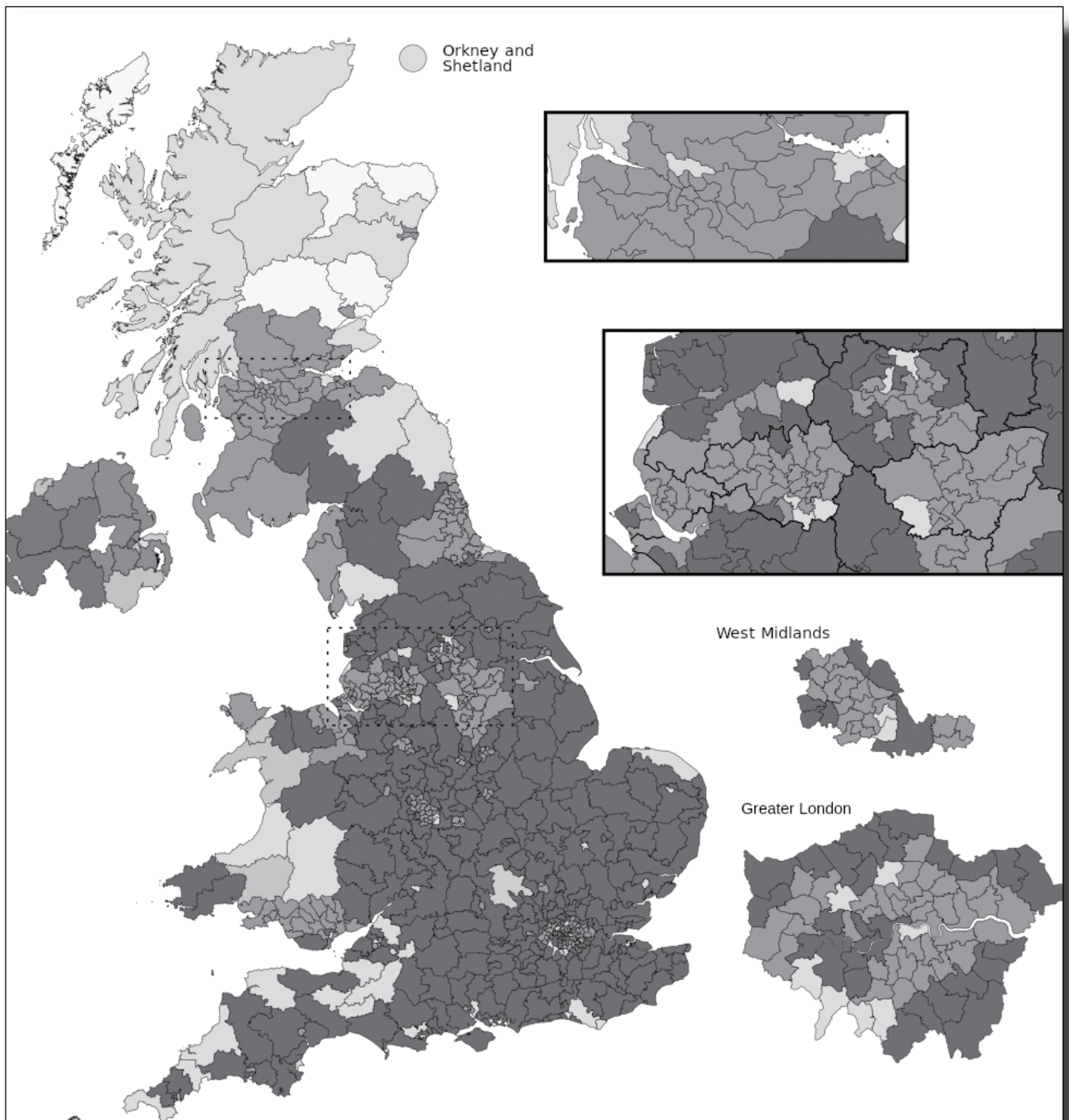


WHO VOTES FOR THE SOURCES OF ELEC



LIBERAL DEMOCRATS? ELECTORAL SUPPORT

Over the years it has been surprisingly difficult to get to grips with the question of who votes for the Liberal Democrats. On the one hand the party has been disadvantaged by an electoral system that tends to make it a sideshow in too many constituencies. On the other the party has benefited from some spectacular by-election victories and its record of keeping those seats has been remarkably good up to now. In social terms it is hard to see the Liberal Democrats as a class-based party, but the common view of the party as a recipient of random votes from all classes cannot be upheld.

Andrew Russell

examines who votes for the Liberal Democrats.

Left: the UK's political map after the 2010 election.

GEOGRAPHICALLY THE PARTY inherited from the Alliance an even national share of the vote but prospered only after it was able to efficiently concentrate campaign resources on heartland and expansion areas at the turn of the century. The Liberal Democrats have always had popular leaders at the time of general elections – in fact Paddy Ashdown, Charles Kennedy and Nick Clegg were all the most popular (or at least the least unpopular) of all three party leaders at certain points of the campaigns of 1992, 2005 and 2010. Moreover, the party has developed policies that have been popular with the electorate, yet at times popular leadership and popular policies have been insufficient to persuade large numbers of the electorate to vote for the party. At the centre of the question of who votes for the Liberal Democrats and how has the profile of the party's electorate changed since 1988 is the struggle for credibility. More than their competitor parties, the Liberal Democrats have been forced to fight for every vote in every ward in every constituency because their starting point has been – and remains – weak.

In charting the dynamics of Liberal Democrat support since the formation of the party we will sketch some of the bases of electoral support for the party. In order to do this we will analyse results from the period of the Liberal–SDP Alliance and even from the old Liberal Party, since the Grimond revival and community politics are both important in explaining how Liberalism retained a foothold in the electoral landscape of Britain and both

provided a foundation for party advance.

Traditionally Liberal voting has been thought of as relatively indistinct in social terms. The Liberals, Alliance and Liberal Democrats all made a virtue of being fairly classless in their approach to politics, so it is not surprising that third-party voting is often thought in this way. As the third party in a two-party system, the security of the Liberal Democrat vote is not assured and unlike the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales the Liberal Democrats cannot rely on an extreme concentration of support to protect the heartland vote geographically. The party has often benefitted from protest voting which is by its nature volatile and the Liberal Democrats have found it difficult to appeal to a large section of society even when they apparently share some of the party's core values.

We will approach this analysis by looking at the social and political basis of the Liberal Democrat vote. On the way we will look at the social profile of Liberal Democrat voting in terms of social class, education and geography. Politically we will look at the nature of electoral campaigning, the party's ideological position in relation to other parties and the difficulties of firstly bridging the credibility gap caused by being the third force in British politics and then of being the minor party in a national coalition.

The dynamics of the Liberal Democrat vote

We will begin by attempting to map out the electorate that the

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party inherited and the change in the party's electoral fortunes since the 1987 general election.

The first thing to say about the Liberal Democrats and the party's key electoral support is how little progress has been made since the last election of the Alliance in 1987. In that election the Alliance received 23 per cent of the popular vote, in 2010 the Liberal Democrats 24 per cent. Of course the major difference in the party's electoral performance in the intervening quarter of a century has been its ability to concentrate support in winnable seats. So while the Alliance received over 7 million votes – 23 per cent of the popular vote – the Liberal party and SDP won a grand total of 22 seats. The 2010 general election returned fifty-seven Liberal Democrats (and even that was retreat from the sixty-two seats from 2005) from 6.8 million votes.

The social profile of the Liberal Democrat vote

Class and Liberal Democrat voting
One of the commonly assumed features of the Liberal Democrat vote is its classless nature. In truth the party – and its predecessors, the Alliance and the Liberal Party – recruited disproportionately from the better-off sections of the electorate. Even in 1987 more than a quarter of the third-party vote was drawn from the ABC1 classes

compared to less than a fifth from the more plentiful DE categories.

Nevertheless the decades of class and partisan dealignment created opportunities for the third party to claim new voters. The fragmenting of the council estates and the trade unions meant that the semi-automatic link that many voters had to the Labour party was disrupted, and the expansion of the affluent working class meant that many socially mobile voters were up for grabs.

Since the 1980s, social change in Britain might be said to have played into the party's electoral fortunes, since the decoupling of class attachments to the Conservative and Labour parties has coincided with the expansion of an affluent middle class.

In the 1990s it became clear that the profile of the typical Liberal Democrat voter was someone who looked like a Conservative in social status but was closer to Labour attitudinally,¹ but these individuals were not in plentiful supply. Hence, as Russell and Fieldhouse note, the party must look to issue-based mobilisation. However, although appeal to voters' beliefs and policy preferences means their votes are likely to be more volatile than the party would want, there are certain societal groups where liberal values might flourish.

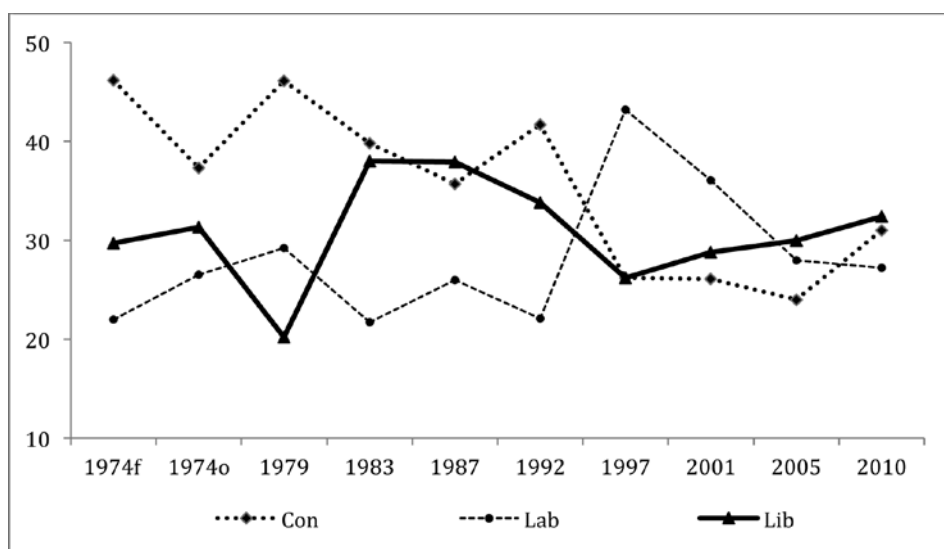
Education and Liberal Democrat voting
The traditional view of Liberal voting as coming from no single

section of the electorate has long been recognised as misplaced. As Curtice points out: 'Support for the party is not classless, but is distinctly stronger amongst the educated middle class than in the less well educated classes.'² Given this, the expansion of university education since the 1990s and parallel embourgeoisement of British society might have enabled further gentrification of the Liberal Democrat vote. If the expansion of higher education has altered the class boundaries for a large slice of the British electorate, this might have provided an inbuilt advantage for the party that was already disproportionately popular with degree holders.

In 2005 and 2010 the Liberal Democrats were actually the party of choice for those voters with a university degree (Figure 1). By 2010 nearly one-third of all voters with a university degree chose the Liberal Democrats, making them the party for graduates. Although this represents an achievement for the party, a longer view reveals the real story – that since the 1980s graduates have turned away from the Conservatives. In fact, amongst voters with a university degree, the Liberal Democrats still fared worse in 2010 than the predecessor Alliance did in 1987. Whereas 38 per cent of voters with a degree voted either Liberal or SDP in the 1987 general election compared to 36 per cent for the Conservatives and 26 per cent for Labour, only 32 per cent of degree holders voted Liberal Democrat in 2010. In truth, the real story of graduate voting is the vacillating fortunes of both Conservative and Labour parties among this group (as the profile of the group has dramatically transformed itself) rather than a positive endorsement of the third party.

Nevertheless the party did benefit from the extension of access to higher education. In many ways this is not surprising, since the link between education and liberalism is well established.³ It is also possible that the party appeals to those liberal-minded middle classes traditionally disinclined to vote Labour because of their class background, or simply that the Liberal Democrats tend to be the credible opposition to the Conservatives in so many seats where those with higher education choose to live.

Figure 1: Vote choice of degree holders in Britain, 1974–2010



Source: British Election Study series, cross-sectional data.

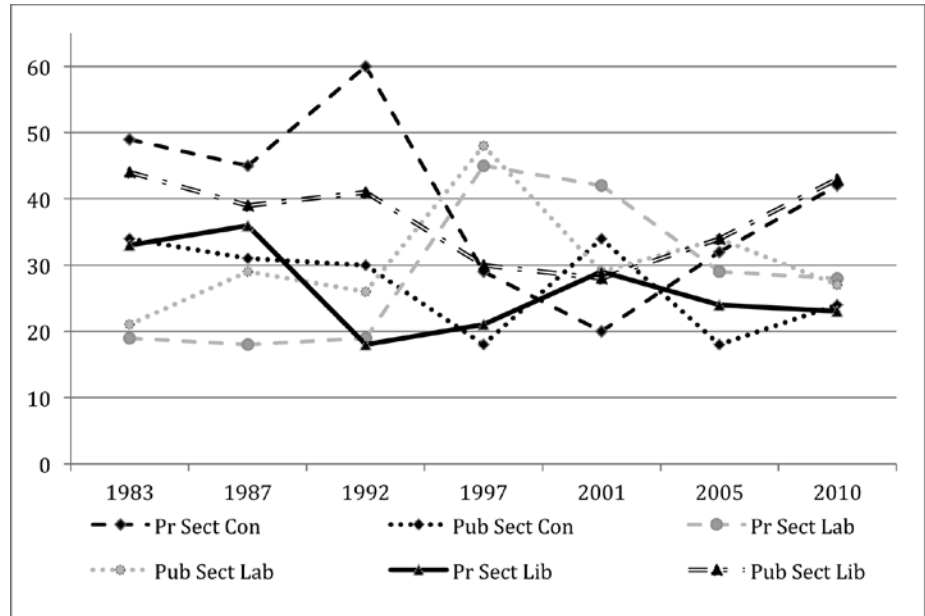
Figure 1 demonstrates the voting pattern of degree holders and shows that the third party has performed well within this group ever since the Liberals managed to field a candidate in most constituencies in February 1974. Although the Alliance was marginally the party of choice for degree holders by 1987, by 2001 the Liberal Democrats were comfortably out-polling the Conservatives within this group (who themselves were beginning to represent a sizeable section of society). Comparing degree and non-degree holders shows that the Liberal Democrats gained between 10 and 15 per cent more votes from those with a university qualification.

Linking education to employment sector also sees the emergence of interesting patterns (Figure 2). The Liberals have traditionally recruited particularly well among university graduates with public sector jobs. In fact, between 1983 and 1992 the party won the largest share of the vote amongst this section of the electorate. By 2005 and 2010 the Liberal Democrats had a distinct advantage among public sector graduates despite falling behind both Conservatives and Labour among graduates with private sector jobs. Russell and Fieldhouse report that this profile of voters that the Liberal Democrats could appeal to and places where the party might thrive was well known to party activists, who often talked of targeting university lecturers and teachers and seats characterised by health service employment and community voluntarism.⁴

Of course, one of the dangers for the Liberal Democrats of the 2010 coalition could therefore be that the post-crash government strategy has directly marginalised those in the public sector. Since the 2010 election the Liberal Democrats have had to try to engage with a new narrative of public thrift and responsible expenditure while trying to maintain their advantage among professionals employed in the very sector hit hardest by public spending cuts.

If the third party has always enjoyed a relative advantage among graduates, in the twenty-first century the party developed policies designed to appeal to undergraduates as well. The pursuit of the 'student-plus' audience was so

Figure 2: Vote of degree holders by employment sector, 1983–2010 (per cent)



Source: British Election Study surveys 1983–2010

successful that by 2005 the Liberal Democrats had won parliamentary seats in Cambridge, Oxford, Bristol, Ceredigion, Leeds and Manchester (although no further wins took place in student seats in 2010 despite the no tuition fees pledge, and Oxford West and Abingdon was lost to the Conservatives). In 2010 the Liberal Democrats averaged 31 per cent of the vote in those parliamentary constituencies where full-time students amounted to more than 10 per cent of the electorate. Of course the real problem here is that, despite the expansion of higher education, there are so few seats where the student vote is particularly influential on the electoral outcome: only 43 of the current configuration of 650 constituencies have student populations of over 10 per cent. Furthermore, many students may also be registered in their family home constituency or be disinclined to vote in any case, so although the party enjoyed a relative advantage in student seats, it does not seem sufficient to engineer many victories in itself.

Of course, since 2010 the relative advantage that the Liberal Democrats had among graduates may have been decimated due to the undoubted damage done to the party's reputation by the raising of tuition fees by the coalition government. A Populus poll in February 2014⁵ reported that while those

with a university degree or higher degree represented 46 per cent of prospective Liberal Democrat voters, fewer than 10 per cent of graduates were actually choosing the Liberal Democrats.⁶ We should be wary, naturally, of comparing poll evidence with actual votes, but there is nevertheless a stark warning here to the party. Since entering the coalition in 2010, the Liberal Democrats have remained a party of the university educated, but the university educated have not remained Liberal Democrats.

Religion and Liberal voting

The link between Liberal voting and Nonconformist religious observance in Britain is well established.⁷ The party's traditional heartlands were often associated with Methodism and non-unionised agriculture labour and the link with Nonconformist communities and Liberal Democrat voting has had an enduring legacy at the aggregate level if not at the individual level.

The link between Nonconformist religious denominations and Liberal voting was clearly demonstrated by Russell and Fieldhouse.⁸ In both the 1987 and 1997 general elections the third party performed significantly better amongst Nonconformist than Anglican (or Church of Scotland) voters, who seemed more likely to opt for the Conservatives. In Roman Catholic

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communities there was a clear and strong bias towards Labour (although this was often also highly dependent on class profile).

In more recent times the pertinence of Christian denominational differences to British voting behaviour has clearly receded, so that in the twenty-first century there is little merit in the party trying to build an electoral strategy based on Nonconformist voters. Indeed so few citizens seem to identify themselves as Nonconformists that it would be surprising if the denominational distinctions in the Christian church had an independent effect on voting patterns. Nevertheless the major legacy of the Liberal Nonconformist vote seems to be that the Liberal Democrats established themselves as a credible party in those places where Nonconformists used to live – and as a result the Liberal Democrat vote might be more durable in those areas than one might otherwise expect.

As the influence of a traditional confessional cleavage has diminished, it might be that Britain's more contemporary religious differences find expression in the electoral battleground. Labour has clearly been associated with ethnic minority voting since the 1950s and 1960s (although, once more, this may have been primarily an expression of social class and exclusion

rather than religiosity). However, the events after 11 September 2001 made it seem possible that the Liberal Democrats could appeal to a new and significant section of the UK electorate – Muslim voters,

The Liberal Democrats' unequivocal opposition to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 enabled the party to exploit disenchantment with Labour amongst Muslim communities – a traditional electoral stronghold for Labour. In 2005, the Liberal Democrat vote share in those seats with a Muslim electorate of more than 10 per cent had improved on average by 9 per cent on 2001.⁹ Even then, coming from such a poor starting position this upturn in Liberal Democrat voting only delivered two Westminster seats (Brent East and Rochdale). Furthermore, in many ways the 2005 general election was a high-water mark for the Liberal Democrat targeting of Muslim voters. By 2010 the Liberal Democrats were finding it even harder to access the Muslim vote (partly due to the decreased salience of opposition to the war, and possibly in part because of the lack of natural fit between liberal values and the conservative religious values embodied in many Muslim communities). At the 2010 general election, in the thirty-nine parliamentary constituencies where Muslim voters amounted to more than 10 per cent

of the electorate, the Liberal Democrats averaged nearly 21 per cent of the vote – a fall of nearly three-quarters of a per cent overall – as the shift towards the Liberal Democrats from Labour among Muslim voters seemed to slow down or reverse.¹⁰

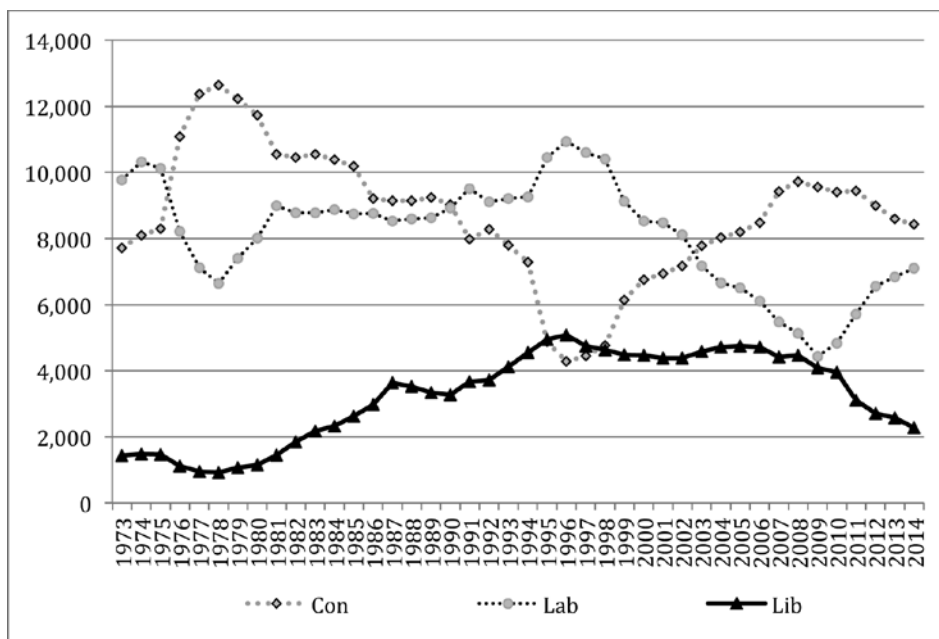
The geographic profile of Liberal Democrat voting

Probably the greatest achievement of the Liberal Democrats in the last twenty-five years has been to gain parliamentary representation in every region of Britain (although the only East Midlands seat, Chesterfield, was lost in 2010). The party has done this by concentrating its vote in winnable seats, usually by converting local election success into a wider framework and seeing success spill over into parliamentary seats. The contagion theory of Liberal Democrat success is a seductive one,¹¹ but it should not obscure the sheer hard work that the party had to put into its campaigning efforts.¹²

Having started by noting the similarities between the contemporary Liberal Democrats and the Alliance, it should be stated that in terms of electoral geography the party is very different from the Alliance, which had a habit of coming second in all regions and winning none. This enabled the tremendous advances at Westminster in 1997 where a deterioration of the popular vote nevertheless saw a doubling of Liberal Democrat MPs, and beyond. Indeed the Liberal Democrats managed to improve both their vote share and parliamentary representation in 2001 and 2005

However, most of the Liberal Democrat parliamentary success came from strong electoral performances in local contests and the brutal truth is that this has decayed at an alarming rate. Liberal Democrat local election performance is worse now than at any time since the 1970s. In terms of the councillor base (which was, after all, the activist base of the party) the Liberal Democrats are reduced to just over 2,000 councillors – the worst showing by the third party in Britain since 1983 (Figure 3). It is not too big an exaggeration to say that the party is in danger of losing all the progress made since the 1970s, as in

Figure 3: Total number of local councillors, 1973–2010 (GB)



Source: House of Commons, 'Local Elections 2014', Research Paper 14/33 (2014)

four short years since the formation of the coalition, the bulwark of the party's local vote has been severely compromised.

There are, however, two important caveats here. Firstly, the Liberal Democrat vote share in the local elections of 2011–13 was marginally better than the national polls might have indicated, with the party gaining 14–15 per cent of the popular vote in all contests. This improvement is marginal but nevertheless should provide some succour to the party strategists. The same was true of the 2014 local elections in England, although in the European Parliament elections the Liberal Democrat vote share fell to below 7 per cent. Secondly, Liberal Democrat electoral performance continues to be best where the party has sitting MPs. It was certainly the case in 2010 that the Liberal Democrats had a much greater chance of retaining the Westminster constituency if the incumbent MP re-stood. In 2010, the party selected ten new candidates to stand in seats where they were the incumbent party. Not only did they lose six of these seats to the Conservatives (Harrogate and Knaresborough, Winchester, York Outer, Truro and Falmouth, Cornwall South East, Hereford and Herefordshire South), but their average vote share declined by 4.69 per cent on 2005. The only Liberal Democrat successes were in Cambridge, Chippenham, Edinburgh West, and St Austell and Newquay. Those candidates who were neither new nor first-time incumbents saw their vote share fall by 1.25 per cent, with five incumbents losing their seats. Across all Liberal-Democrat-held seats, party performance only marginally declined in 2010, with an average vote share of 45.51 per cent in these constituencies.

Looking at the data from the elections since 2010, it does seem, firstly, that the Liberal Democrat vote holds up slightly better than the national polls might predict and, secondly, that this is especially true in places where the party has a sitting MP. However the incumbency bonus to the party is far less than the party faithful commonly imagine; and it is worth reiterating that, despite the incumbency bonus, the party is managing electoral decline rather than promising success. In fact, the drop in Liberal

The number of people who identify as Liberal Democrat has not transformed in the twenty-five years since the party's inception.

Democrat vote share in such places is around ten percentage points rather than twelve points everywhere else. Although incumbency has been a factor in explaining Liberal Democrat election results, it can only provide a small crumb of comfort to the party.

The political profile of Liberal Democrat voting

Turning finally to the political aspect of Liberal Democrat support, we should first acknowledge an essential truth about the Liberal Democrats over the past quarter of a century: that, as the third party in a system designed to sustain only two, they have too often been defined only in relation to the main two parties. The Liberal Democrats' struggle for identity and credibility has too readily been seen as an effort to tack themselves to, or manoeuvre themselves away from one of the other parties. This is not surprising for a party that struggles to make a national impact and which had clearly decided by the turn of the century that its best chance of achieving and maintaining breakthrough at Westminster was by establishing the Liberal Democrats as a viable party locally – usually as the effective opposition to an incumbent from the Conservatives or Labour. Three-way marginal constituencies remain extremely rare, and the Liberal Democrats created a series of local narratives about the party's credibility via local election presence and occasional by-election success. In other words, the Liberal Democrats became credible through establishing a status as one of the two main parties in a series of two-party systems.

It might have been reasonable to assume that the establishment of the coalition government of 2010 and the wide-ranging involvement of the Liberal Democrats in all aspects of that coalition would solve the traditional problem of credibility for the party. After all, what better signifier of credibility could there be than the presence of the party in peacetime government for the first time since the National Government?

There was of course a risk attached to entering coalition. Electorally those voters who came to the Liberal Democrats as a tactical

choice may never forgive the party for propping up the party they really identified against. Given the irresistible force of the electoral mathematics in Westminster after the 2010 general election, the Liberal Democrats may have had no real choice, but entering coalition with the Conservatives was always a gamble. If this was the hope, it seems that the gamble has not paid off, not least because the fragility of the Liberal Democrat core vote has been exposed.

Identification

The number of people who identify as Liberal Democrat has not transformed in the twenty-five years since the party's inception. Indeed analysis of the 1987 general election reveals that the Alliance could count on 16 per cent of all British voters to class themselves as party identifiers (for either party, naturally). In both 2005 and 2010 the Liberal Democrats' core of support (their partisans) amounted to only 11 per cent of the electorate.¹³ This is important, since it reveals that so much of the Liberal Democrat vote (even when the party are doing well) is loaned to rather than owned by the party. As such, it is more vulnerable to erosion from both sides than any party would hope. Electoral appeal predicated on attracting switchers from the other parties is problematic while too large a proportion of voters seem to share the view, encapsulated by John Curtice's famous phrase, that the Liberal Democrats are more of a one-night stand than long-term relationship material.

Credible, electable, alternative?

One of the key aspects of Paddy Ashdown's speech at Chard in 1992 was that he set a fierce test by which we can judge the subsequent electoral performance of the Liberal Democrats. Immediately after the 1992 general election, Ashdown claimed that the Liberal Democrats must rise to the challenge of at least being a part of 'a credible, electable alternative government to the Tories'.¹⁴ This was a key moment for the party since it paved the way for the abandonment of equidistance from the Conservative and Labour parties. Writing now, this might seem little more than a necessary and viable electoral tactic, or a reaction to the unpopularity

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of the Conservative brand, but the context is important.

The 1992 general election had seen the Liberal Democrats underperform electorally. There was a widespread notion that the party had missed winnable targets because they had insufficiently differentiated themselves from the incumbent party – and in the vast majority of cases this was the Conservatives. In seats like Sheffield Hallam and Littleborough and Saddleworth the Liberal Democrat challenge to sitting Conservatives had faltered since the party could not adequately convince Labour supporters to transfer their votes to the Liberal Democrats in order to defeat the Tories. Academics had written of Ashdown's mistake in misjudging the public mood.¹⁵ The Chard speech and the subsequent abandonment of equidistance paved the way for the party to become part of the anti-Conservative opposition or, in Ashdown's own phrase, a credible, electable alternative.

It should further be emphasised that the realignment signalled by Chard occurred before the ERM crisis, and before John Major's back-to-basics rallying call and the subsequent discrediting of a sleaze-ridden Conservative government. Ending equidistance may now seem like the inevitable consequence of 1990s British politics, but at the time there was little inevitable about it. Indeed, it prefigured a period of intense collaboration between Labour and the Liberal Democrats and the promise (or threat) of still more, as the two party leaders seemed intent on dragging their parties even closer towards each other.

Since the Labour and Liberal Democrat leadership have drifted apart with the disintegration of the 'Project' between Blair and Ashdown, the Liberal Democrats have had some spectacular but sporadic electoral success. Tellingly this success typically resulted from relentless and efficient targeting of resources on winnable seats rather than on spreading support over a wider canvass.

Importantly, every Liberal Democrat vote, every ward held and every Westminster seat won has been fought over a number of contests and years. This strategy requires a labour-intensive party machinery in order to campaign

Given the asymmetrical approach to electoral strategy, the decision to enter coalition with the Conservatives after 2010 would inevitably harm the party's potential voting base.

assiduously. The Liberal Democrats have, however, not made much progress in twenty-five years in fundamentally changing the basis of British electoral politics.

In truth the Liberal Democrat heartland is still a niche in British politics as the key electoral cleavages remain class-based. For instance, although the influence of social class upon the preferences of an individual has seemingly diminished since the 1960s, the aggregate class characteristics of an area have become an even better predictor of voting behaviour in each constituency.¹⁶ Furthermore the predominant determinant of British electoral politics remains the left-right axis rather than the liberal-authoritarian one. This means that party has to compete on territory that it finds harder to own than the other parties do.

In left-right terms, the party inherited a set of voters from the Alliance that was slightly left of centre. Alliance voters in 1987 identified themselves as typically to the right of Labour, but significantly closer to them than to the Conservatives. The Chard Speech, the abandonment of equidistance, the adoption of clear tax-and-spend policies (and in particular the hypothecated taxation that targeted spending on education) all facilitated the closer relationship between Liberal Democrat and Labour voters that followed. Indeed in the early years of New Labour, when that party's apparent obsession with 'prudence' led them to accept the spending proposals of the outgoing Conservative regime, it was the Liberal Democrats who began to seem the most left wing of all parties on certain issues. Public perception of the Liberal Democrats reflected this, and the party began to compete, in some seats at least, for the credible anti-Conservative vote. In addition, the Liberal Democrats were able, crucially, to open up a second front and to compete with Labour in some areas based on dissatisfaction with Labour's record in government.

This is central to understanding the appeal of the Liberal Democrats in the twenty-first century. The party were able to follow their familiar strategy for Conservative sympathisers – a moderate appeal to those worried that the one-nation party had been hijacked

by Eurosceptic neo-liberals – and the Liberal Democrats' stance against the Iraq War, in favour of hypothecated taxation, and against ID cards was popular with many voters. On the other hand, their approach to Labour identifiers was qualitatively different and sat uncomfortably with the rest of their electoral strategy. Criticism of New Labour's foreign policy and approach to civil liberties seemed to strike a nerve less with moderate Labour supporters than with the relatively diehard left. In simple terms, the party was no longer acting as, nor could be perceived as, a party of the centre. Pursuit of one of these electoral flanks (Conservative moderates) would sooner rather than later come into conflict with the pursuit of the other (Labour stalwarts), and as the party grew the cracks began to show. This meant that at the heart of the Liberal Democrat electoral strategy was an asymmetry that simply could not be sustained.

Given the asymmetrical approach to electoral strategy, the decision to enter coalition with the Conservatives after 2010 would inevitably harm the party's potential voting base. In policy terms, the Liberal Democrats had signalled a discernible move back towards the centre between 2005 and 2010 with the election of Nick Clegg to the leadership and the advance, to a certain extent, of the economic liberals over the social wing of the party.

The political perception of the Liberal Democrats by the public can be gauged by the second preferences of voters in general elections. This is a regular question in the British Election Study series and allows us to analyse and locate the public placement of the party. Despite the fact that most Alliance voters in 1987 placed themselves to the left of centre, a small majority of them preferred the Conservatives to Labour as their second choice of political party. Of course this might signify little more than the relative unpopularity of Labour in the 1980s and the antipathy of those that deserted Labour to join the SDP in the first place. Between 1987 and 1997 the public discerned a move left in the Liberal Democrats, which was mirrored in the perceptions of Liberal Democrat voters themselves. For the first

time the general electorate and the party's own voters tended to place the party as closer to Labour than to the Conservatives. This was confirmed by the Chard speech and subsequently the 'Project'.

By 1997, when the non-equidistant Liberal Democrats stood in stark contrast to the toxic Tory brand, only 22 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters favoured the Conservatives as their second preference; 64 per cent chose Labour. By 2010, despite the general downturn in Labour popularity nationally, Liberal Democrat voters were still markedly more likely to favour Labour as their second preference to the Conservatives (40 per cent to 24 per cent).

The politics of second choice

In a similar vein, over the course of the past quarter of a century the Liberal Democrats had become more palatable to Labour supporters than to Conservative voters. This is important, in that it provides a good guide for the latent support needed to convert tactical voters in strategically important constituencies. By 2010 the Liberal Democrats were the second choice of two-thirds of Labour voters and 54 per cent of Conservatives.¹⁷ Of course, this effectively meant that many more voters were going to be antagonised by the coalition agreement with the Conservatives than the party would have wanted and made a deal with the Conservatives harder for the party to sell to its own voters than any deal with Labour would have been. It also explains why disenchantment with the Liberal Democrats in government has translated directly to Labour support for the most part (although there is a significant boost to UKIP also). This transfer to Labour means that, at the time of writing, a party with distinct disadvantages in terms of the public perception of both leadership and economic competence still leads in the opinion polls.

Finally it is instructive to reiterate a fundamental point about the vulnerability of the electoral fortunes of the third party in British politics. Writing before the foundation of the Liberal Democrats, Ivor Crewe recognised the 'softness' of the Liberal vote, based as it was on relatively small and relatively weak partisan identification. In simple

terms, the Liberal Democrat vote is still much more fragile than that of the main two parties. Whereas nine-tenths of all Conservative and Labour supporters identify themselves as supporters of the party they voted for in 2010, only just over one-half of Liberal Democrat voters did the same.

Nor is the basis of Liberal Democrat support any more stable than it was at the party's launch. The Liberal Democrat vote still contains a large element of protest voting, which means that any electoral success for the Liberal Democrats has been built upon the most fragile of foundations. In Crewe's terms, the traditional Liberal challenges of recruitment and retention of voters remain difficult for the contemporary party. At the last general election, 64 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters were new to the party (versus only 40 per cent of Conservative and 27 per cent of Labour voters), which demonstrates both the success of the electoral project and its inherent weakness. Votes which are lent to a political party – for whatever reason (strategic voting, a symbol of protest, or a personal reward for an incumbent or local candidate) – can just as easily be withdrawn, and being in coalition with the Conservatives runs the risk of losing two of these three sources. Anti-Conservative tactical voters will be less inclined to vote for a party that put the Tories in power, and anti-politics protest voters are likely to be swept away as soon as the protest party becomes a party of government.

Conclusion

In summary, then, the contemporary Liberal Democrats find themselves in a very similar position to when the party was founded. It can rely on the votes of a small and indistinct social community and is vulnerable to surges in the popularity of parties on either side of the spectrum (or even outside the spectrum if anti-party sentiment can be harnessed by another party of protest). Unlike the Alliance, the Liberal Democrats are a party with some geographic strongholds, particularly where the party can call on the benefits of prolonged incumbency, but by and large the party's prospects for expansion were fairly evenly spread. It is likely that a

defensive campaign in 2015 would see the Liberal Democrats concentrate on a heartland vote strategy, since these are the areas where the vote has collapsed least since 2010. Local election results would suggest that the party will find it hard even to be viable in places previously identified as expansion territories (local Liberal Democrat representation has been wiped out in Greater Manchester and Liverpool for instance).

Systematic and prolonged electoral progress has occurred over the first quarter of a century of the party – in terms of representation if not in terms of the popular vote – and an asymmetric approach to campaign strategy was remarkably successful up to a point. However the limits of the asymmetry became apparent in the early twenty-first century. Entering into coalition with the Conservatives gave the Liberal Democrat the chance to finally bridge their credibility gap – but the price of the coalition has been to undermine much of the progress made since the birth of the party.

Andrew Russell is Professor of Politics and Head of Department at the University of Manchester. He has written extensively on party politics and voter engagement. His publications include Neither Left Nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate (with Ed Fieldhouse) and Voter Engagement and Young People for the Electoral Commission.

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- 1 A. Russell and E. Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (Manchester University Press, 2005), pp. 117–23.
- 2 J. Curtice, 'Who Votes for the Centre Now?' in D. MacIver (ed.) *The Liberal Democrats* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. 20.
- 3 For a full discussion of how formal education is positively associated with progressive attitudes to redistribution and social liberalism, see M. Forslund, 'Patterns of Delinquency Involvement: An Empirical Typology', *Western Association of Sociologists and Anthropologists Conference* (Alberta, 1980), or E. Babbie, *The Practice of Social Research* (Wadsworth, 1995).
- 4 Russell and Fieldhouse, *Neither Left Nor Right?*, p. 93.

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GREAT LIBERAL THINKERS: LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Baroness Liz Barker and MPs Alan Beith, David Laws and John Pugh draw lessons from past Liberal thinkers for the future direction of the Liberal Democrats. Chair: Malcolm Bruce MP; Twitter: #LDHGFrige. Marks the launch of a new History Group booklet on 'Liberal Thinkers', containing concise summaries of the lives and thoughts of the greatest Liberal thinkers, from John Milton to John Rawls, including John Stuart Mill, Tom Paine, L. T. Hobhouse and many more. See next issue for details

Speakers: **Baroness Liz Barker, Alan Beith MP and John Pugh MP.** Chair: **Malcolm Bruce MP.**

7.45pm, Sunday 5 October

Picasso 2 Room, Campanile Hotel, 10 Tunnel Street, Glasgow G3 8HL

(just outside the conference centre, and outside the secure area – no conference passes necessary)

- Party, 1999).
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