrat government would undoubtedly have been fragile – but it was sufficiently close to give the party more leverage than it has ever had before in the post-war period.

Secondly, however, being able to exercise such leverage implies a willingness to strike a deal with either Labour or the Conservatives – and not to privilege a prior preference to do a deal with one rather than the other. In other words, the party has to accept that it is a 'hinge' party that sometimes does a deal with Labour, sometimes with the Conservatives – and does not regard coalition as the first phase in some form of realignment of either the 'right' or the 'left'.

It is with this logic in mind that the value of the deal on electoral reform with the Conservatives has to be judged. There is no doubt that, if implemented, the alternative vote would produce far from a proportional outcome, and still leave the Liberal Democrats at some considerable disadvantage in turning votes into seats. Taking into account the evidence on the second preferences of

voters collected by ComRes for *The Independent* shortly before polling day, it can be estimated that if the system had been in place in 2010, the party would still only have won some seventy-nine seats, only twenty-two more than it secured under the current system, and just 12 per cent of the total seats in the Commons.

Even so, the potential impact of the alternative vote on the party's bargaining power is considerable. If we look further at what might have happened if that system had been in place in 2010, the Conservatives, with 281 seats, would not have been far ahead of Labour on 262. On these figures the Liberal Democrats would have been able to form a majority government in collaboration with either of its two bigger rivals. So introducing the alternative vote could well have a bigger impact on the Liberal Democrats' future prospects than immediately meets the eye.

This perhaps is even more clearly the case if we consider what the Liberal Democrats might do with such bargaining power. One obvious option would be to press for yet further electoral reform to something more clearly proportional than the alternative vote. That suggests that switching to the alternative vote may be no more than a staging post in a move towards a more proportional system. Viewed in that light the outcome of the referendum vote next May would certainly seem to be crucial.

Yet curiously this may not be the case after all. For we also have to consider why first past the post failed to deliver David Cameron his majority in the first place. Was it simply an accident that is unlikely to be repeated any time soon? Or did it signal a more profound change in British politics, whereby hung parliaments are likely to be more common even if first past the post remains in place?

We have already noted the long-term growth in Liberal Democrat representation in the House of Commons. The party is not alone in its challenge to the Conservative and Labour domination of the Commons. Before the 1970s, typically only two or three independent or minor party MPs were elected. At each of the last four elections, there have been

between twenty-eight and thirty. So, together with the representation secured by the Liberal Democrats, it has become the norm for the Commons to contain some eighty to ninety MPs belonging to parties other than Conservative or Labour. That in itself has made hung parliaments more likely.

However, the ability of first past the post to generate an overall majority for either Conservative or Labour also depends on there being a plentiful supply of seats that are marginal between those two parties. If a small lead for one of those parties in votes is to be transformed into a lead in seats that is big enough to give it an overall majority, then many a seat needs to change hands between those parties as a result of the swing of the national pendulum. However, the number of such seats fell markedly in the 1970s, primarily because the northern and more urban half of Britain became increasingly Labour and the southern and more rural half more Conservative, leaving fewer and fewer seats potentially representative of the national mood. The trend was reversed somewhat when New Labour had some success in the 1990s in chasing southern voters, but after the 2010 election the number of marginal seats has fallen once more to around half the level it was in the 1950s and 1960s.

The combination of fewer marginal seats and more third-party MPs has profoundly undermined the ability of first past the post to generate overall majorities. This can be seen by looking at the range of results that would produce a hung parliament if we assume that support for the Liberal Democrats and other smaller parties remains as it was in 2010, and then investigate what the outcome in seats would be as a result of various uniform national swings from the 2010 result between Labour and the Conservatives. Such an exercise reveals that any outcome between an 11.2-point lead for the Conservatives and a 2.7-point lead for Labour would produce a hung parliament.

This range is, of course, asymmetrical. It is currently harder for the Conservatives to secure a majority than Labour. This reflects a 'bias' in the system that arises for

a number of reasons – the average electorate in seats won by the Conservatives is higher than in those won by Labour, as is the turnout, while the Conservatives are also somewhat less successful than Labour at winning seats by small majorities. This bias may be reduced somewhat at the next election if the new government is successful in implementing its aim of reducing the disparity in the size of constituencies. But while such action may make it somewhat easier for the Conservatives to win an overall majority in future, equally it will become more difficult for Labour to do so. The overall width of the range of results that would produce a hung parliament is unlikely to be affected – and would encompass more or less any reasonably narrow Conservative or Labour lead in votes.

So the hung parliament in 2010 was not a one-off accident. It was the product of long-term and now well-established changes in the electoral geography of Britain. As a result, even if the alternative vote were not to be introduced, hung parliaments could well still be quite common in future – potentially giving the Liberal Democrats new opportunities to exercise leverage to have the system changed even if the vote next May is lost.

The 2010 election undoubtedly contained its disappointments and setbacks for the Liberal Democrats. It was a salutary reminder of the limitations of what can be achieved with a successful national election campaign and of the continued importance of long-term activity by popular candidates and MPs in their constituencies. The party still finds it harder to mount a challenge in Labour territory than in Conservative seats. But at the same time it was an election that demonstrated how the first-past-the-post system has now become significantly less effective at denying the party leverage. Meanwhile, limited though the reform might at first appear, introducing the alternative vote would increase that leverage yet further. There does indeed now seem to be a substantial crack in the mould of British politics.

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