



# The Liberal Democrat performance

**T**HE LIBERAL DEMOCRATS approached the prospect of an election in the autumn of 2019 with high hopes. Earlier in the year, the European Parliament elections had occasioned a revival in the party's electoral fortunes, the first it had enjoyed since it entered into coalition with the Conservatives in May 2010.<sup>1</sup> Not only did the party win a fifth of the vote in those elections, enough to come second, but ever since then it had consistently enjoyed an average rating of 18 per cent in polls of voting intention for Westminster. At the same time, the party had recruited as many as eight MPs who had defected from either the Conservatives or Labour (five of them via the short-lived Change UK party). Against this backdrop, a pre-Christmas ballot appeared to represent an opportunity for the party to reverse much of the damage it had suffered in the 2015 and 2017 general elections.

Indeed, so high were its hopes that the party helped pave the way for an election to be held. Thanks to the provisions of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act (FTPA) that had been passed by the 2010–15 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, the Prime Minister could no longer use the royal prerogative to call an early general election – instead, two-thirds of MPs needed to vote in favour of an early dissolution. Consequently, although the Conservative government had been eager to hold an election that might create a

House of Commons that was more amenable to passing the withdrawal treaty it had recently renegotiated with the EU, it had been unable to do so because on more than one occasion in September and October 2019 fewer than two-thirds of all MPs had voted in favour.

However, during the last weekend of October the Liberal Democrats signalled that, even though the party had originally been instrumental in putting the Act on the statute book, they, along with the SNP, were willing to support a step that would bypass the provisions of the FTPA. An election would be triggered by passing legislation that stipulated that despite the normal provisions of the FTPA an election would be held on 12 December. This legislation would only require a simple majority in the Commons (and the Lords) to be passed – and support from the Liberal Democrats and the SNP would ensure that such a majority was in place. But for this decision by the Liberal Democrats and the SNP, Britain would not have enjoyed its first December election since 1923.

The manoeuvre represented a last desperate throw of the dice by the party in its attempts to stop Brexit happening. It had come to the conclusion that the House of Commons remained unwilling to support a second EU referendum – a ballot that might pave the way for a reversal of Brexit. As a result, it seemed likely that the

Leader of the Liberal Democrats, Jo Swinson's, rally at the Esher Rugby Club during the last day of the 2019 election campaign, December 11. Photo by Andre Camara, Liberal Democrats Flickr.



# Gambling on Brexit

## Failure in the 2019 general election

Conservative government would eventually be able to deliver Brexit anyway, if only by exercising what at the end of January 2020 would legally be the default position of exiting the EU without a withdrawal treaty. That prospect might be avoided if the electorally buoyant Liberal Democrats, either alone or in tandem with others, held the balance of power in a new House of Commons that was able to install an alternative administration that was willing to hold another referendum. Thus, the Liberal Democrats – who hoped that an election would pave the way for a reversal of Brexit – found themselves in agreement with the Conservatives – who hoped that an election would enable them ‘to get Brexit done’ – that it was time to go to the country.

In the event, it was the Conservatives for whom the gamble paid off. The election gave the government an overall majority of 80, more than enough to ensure that it would be to pass its EU withdrawal treaty into law. In contrast, the Liberal Democrats found themselves not only with ten fewer seats than the 21 the party had enjoyed by the end of the 2017–19 parliament, but even one less than the dozen it had won in 2017. In backing an early election, the party paved the way for the delivery of Brexit while failing to secure any enhancement of its own parliamentary strength. The decision to back an early ballot backfired spectacularly.

This article analyses why this proved to be the case. It begins by examining what underlay the party’s rise in the polls in the summer of 2019, and the opportunities and the challenges that its enhanced popularity appeared to create. We then examine how support for the party fell away during the course of the election campaign before outlining what eventually happened on polling day. We conclude with an assessment of what went wrong and why.

### A summer of promise

The UK was originally due to leave the EU on 29 March 2019. However, the government proved unable to meet this deadline. This meant that, as it was still a member state, the UK was obliged to hold European Parliament elections on 23 May. Even in normal times, such elections are often regarded by voters as an occasion to cast a ‘protest’ vote, thereby creating an environment in which smaller parties in general, and anti-EU parties in particular, tend to flourish.<sup>2</sup> Unsurprisingly, those tendencies were especially in evidence this time around. First place in the election went to the anti-EU Brexit Party, which was arguing that Britain should leave the EU without a deal, with 32 per cent of the vote (in Great Britain), while the Liberal Democrats, who were arguing that another EU referendum should be

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## Gambling on Brexit: The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2019 general election



Jo Swinson launching the Liberal Democrat manifesto, 20 November 2019

Jo Swinson and Liberal Democrat Education Spokesperson Layla Moran in Cambridge, at the Trumpington Park Primary School 20 November 2019. (Photo by Andre Camara.)

Liberal Democrat MPs after the 2019 election; from left: Wendy Chamberlain, Tim Farron, Layla Moran, Daisy Cooper, Baroness Brinton (Liberal Democrat President and interim co-leader), Christine Jardine, Sarah Olney, Edward Davey (interim co-leader), Munira Wilson, Alistair Carmichael, Wera Hobhouse (not present: Jamie Stone)

(All photos: Liberal Democrats Flickr)



held, came second with 20 per cent.<sup>3</sup> The two parties that have traditionally dominated post-war British politics, Labour and the Conservatives, found themselves with just 14 per cent and 9 per cent of the vote respectively. The Conservatives were punished for their failure to deliver Brexit. Labour, meanwhile, lost support in the wake of its adoption of a compromise position that opposed the government's plans for Brexit but indicated a willingness by the party to pursue its own proposals for leaving the EU should it win a general election, while the possibility of holding another referendum was held in reserve.

The European contest had a knock-on effect on the parties' standing in polls of voting intentions for a Westminster election. Both the Conservatives and Labour found themselves on average with little more than a quarter of the vote, with the Brexit Party enjoying about a fifth and the Liberal Democrats, on 18 per cent, just a little less than that. For a while at least, it looked as though Britain could have entered an unprecedented era of four-party politics (with a fifth, the SNP, dominating the electoral scene north of the border).

Occasioned as it was by the Brexit impasse, the new-found support for the Liberal Democrats was very distinctive. All of the increase in the party's support as compared to the 2017 general election came from those who had voted Remain in the EU referendum in 2016. In July, polls on average put support for the party among those who had voted Remain at 31 per cent, up 17 points on what (according to the British Election Study) it had enjoyed among this group in 2017. In contrast, just 5 per cent of those who voted Leave said that they were supporting the party, the same figure as in 2017. By September, support for the party among Remain voters was, at 35 per cent, if anything even higher, whereas it simply stayed at just 5 per cent among Leave voters. Although the Liberal Democrats (and before them the Liberal Party) have long been Britain's most Europhile political party, never before had the party's electoral support been so dominated by those with a relatively benign view of the European Union. Rather than enjoying a revival of the electoral base that had helped it gain a slice of power in 2010, the party had seemingly found new life as an anti-Brexit party.

In 2017, in contrast, Labour had clearly won the battle for Remain votes; according to the British Election Study just over half (53 per cent) had voted for Jeremy Corbyn's party. Now, however, the Liberal Democrats were almost neck and neck with Labour among Remain voters. Around one in five (20 per cent) of those who voted Labour in 2017 were saying in September that they would vote for the Liberal Democrats. At the same time, however, the party was also scoring among Remain voters who had backed the Conservatives in 2017; some one in eight (12 per cent) of those who had voted Tory in 2017 were also at that point backing the Liberal Democrats.

This newly buoyant Liberal Democrat vote inevitably put the party in good heart. However, it also posed questions. First, the party had performed so badly in 2015 and 2017 – including not least in many a seat where the Liberal Democrats had previously been very strong<sup>4</sup> – that there were relatively few seats where the party would start an election in anything like a close second place. There were just 16 constituencies in which the party had been less than 20 per cent behind the winner last time around. How well what was still no more than a modest recovery in the party's fortunes would translate into seats gained was thus open to doubt, especially after the Conservatives began to enjoy some improvement in their electoral position in the wake of Boris Johnson's election in July as the party's new leader.

Having so Europhile a vote also raised its own questions about the party's prospects. Some of its traditional strongholds in the far south-west of England, such as North Devon, North Cornwall, and St Ives, voted heavily for Leave in 2016. More generally, the average vote for Leave in the dozen seats where the party was closest to an incumbent Conservative was as much as 47 per cent, indicating that what collectively might be thought to be the party's best prospects were far from being heavily pro-Remain in character. At the same time, the party's prospects appeared to rest heavily on its ability to retain the support of Remain voters who had switched to it from Labour, an ability that could not be taken for granted. After all, many Remain voters were still sticking with Labour, and perhaps Jeremy Corbyn's party would be able to win back some of those it had lost to the Liberal Democrats if Labour were to adopt a stronger stance in favour of a second EU referendum.

### Brexit manoeuvres

Labour did indeed shift its stance on Brexit. First of all, in July it said that any form of withdrawal proposed by the Conservatives should be put to a referendum and that in those circumstances Labour would back Remain – though at this point the party did not promise that it would put any deal that a Labour government itself might negotiate to a second ballot. By the time of the party's conference in September, however, the party was also indicating that any withdrawal deal that Labour negotiated (which would be much 'softer' than that envisaged by the current government) would also be put to a referendum, albeit the party would not decide until after that negotiation had been completed whether it was in favour of leaving with its own deal or remaining in the EU. While still a less straightforward pro-Remain position than that being offered by the Liberal Democrats, it was a stance that might be able to persuade some former pro-Remain Labour supporters that they should return to the fold.

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However, the Liberal Democrats themselves did not stand still on Brexit. Perhaps mindful of the possibility that Labour was gradually moving towards a position that might be more attractive to Remain voters, the Liberal Democrat leader, Jo Swinson, who had succeeded Sir Vince Cable to the position in July, announced in September that, should the Liberal Democrats form a majority government on their own, they would reverse the decision to leave the EU without first holding another referendum. The party was both signalling its determinedly anti-Brexit position in the clearest possible fashion and doing so in a manner that ensured that it was more or less guaranteed to have a position that was distinctive from Labour's. At the same time, however, the party was still indicating that it backed the idea of holding a second referendum in the event that it did not win (a seemingly improbable) overall majority.

Ms Swinson's move was undoubtedly a controversial one, attracting the charge that even many a Remain voter thought that it was undemocratic to reverse Brexit without first holding another ballot. Polling on the subject, however, does not clearly support this claim. BMG Research asked voters on four occasions between July and October what they thought should happen if no new Brexit deal had been agreed by what at that point was the deadline for leaving (the end of October), with both holding a second in-out referendum and revoking the UK's notice of withdrawal included among the possible options. While on average 30 per cent of Remain voters said that they favoured another referendum, rather more – 39 per cent – indicated that they were in favour of revoking the UK's Article 50 notice of withdrawal. Meanwhile, when the election was called, 56 per cent of Remain voters said the Liberal Democrats' stance of stopping Brexit without a referendum made it more likely that they would vote for the party, whereas just 14 per cent stated that it made them less likely to do so. And when during the election campaign itself YouGov asked whether revoking Article 50 would be a good or a bad outcome, two-thirds (66 per cent) of Remain voters said that it would be a 'very' or 'fairly' good outcome, while only just over half (53 per cent) said the same of the policy position adopted by Labour.

It is thus far from clear that the Liberal Democrats' revised stance was viewed unfavourably by the pro-Remain constituency to whom the party was trying to appeal. Perhaps a more subtle criticism is that it left the party trying to pursue two arguments at once – both arguing for revoking Article 50 and in favour of having a second referendum – and thereby lost some of the advantage of clarity that it had enjoyed over Labour. That said, as of the end of October at least, as many as 68 per cent of Remain supporters were saying to YouGov that the Liberal Democrat position on Brexit was clear, whereas just 27 per cent were stating the same of Labour's position. Similarly,

in mid-November 57 per cent of Remain voters agreed that they had a good understanding of the Liberal Democrats' Brexit policy, while only 40 per cent said the same of Labour. Brexit still looked like a potentially winning card for the party.

### The campaign

However, whatever the merits of the party's new position on Brexit, the campaign did not go well for the party from the outset. Even before MPs had vacated the Palace of Westminster and the election had got under way, the party's seemingly solid bedrock of 18 per cent average support in the polls had slipped back to 16 per cent. In contrast to the uplift the party has often enjoyed during election campaigns, when enhanced media coverage brings it to the attention of more voters, support then fell again by another couple of points in the third week of the campaign, and then gradually slipped further thereafter to what proved to be the 12 per cent with which the party emerged in the ballot boxes on polling day, 12 December. The four-point drop in the party's support between the beginning and the end of the campaign matched what had hitherto been the biggest drop in support for Britain's main third party during an election campaign, that is, the four-point fall in Liberal/SDP Alliance support in 1987. The party's 2019 campaign has thus to be regarded as one of the least successful in its history.

The explanation lay in a gradual erosion of the party's ability to retain the support of those who had voted Remain. As soon as the election was called, the party's average support in the polls among Remain voters fell to 29 per cent, with Labour now clearly ahead on 42 per cent. That gap continued to widen, such that in the polls taken just before polling day, support for the party among Remain voters stood at just 20 per cent. Instead of competing with Labour to be the most popular party among Remain supporters (48 per cent of whom were now backing Labour), by the end of the campaign the party found itself struggling to stay ahead of the Conservatives (on 21 per cent) as the second most popular party.

The picture painted by the final polls was broadly corroborated by the two polls of how people actually voted that were conducted immediately after polling day, one by Lord Ashcroft and one by YouGov. Both reported that 21 per cent of those who backed Remain in 2016 had voted Liberal Democrat, just slightly more than had voted Conservative (19 per cent according to Ashcroft and 20 per cent YouGov), and well behind Labour (47 per cent and 49 per cent). Meanwhile, just 3 per cent of Leave voters had backed the party. The party ended up with a vote that was still heavily tilted in the direction of Europhile voters, but at a markedly lower level than the party had enjoyed just a few weeks earlier.

Much of the Remain vote that switched away from the party consisted of Labour voters returning to the fold. Just before the election was called the polls were reporting on average that as many as 18 per cent of those who had voted Labour in 2017 were saying that they would vote Liberal Democrat. But, according to Lord Ashcroft, by polling day that figure had fallen to just 7 per cent, while YouGov put it only a little higher, at 9 per cent. In contrast, the Liberal Democrats appear largely to have retained the support of those who had switched to the party from the Conservatives. That proportion stood at 9 per cent of the 2017 Conservative vote just before the election was called and was still estimated to be as much on polling day as 8 per cent by Lord Ashcroft and 7 per cent by YouGov. Even though Remain voters were far more numerous in Labour's ranks than they were among Conservative supporters, in the event the Liberal Democrats secured the support of former Conservatives at much the same rate as Labour voters, implying that in the event the votes the party gained between 2017 and 2019 had little net impact on the size of the Conservative lead over Labour. In any event, it is clear much of the eventual weakness in the party's election performance is accounted for by what proved to be a marked decline and relative lack of success in getting Labour Remain voters to back it in the polling booths.

**Defeat**

The result was a crushing disappointment. True, at 11.8 per cent, the party's share of the overall vote in Great Britain was as much as 4.2 points above what it had secured in 2017 (even though it had stood down in 21 seats, primarily as a result of a partial electoral pact with the Greens and Plaid Cymru), but even that share of the vote was well below the level that it or its predecessor parties had won between 1974 and 2010. Meanwhile, with just 11 seats, the party ended up with one less MP than it had won in 2017. Although some of them secured a considerable increase in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote (on average, 15.4 points), none of the seven former Conservative

or Labour MPs who had defected from their own parties and stood under the Liberal Democrat banner were successful in securing re-election – or even came close to doing so. That outcome is hardly likely to encourage other Conservative or Labour MPs to embark on the same journey in the future.

In part, the party was unlucky in failing to win more seats. Of the 11 seats that it won, only three were secured with a majority of less than five points. In contrast, the party lost out in ten seats by less than that amount, including the East Dunbartonshire seat of the party's leader, Jo Swinson, who became the first party leader to lose their seat in a general election since the then Liberal Party leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, (also very narrowly) lost his seat in 1945. Two other MPs, Tom Brake in Carshalton & Wallington, and Stephen Lloyd in Eastbourne, also lost their seats (as did Jane Dodds the Brecon & Radnorshire seat she won in a by-election in July), while the party proved unable to defend the North Norfolk seat that Norman Lamb opted not to defend. Just three seats, Richmond Park, St Albans and North East Fife, were gained in compensation. However, while only a somewhat better performance in a handful of seats would have left the party in a somewhat stronger parliamentary position, the outcome affirmed that the party's attempts to turn increased support into greater parliamentary representation rested on precarious foundations.

More generally, the geography of the party's performance reflected the Europhile character of its newly acquired support. Scotland apart, where half of the strong Remain vote there was secured by the SNP,<sup>5</sup> the party generally advanced more strongly the larger the Remain vote had been in 2016. Thus, as Table 1 shows, the party's vote increased on average by just over seven points in seats in England & Wales where more than 58 per cent voted Remain, but by only two and a half points in those where less than 38 per cent did so. No less than 17 of the 20 seats where the party's vote increased most strongly were ones in which a majority voted to Remain. All three of the seats that the party gained voted heavily for Remain, whereas all three of the seats that the party lost in

% Remain	All seats	England & Wales	Scotland
0–58	+5.5	+7.2	+2.8
53–58	+5.5	+6.0	+2.7
48–53	+5.5	+5.7	+1.9
43–48	+4.1	+4.1	–
38–43	+2.8	+2.8	–
38+	+2.5	+2.5	–
All	+4.1	+4.3	+2.7

Source: Author's calculations based on results collected by the BBC. Estimates of 2016 Remain vote in each seat from Chris Hanretty, 'Final estimates of the Leave vote, or "Areal interpolation and the UK's referendum on EU membership"' (2017); posted at <https://medium.com/@chrishanretty/final-estimates-of-the-leave-vote-or-areal-interpolation-and-the-uks-referendum-on-eu-membership-5490b6cab878>

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England & Wales were ones where a majority had voted to Leave the EU.

However, some parts of Remain-voting England proved more amenable to the Liberal Democrat message than others. All but two of the largest increases in the party's support were in seats in London and the South East, while the remaining two were in the South West. At the same time, all but one of these seats was a constituency being defended by the Conservatives. In general, the Liberal Democrat vote rose on average by as much as 17 points in the South of England where more than 55 per cent had voted Remain in 2016 and over 45 per cent had backed the Conservatives in 2017. It seems that the party's relative success during the election campaign in retaining the support of Conservative Remainers paid off in particular in seats where such voters were relatively common. In contrast, the Liberal Democrat vote only increased by 2.3 points in seats in the North of England where more than 55 per cent had voted Remain, most of which were seats with a very substantial Labour vote in 2017.

The converse of the party's new-found success in parts of Remain-inclined southern England was a further decline in the party's vote in areas of past strength. All but just two of the 25 seats in which the party's vote fell by one and a half points or more were constituencies that had had a Liberal Democrat MP no longer ago than 2005 – and in many cases much more recently than that. This pattern often represented a further erosion of the local strength that the party had established in these seats at the beginning of the twenty-first century but which fell away after they were lost in 2015 and 2017.<sup>6</sup> It is a further indication of how the party's advance in 2019 was less of a revival of past strength and more the acquisition of a new electoral base that in some respects is markedly different from the one the party has enjoyed in the past.

The reliance of the party on Remain voters is also reflected in the demography of its support. Remain voters consist disproportionately of university graduates, who, in turn, are more likely to be in middle-class occupations.<sup>7</sup> Both groups moved particularly heavily towards the party. According to YouGov's post-election poll, 17 per cent of university graduates voted for the party, while only 8 per cent of those whose highest educational qualification was a GCSE or less did so. The figure for graduates represents a six-point increase on the party's tally for that group in the same company's post-election poll in 2017, whereas the statistic for those with less in the way of qualifications constitutes only a three-point increase. Meanwhile, at 16 per cent, the party's vote among those in professional and managerial (AB) occupations was, according to YouGov, up six points on 2017, and is twice the 8 per cent figure among those in working class (C2DE) jobs, among whom the increase in support on 2017 was just two points. Lord Ashcroft's poll paints a similar picture, with support for the Liberal Democrats

running at 15 per cent among those in professional and managerial roles, but only 8 per cent among those in working-class occupations.

These patterns are also reflected in the geography of the Liberal Democrat increase in support. The Liberal Democrat vote increased in England and Wales on average by 7.9 points in seats where, at the time of the last Census, 31 per cent had a degree, but by just 2.2 points in those constituencies where less than 21 per cent had a university education. Meanwhile, support for the party increased on average by 8.1 points in England and Wales where over 35 per cent had a professional or managerial job, but by just two points where less than 25 per cent did so. On average, the party won as much as 20 per cent of the vote in the most middle-class seats in England and Wales, but less than 5 per cent in the least middle-class ones.

The Liberal Party once prided itself on being Britain's non-class party, in contrast to the Conservatives whose support was concentrated in the middle class, and Labour's in the working class. However, that picture, which perhaps always understated the party's reliance on middle-class voters, no longer holds true. While the Liberal Democrats are now twice as popular among those in professional and managerial occupations than among those in working-class jobs, between them the post-election polling by YouGov and Lord Ashcroft suggest that the level of support for both the Conservatives and Labour varied relatively little between those in different occupational classes, not least because the Conservatives performed relatively well among working-class voters while Labour's support held up rather better among their middle-class counterparts.

Support for Remain and Leave also varied markedly by age, with younger voters being much more likely to vote to stay in the EU while older voters were more likely to want to exit. Of this divide, however, there was little sign in the Liberal Democrat performance. According to Lord Ashcroft, at 12 per cent the level of support for the Liberal Democrats among those aged 18–24 was the same as it was among those aged 65 and over. While YouGov did find that, at 15 per cent, support for the party among those aged 18 and 19 (who would have been voting for the first time) was higher than the 11 per cent recorded among those aged 70 and over, it was no more than 10 per cent among those aged between 20 and 24. The younger Remain voters, who provided the bedrock of Labour's support, largely eluded the party, a pattern for which there had already been evidence during the European election<sup>8</sup> and which will have been reinforced by the party's reliance at this election on Conservative Remain voters.

### Alliances

During the summer, the fact that the party preferences of Remain voters were now divided

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between those who said they would vote Labour and those who were backing the Liberal Democrats did not go unnoticed. Such a development would potentially be advantageous to the Conservatives if they, in contrast, were to be successful in squeezing the support of the Brexit Party and unite Leave voters behind them. Two initiatives were taken to try and overcome this potential split in the Remain vote. First, following on from a decision by the Greens and Plaid Cymru to stand down in the July 2019 Brecon & Radnorshire by-election in favour of the Liberal Democrats – a decision that may have been crucial to the party's success in narrowly wresting the seat from the Conservatives – the three parties agreed a limited electoral pact under which the Liberal Democrats did not nominate a candidate in 17 seats, while in return the party was not opposed by the Greens in 40 seats in England and by neither the Greens nor Plaid Cymru in three further seats (including Brecon & Radnorshire) in Wales. In addition, the Liberal Democrats decided not to stand against three pro-Remain MPs who had defected from the Conservatives and Labour but who had opted to stand under a variety of other labels.

However, the chances that this 'Remain Alliance' would make a significant difference to the Liberal Democrats' prospects of winning seats always seemed rather limited. In the event, the Greens did not nominate a candidate in 53 seats in England and Wales that they had contested in 2017. On average, the party had won just 2.0 per cent of the vote in these seats in 2017, and the polls suggested that the party was only likely to record a marginal improvement in its vote in 2019 – as eventually attested by what was an average increase in the party's support of one and a half points in those seats that it did contest again. Even if in seats where the Greens stood down, all of the potential 3.5 per cent of the vote that this implied they might otherwise have won had instead switched as recommended to the Liberal Democrats (a highly unlikely scenario, given the potential competition for their support from Labour), such a bonus could only make a difference in the most marginal of contests. Meanwhile, at 3.7 per cent, the average share of the vote won by Plaid Cymru in 2017 in the three seats where it stood down in favour of the Liberal Democrats did not suggest that rich rewards would flow from its involvement in the pact either.

Indeed, it is doubtful that the Remain Alliance delivered a single seat to the Liberal Democrats. As we have already noted, most of the seats the party won were secured comfortably. In England and Wales, only the result in Westmorland & Lonsdale, where the former party leader, Tim Farron, was defending his seat, was at all close – a majority of 3.7 points over the Conservatives. But even this figure is a little more than the average maximum benefit of 3.5 per cent that we have suggested might have accrued to the Liberal

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Democrats from the absence of a Green candidate. True, we might note that when the Greens did last fight the seat – in 2015 – the party did win as much as 3.7 per cent of the vote, but in general the performance of the Greens in 2019 was, although stronger than in 2017, still weaker than in 2015. All in all, it seems unlikely that Mr Farron's seat was saved by the alliance.

However, the pact did not extend to some of the seats that the Liberal Democrats had hopes of winning. The Greens stood in Carshalton & Wallington, which was narrowly lost by the incumbent Liberal Democrat MP, Tom Brake. However, at 1.5 per cent the Green share of the vote was only slightly greater than the 1.3 point margin by which the seat was lost. Nearly all of the votes that went to the Greens would have had to have gone to the Liberal Democrats instead for the result to have been different. The Greens also stood in Sheffield Hallam, where the 2.9 per cent that the party won was well above the 1.2 point margin by which the Liberal Democrats failed to recapture the seat that former party leader, Nick Clegg, lost in 2017. However, this was a contest with Labour rather than the Conservatives, and it must remain uncertain as to what extent the Greens took more votes away from the Liberal Democrats than they did from Labour.

Not least of the reasons why the Remain Alliance could only have a limited effect was that it did not involve the party with the highest level of support among Remain voters, Labour. But if Labour voters could be persuaded to vote tactically for the Liberal Democrats in those seats where the Liberal Democrats appeared better placed to defeat the Conservatives – and vice versa – then the advantage that the Conservatives might derive from the split in the party preferences of Leave supporters might be reduced. No less than three organisations campaigning against Brexit attempted to promote anti-Conservative tactical voting by providing advice on their websites, based on recent polling, as to which party was best able to defeat the Conservatives in each seat. Given the evidence that voters were more likely to identify strongly as a 'Remainer' or 'Leaver' than as a supporter of any particular party,<sup>9</sup> it seemed possible that at least some voters might be willing to heed such advice.

However, in practice there is little sign that the Liberal Democrats derived much advantage from tactical voting. On average, Labour's vote fell by 6.6 points in those seats where the Liberal Democrats were second to the Conservatives in 2017, rather less than the average drop of 8.3 points that occurred in all seats in England and Wales. Even if we confine our attention to those seats where the Liberal Democrats started off within 20 points of the Conservatives (and where the incentive for Labour supporters to vote tactically might be thought to be strongest) we find that the average drop in Labour's vote was just 6.3 points. That Labour's vote did not fall more heavily in



these seats can in part be accounted for by the fact that Labour's vote was already relatively low – on average the party had won just 16 per cent of the vote in them in 2017 – and thus had less far to fall. Indeed, on average the party's vote fell on average by just 6.4 points in all Conservative-held seats in England and Wales where it had won less than 20 per cent of the vote in 2017. But even taking this into account there is no sign here of the Labour vote in general falling more heavily in those seats where the Liberal Democrats were starting off in second place. The one exception is St Albans, a seat where, exceptionally, the Liberal Democrats had gained second place in 2017 and where there was still as much as a 23 per cent Labour vote last time around. Here the Labour vote fell by as much as 14.4 points, 6 points above the England and Wales-wide average drop in the party's support. However, given that the heavily pro-Remain seat was won by the Liberal Democrats by a margin of almost 11 points, the additional tactical squeeze on the Labour vote that does seem to have occurred here appears not to have been decisive in enabling the Liberal Democrats to capture the seat.

Of course, the Liberal Democrats' hopes of winning over tactical votes from Labour were not necessarily confined to those seats where the party was second last time. If in some of the heavily pro-Remain seats in and around London where it came third last time but was now mounting a strong local campaign it could convince voters that it had a chance of winning it might hope to persuade some Labour voters to switch sides.

There were four seats (Cities of London & Westminster, Esher & Walton, South Cambridgeshire, Wimbledon) where, thanks to an average 23.3 point increase in support, the Liberal Democrats came within ten points of the Conservatives, even though the party only came third last time. In part the Liberal Democrat advance in these seats was a reflection of a poor Conservative performance – an average drop of 7.4 points, four points above what was typical of the most heavily pro-Remain seats in the south of England. However, it was also accompanied by an even bigger drop in the Labour vote – by as much as 13.5 points, seven points above the norm for such seats. So, it looks as though in some instances what was a new challenge locally by the Liberal Democrats did help to secure something of a tactical squeeze on the Labour vote – but not enough to wrest any of these seats from the Conservatives.

### Anatomy

Our analysis has identified one immediate proximate cause of the Liberal Democrats' failure to fulfil the high hopes that the party had at the beginning of the 2019 election campaign – a failure to retain the support of, let alone win further ground among, those who had voted Remain

in 2016 and Labour in 2017. It was among this group that the party above all lost ground during the election campaign and among whom, in the event, tactical voting was largely notable by its absence. However, we have raised doubts about the claim that the reason for this failure lies in the party's decision to support revoking Article 50 without holding another referendum. Where, then, might the explanation lie?

Arguably of the two principal groups of Remain voters that the party had gathered during the summer of 2019 – those who had previously voted Conservative and those who two years ago had supported Labour – the latter was always potentially the more vulnerable. Labour's stance on Brexit may not have been particularly attractive to them, but, having edged to some degree in their direction, it might at least not necessarily prove an anathema to them. In contrast, the Conservatives' pro-Brexit stance was clearly at odds with that of their supporters who wanted to stay in the EU. As a result, Labour Remainers might need further reasons beyond Brexit to stick with the Liberal Democrats, especially given that during the campaign Labour regularly reminded voters of the Liberal Democrats' involvement in the public expenditure cuts that had been implemented by the 2010–15 coalition. At the same time, popularity on other fronts might have helped win over more of the Remain vote that was still inclined to vote Conservative.

Yet in practice the Liberal Democrats proved ineffective at communicating to voters anything much beyond the party's stance on Brexit. The party's domestic policy programme was not so much unpopular as largely unknown. This became evident in polling conducted by Lord Ashcroft towards the end of the campaign in which voters were presented with a range of policy proposals and asked to identify which party was backing each one. This revealed that much of what Labour was advocating had cut through to the electorate: on average across ten of the party's policy proposals, just over half of voters (51 per cent) were able to identify them as emanating from the party. The party's proposals for nationalisation were especially widely recognised. Less ambitious though the party's programme mostly was, many a Conservative proposal was also correctly identified – on average by 43 per cent. In contrast, when voters were asked about eight policies that appeared in the Liberal Democrat manifesto, on average just 27 per cent associated them with the party. Indeed, if we leave aside the two-thirds (66 per cent) of voters who recognised revoking Article 50 as a Liberal Democrat policy, the average across the remaining domestic policy items was just 19 per cent. Even the party's distinctive policies of increasing the basic rate of income tax and the legalisation of cannabis were only recognised by 28 per cent. The position among Labour

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Remainers was little different from that among voters as a whole. In short there was little in the Liberal Democrats' campaign on domestic issues that might help persuade this group (or anyone else) to stick with the party.

At the same time, the party lacked an asset that has often been crucial to its ability to gather votes during an election campaign – a popular leader. Jo Swinson began the campaign with a reasonably respectable approval rating. According to *Opinium*, 24 per cent approved of the job that she was doing as Liberal Democrat leader while 35 per cent said they disapproved. Most (41 per cent) simply said that they neither approved nor disapproved. However, the more that voters saw of the new Liberal Democrat leader, the less they liked her. By the end of the campaign, just 19 per cent said that they approved of the job that she was doing, while as many as 46 per cent indicated that they disapproved – an even larger proportion than disapproved of the job that Tim Farron was doing at the end of what was widely regarded as a rather hapless campaign in 2017.<sup>10</sup> As a result, her net approval rating of –27 among voters in general was little better than that of the Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn (–30), while much the same was true among those who had voted Remain (amongst whom Ms Swinson had a net approval rating of –4, similar to the –5 enjoyed by Mr Corbyn). Ms Swinson's efforts evidently also did little to help make voting Liberal Democrat a particularly attractive option for Labour Remainers.

### Conclusion

In helping to precipitate an early general election the Liberal Democrats gambled that a ballot would result in both Brexit being stopped and their own parliamentary position strengthened. In the event, it did neither. While perhaps the alternative was to risk the prospect that the UK might leave the EU without a deal at the end of January 2020, the party's gamble clearly did not pay off. Backing the election must be regarded as one of the party's most serious political miscalculations in its history.

The principal source of its disappointing performance lay in its failure to retain much of the support of Remain voters that it had attracted from Labour in the wake of the European elections earlier in the year. That support was perhaps always potentially more fragile than it had seemed, given the possibility that Labour could, as it did, move in a more Remain direction. However, the party did not help itself by its apparent failure to give these voters reasons beyond Brexit to stick with the party. Even in the context of an election that had the potential to determine Britain's future relationship with the EU, a one-dimensional campaign in which the party failed to communicate its domestic agenda proved woefully inadequate.

The principal task now facing the party is to move its appeal beyond Brexit. Limited though it might have been, all the progress that it did make in 2019 in terms of votes won rested on winning over Remain voters. There was little sign of a renewed ability to restore the broader coalition that had ranged from the Celtic fringe to university towns, underpinned by strong local campaigning, that had delivered the party success in 2005 and 2010. Indeed, it looks as though much of the damage done to the party's image and reputation by its involvement in the 2010–15 coalition is still to be reversed. The task facing whoever succeeds Jo Swinson as party leader is a formidable one.

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