

The 2001 election

Implications for the Liberal Democrats

Four years ago, few in the party would have hoped for such a good result. Not only did the Liberal Democrats retain all but two of the record haul of seats they won in 1997, but they even managed to emerge with half a dozen more MPs. Moreover, in contrast to 1997 the party also stemmed the decline in its overall share of the vote that had been taking place at every election since 1983.

But political parties can rarely afford to rest on their laurels. No sooner is one election over and it has to think about how it can maximise its chances at the next one. And as well as affirming the success of the strategy the party has pursued hitherto, the 2001 election also poses some key questions about what its strategy should be in the future.

Both the basis of the party's current success and the questions it faces about its future can be seen from looking at where the party managed to increase its vote most in the 2001 election. One kind of seat where the party typically did relatively well comprises those marginal constituencies it was defending, together with some of those that it had most hope of gaining. The other kind, however, was very different in character, consisting of working-class Labour seats where the party has traditionally found it hardest to secure support.

The party's success in defending and capturing seats appears to be a vindication of a well-established theme in the party's strategy – local activity and targeting. Amongst the seats the party was defending, it easily did best in those which it had won for the first time in 1997, and where the new incumbent MP had had an opportunity over the last four years to develop a reputation as a good constituency member. On average, the party's vote rose by no less than 6.3% in such seats, well above the 1.5% average increase enjoyed across the country as a whole. As if to underline the importance of local reputation, the party struggled most to hang on to its vote where the local Liberal Democrat MP had

decided to stand down. Where this was the case the party's vote actually fell – by nearly 5% on average – though it had the good fortune not to lose any seats as a result, giving the new incumbents the chance to develop a local reputation for themselves over the next four years.

The party's success in consolidating its position in those seats it gained in 1997 has one very important consequence for its future. So long as the Liberal Democrats can keep on winning around a fifth or so of the national vote, the days when it could muster no more than two dozen MPs appear to have disappeared for good. The party's breakthrough in 1997 owed much to the collapse in the Conservative vote. Because it tends to win more votes in Conservative- than in Labour-held seats, the party could profit from the decline in Conservative support in a way that it could not in 1983, when it was Labour's vote that fell away. But by consolidating its vote in those seats it won four years ago, the party has now begun to insulate itself from the impact of any future Conservative revival. Even if, at some point in the future, the Conservatives were to secure a lead over Labour as big as that which Labour enjoyed over the Conservatives in June, the Liberal Democrats should still be able to win around three dozen seats.

Meanwhile, as well as hanging on to all but two of the seats it currently holds, the party also managed to pick up six seats from the Conservatives and one from Labour, as well as to retain the by-election gain of Romsey, made at the expense of the Conservatives in May 2000. These gains were made despite the fact that the Conservatives generally enjoyed above-average increases in the share of the vote in those seats they were defending. The key to the party's success here appears to have been its targeting efforts. It generally performed about four points better in targeted seats where the Conservatives were being challenged as it did in non-targeted seats. This largely appears to have been



higher than the 13.3% (up from 11.3%) that the party won in Labour-held seats. Moreover, seats where the party is second to the Conservatives (58) still outnumber those where it is second to Labour (49).

New voters for the Liberal Democrats

The significance of the party's relative success in more working-class Labour Britain lies not in any immediate transformation of the geography of Liberal Democrat support but rather as an indication of how New Labour's continued determination to occupy the ideological centre of British politics may be changing the kind of voter the Liberal Democrats are able to woo. There is a hint of this in ICM's summary of all the polls they conducted during the election. Compared with 1997, the Liberal Democrats' share of the vote was no higher than it was in 1997 amongst the most middle-class AB social group, whereas it rose by four points amongst the skilled working-class C2s as well as by two points amongst the DEs. Labour, in contrast, gained ground amongst middle-class voters while losing support amongst the working class.

More dramatic, however, are the results of a poll conducted by ICM for the BBC in the final few days of the campaign, a poll that tapped into some of the attitudes of each party's supporters. As the table shows, this found that for the most part Liberal Democrat voters were slightly to the left of Labour supporters. Not only were they most in favour of 'tax and spend', where the party's long held stance of an extra penny on income tax for education is by now quite well recognised by voters, but they were also most in favour of renationalisation of the railways and most opposed to involving private companies in the running of schools and hospitals and of getting rid of taxation of savings, a move unlikely to be of much benefit to less well-off voters. On these latter kinds of issues, at least until now, it has usually been Labour voters who have usually given the most left-wing response.

achieved by squeezing the Labour vote in seats that for the most part were ones where the Liberal Democrats had not been such strong credible local challengers before, and where, thus, the incentive for Labour supporters to vote tactically had not previously been so great.

Targeting in those seats where Labour was being challenged does appear, though, to have had a more mixed record of success. On average the party performed only one and a half points better in its targeted seats than in the remainder. Yet more generally, traditionally Labour Britain proved to be relatively fertile territory for the party. In safe Labour, typically working-class, seats where the Liberal Democrats started off third, their share of the vote

typically rose by a percentage point or so more than the national norm. Meanwhile it was in these kinds of seats that Labour's vote fell most heavily.

This relative success in Labour Britain is not a wholly new phenomenon; it was also apparent in local elections during the 1997–2001 parliament. Equally, its impact should not be exaggerated. The difference between the party's share of the vote in the typical middle-class Conservative seat and in the typical more working-class Labour one may have narrowed, but the party is still much stronger in the former than in the latter. Thus, for example, while the party's average share of the vote in seats won by the Conservatives in 1997 may have fallen slightly, from 23.1% to 22.7%, that latter figure is still much

Who's on the left now?

Supporters of	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dems
<i>% agree govt should:</i>			
Increase taxes and spend the money on schools	41	71	79
Bring railways back into public ownership	56	70	74
Require employers to give fathers two weeks paid leave when they have a baby	44	75	69
Get rid of all taxation on savings	66	57	51
Get private companies to run more state schools	42	26	20
Get private companies to run NHS hospitals	43	25	13

Source: ICM/BBC Analysis Poll

All of this suggests that the Liberal Democrats may well have been the beneficiaries of dissatisfaction with Labour's continued move to the centre amongst some more traditional and more left-of-centre Labour voters – although abstention and voting for far left socialist candidates also appear to have been options taken by discontented Labour voters. If this is so (and further analysis of more extensive survey data than is so far available will be needed to confirm that this is indeed what happened), then the party would certainly seem to be facing a new strategic landscape.

Hitherto, New Labour's switch to the centre has appeared to be more of a hindrance than a help to the Liberal Democrats, especially as it included pinching many of the party's most distinctive clothes on constitutional reform. Certainly, analysis of the British Election Study suggests that over the 1992–97 period, Labour won the support of right-of-centre former Conservative supporters who might previously have been expected to switch to the Liberal Democrats.¹ But now it appears that it may be opening up a new opportunity for the Liberal Democrats to win over left-of-centre Labour voters disillusioned at the performance of New Labour.

The new left in British politics?

Of course, there are dangers for the party in pitching its tent even just a little to the left of Labour. In particular, it would seem to run the risk of making the party less attractive to disgruntled Conservative voters, and, as we have seen, many of the party's seats are held against a Conservative rather than a Labour challenger. Against this, however, it may well be worth bearing in mind three points:

1. The party may find it difficult to *avoid* being left on the left. If New Labour is determined to move to the centre of British politics, the Liberal Democrats may well find themselves to the left of Labour even if all they have done is to stand still.

2. At the moment at least, the electorate's dissatisfaction with New Labour appears to comprise a disappointment with the government's record on improving public services coupled with a suspicion of its proposed greater use of the private sector as a solution. There seems to be little appetite for a further reduction in the role of the state. If this dissatisfaction persists and grows during Labour's second term, then a party that opposes Labour from the left may have more appeal than one that does so from the right, a stance where in any event the Liberal Democrats would face competition from the Conservatives.
3. The party's existing seats may not be put at as much risk by such a strategy as may first seem to be the case. Being somewhat to the left of Labour could help the party win over tactical support from Labour voters and will do nothing to undermine the party's efforts at targeting and establishing a reputation for local activity.

At the same time, the party may well also need to recognise that it could be hitting the limits of what it can achieve through targeting and local activity with around one-fifth of the vote. Whereas after the 1997 election Liberal Democrat candidates were

within 10% of the Conservative winner in 20 seats, and of Labour in 4, those figures have now fallen to 15 and 3 respectively. Moreover, only two or three of these are seats that are newly marginal for the party and where there is still a sizeable third-party vote that might yet be further squeezed. Targeting and local campaigning may well be sufficient to enable the Liberal Democrats to hold on to what they have already got, but seems unlikely to be sufficient to enable them to make another leap forward.

The debate that has started within the party about how it should position itself over the next four or five years is a real one. Like it or not, New Labour's move to the centre has rewritten some of the rules of British politics. Deliberately settling for a position somewhat to the left of Labour may not be the only viable response for the party as it considers how best to make further electoral headway, but it does at least now seem to be serious option, for the first time in modern British politics.

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¹ See A. Heath, R. Jowell and J. Curtice, *The Rise of New Labour: Party Policies and Voter Choices* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

