

Election analysis

Professor Sir John Curtice examines the outcome of the 2024 general election from the Liberal Democrats' point of view.

The 2024 Election: Sir Ed Davey's Gamble Pays Off

SIR ED DAVEY'S gamble that his party could profit handsomely from voters' disenchantment with the incumbent Conservative government paid off handsomely in the 2024 election. There are now more Liberal Democrat/Liberal MPs than at any point in the last 100 years. Yet the outcome raises important questions about the party's next steps given that voters did indeed succeed in ousting the Conservatives from office and Britain is now ruled once more by a Labour administration.

Seventy-two Liberal Democrat MPs were elected: sixty-four more than it was estimated the party would have won in 2019 if the new parliamentary boundaries introduced in 2024 had been in place on that occasion; sixty-one more than its actual tally in 2019; and ten more than the party's previous highest tally of sixty-two in 2005. Indeed, not only did the party reclaim from the SNP its position as the third largest party in the House of Commons, but it secured the election of more MPs than the Liberal Party had done at any election since 1923.

However, this performance was achieved against the backdrop of no more than minimal progress in terms of votes. The party won

12.5 per cent of the vote in Great Britain, up by only 0.7 per cent on 2019. Although this still represented the party's highest share of the vote since the calamitous fallout from its decision to enter into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010, it was still well short of the 22 per cent of the vote that it won in 2010, or indeed its performance (and that of its predecessor parties) at any election between 1974 and 2010. Moreover, the party still trailed in fourth place in terms of votes. It was overtaken as the third largest party by Reform UK, who won 14.7 per cent of the vote in an outcome that was redolent of Ukip's success in coming third in votes in the 2015 general election.

As a result of this contrast between the party's minimal progress in terms of votes and its success in terms of seats, the party's share of the seats in the House of Commons, 11 per cent, is almost commensurate with its share of the UK-wide vote (12.5 per cent). That, of course, is a remarkable outcome for a party that historically has struggled to convert votes into seats.

But how did this outcome come about? What were the foundations of its success? And what are the implications for the party's future prospects now that Labour are back in power?

Sir Ed Davey's gamble

The 2019 election left the Liberal Democrats in a relatively strong position from which to profit from any misfortune that might befall the Conservative government under Boris Johnson. The party's average share of the vote was much higher in seats that would (under the new boundaries) be defended by the Conservatives at the next election (13.4 per cent) than it was in constituencies where Labour were locally the incumbents (7.5 per cent). Thus, although the Conservatives emerged from that election in a much stronger position than Labour, the Liberal Democrats found themselves second to the Conservatives in

eighty-five seats, whereas they were the challengers locally to Labour in just ten.

Misfortune is, of course, precisely what befell the Conservatives. First, the party's vote fell precipitously in the wake of the initial revelations in December 2021 that the Covid-19 lockdown regulations had been interpreted more liberally in Downing Street than anywhere else in the country. Then it fell sharply once again in September/October 2022 after Liz Truss's government announced a set of unfunded tax cuts that triggered an adverse reaction on financial markets, necessitating action by the Bank of England. By the time Ms Truss left Downing Street, the

Ed Davey launches the Liberal Democrat manifesto, 10 June 2024 (photo by Dinendra Harla)



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Conservatives were down to an average of 25 per cent in the polls.

Not, however, that the Liberal Democrats themselves appeared to benefit much from the Conservatives' misfortune. At 9 points, the party's average rating in the polls when Ms Truss resigned was little different from what it had been twelve months earlier, shortly before the first revelations about 'partygate'. Indeed, on average in the polls conducted at that time, just 7 per cent of 2019 Conservatives said they would now vote Liberal Democrat, far below the 22 per cent who indicated they had switched their loyalties to Labour.

However, the party itself showed little interest in or concern about its overall standing in the polls. Rather, it anticipated that it would be able to profit from the Conservatives' difficulties in those constituencies where the party was best placed to defeat the local Tory MP and it was on these seats that it focused its campaigning efforts. The party's performance in parliamentary by-elections gave some credence to this strategy. Early gains from the Conservatives in Chesham & Amer sham, North Shropshire, and Tiverton & Honiton, accompanied as they were by an average 13-point fall in Labour support, suggested that Labour supporters had put their animosity to the Liberal Democrats' involvement in the 2010–15 coalition with the Conservatives behind them, and were now willing to vote tactically for the Liberal Democrats where that seemed the better way locally of ensuring the defeat of an unpopular Conservative government.

Perhaps even more importantly, there were clear signs in the English local elections in May 2023 that the party was performing best in places where it was starting off second to the Conservatives.¹ In a sample of wards where the BBC collected the detailed voting figures, support for the Liberal Democrats rose on average by over 5 points in wards where they had been second to the Conservatives the

previous year, even though nationally the party's support was only up by 1 point. Labour, in contrast, performed less well in these wards. It looked as though some anti-Conservative tactical voting was now taking place outside the unusually heightened atmosphere of a parliamentary by-election. Unless the Conservatives' electoral fortunes improved, Sir Ed Davey's decision to focus on the 'blue wall' of seats where his party would be starting off the 2024 election in second place to the Conservatives looked as though it might pay off.

What happened in 2024

In the event, Liz Truss's successor as Conservative leader, Rishi Sunak, proved unable to turn his party's fortunes around. When, rain-soaked, Mr Sunak announced outside 10 Downing Street that he was calling an election on 5 July 2024, rather earlier than most people had anticipated, his party was still languishing at just 24 per cent in the polls. Its prospects were not improved when, two weeks later, Nigel Farage announced he was returning to the political front line as leader of Reform, most of whose support was coming from the Conservatives. In the event the Conservatives ended up on polling day with 24.4 per cent of the vote, down 20.4 points since 2019, and by far the party's worst ever result in its history.

As the polls had long been anticipating, the Liberal Democrats themselves only benefited marginally from direct switching from the Conservatives. On average, four polls conducted by Lord Ashcroft, Ipsos, More in Common, and YouGov found that on 5 July still only 7 per cent of 2019 Conservative voters had switched to the Liberal Democrats, well below the 12 per cent who switched to Labour, let alone the 23 per cent who voted for Reform. Nevertheless, so big a collapse in the Conservative share of the vote was almost bound to bring the Liberal Democrats a not inconsiderable benefit. After all, there were twenty-three

Table 1: Change in party share of the vote 2019–24 by tactical situation

<i>Mean change in % vote 2019–24</i>	<i>Conservative/Labour seats</i>	<i>Conservative/Lib Dem seats</i>	<i>All Conservative-held seats</i>	<i>All opposition-held seats</i>
Conservative	-26.2	-23.6	-25.3	-13.9
Labour	+6.1	+0.1	+4.8	-2.1
Liberal Democrat	-1.6	+9.1	+1.0	-0.8
Reform	+17.6	+12.9	+16.5	+8.5
Greens	+3.0	+1.8	+2.8	+6.7

In the case of the Liberal Democrats and Greens the figure shown is based on those constituencies fought by the party in 2019 and 2024. In the case of Reform, the figure is based on all constituencies fought in 2024, irrespective of whether the party fought the seat in 2019.

constituencies where the Conservative lead over the Liberal Democrats was less than 20.4 points in 2019. In these constituencies at least, the party would be able to gain the seat even if all that happened was that the Conservative vote fell in line with the national fall in support while the Liberal Democrats retained the same share of the vote as in 2019.

In the event, however, the geography of the decline in the Conservative vote advantaged both Labour and the Liberal Democrats yet further. As Table 1 shows, Tory support typically fell much more heavily in seats the party was defending – on average by just over 25 points – than it did elsewhere, albeit the figure was a little lower where the Liberal Democrats were second. This inevitably made more Tory seats vulnerable to defeat. Moreover, even among the seats the Conservatives were defending, their vote fell more heavily in places where they had previously been strongest. In seats where the Conservative lead in 2019 over their principal opponents was more than 25 points, the party's support in fact fell on average by nearly 28 points, albeit the figure was again, a little lower where the Liberal Democrats were their principal challengers. In the event, the Liberal Democrats gained twenty-nine seats where the fall in Conservative support was bigger than the size of the Conservative majority in 2019, rather more than

the twenty-three we would have anticipated from the national movement alone.

At the same time, as Table 1 also shows, some opposition voters appear to have been willing to vote for whichever of Labour or the Liberal Democrats was better able to win locally. Liberal Democrat support rose on average by 9 points in seats where the party started off in second place to the Conservatives, far better than in any other kind of seat. Meanwhile, Labour's support in these seats did no more than hold steady. In contrast, in Tory-held seats where Labour began in second place, support for the Liberal Democrats actually fell back by just over one and a half points, a worse performance than in any other kind of seat, while Labour's vote increased by 6 points, markedly better than elsewhere.

This pattern of anti-Conservative tactical voting was remarkably consistent. Among the forty-eight constituencies where the Liberal Democrats began 30 points or less behind the Conservatives, only in five did Labour's vote rise more than that of the Liberal Democrats, while in one seat the two parties advanced by more or less the same amount. Four of these six seats were ones that had previously been held by the Liberal Democrats, and where Labour's vote might already have been squeezed to a greater extent than elsewhere. Another instance was Finchley & Golders

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Green, a constituency with a significant Jewish population where the Liberal Democrat candidate in 2019 had been the former Labour MP, Luciana Berger, who had quit her former party over its failure to deal with allegations of antisemitism, allegations that Sir Keir Starmer had since done much to address. The final example was Farnham & Bordon, where the Liberal Democrat candidate was from a minority background. Otherwise, it was only in seats where the Liberal Democrats started off more than 30 points behind the Conservatives, and where often the party's lead over the third-placed Labour candidate in 2019 was typically no more than a narrow one, that there was more than the occasional example of the Liberal Democrat vote advancing less strongly than Labour's. However, even in these seats Labour outperformed the Liberal Democrats in just one in three (twelve) of the thirty-seven seats in question.

Conversely, only rarely did the Liberal Democrats register any notable advance in seats where Labour started off second to the

Conservatives. The two biggest exceptions were Shropshire North (+42.4) and Honiton & Sidmouth (+35.9), in both of which the predecessor constituency had been gained by the party in a by-election during the 2019–24 parliament. Otherwise, the party's share of the vote increased by 15.4 points in Burnley, which, of course, had been held by the Liberal Democrats between 2005 and 2015, and where Labour's performance (-8.5 points) may have been adversely affected, as it certainly was in many such constituencies, by the presence of a substantial Muslim community concerned about Sir Keir Starmer's stance towards events in Gaza. Otherwise, the Liberal Democrat share of the vote more than edged up in only half a dozen or so seats, most of which were places where, though Labour were second, they started off a long way behind the Conservatives.

However, more lay behind the scale of the Liberal Democrats' success in capturing seats from the Conservatives than the willingness of Labour supporters to switch tactically in

The Liberal Democrat MPs elected on 4 July 2024 (photo by Dinendra Harla)



favour of the Liberal Democrats. Overall, the Liberal Democrats gained twenty-nine seats where the fall in the Conservative support was less than the Tory majority last time (thereby doubling the gains the party made from the Conservatives in seats where they started off in second place). But only in seven of these seats was the fall in the squeezed Labour vote sufficient to take the Liberal Democrats over the line (assuming they were the sole recipients of Labour's lost support).

Meanwhile Table 1 above shows that, typically, the Greens made least progress in seats where the Liberal Democrats started off second to the Conservatives. At the same time, it also shows that Reform (the increase in whose support on that secured by the Brexit Party in 2019 was boosted by the fact that the Brexit Party did not contest Conservative-held seats in 2019), advanced less strongly in Conservative/Liberal Democrat seats than it did in Conservative/Labour contests. Reform tended to perform best in seats where support for Leave was high in 2016. Meanwhile, the average vote for Leave in seats where the Liberal Democrats were the principal challengers in 2024 was just 50 per cent, well below the 58 per cent figure that pertained in seats where Labour were challenging the Conservatives. It looks likely that, in many of the seats where the Liberal Democrats were challenging the Conservatives, rather fewer 2019 Conservative voters switched to Reform and rather more to the Liberal Democrats than was the case across the country as a whole (see above) – and that that pattern together with a tactical squeeze on the Greens also helps to account for the scale of the Liberal Democrats' gains from the Conservatives.

That said, and uncomfortable though it might be for the party to acknowledge, Reform's success in taking votes away from the Conservatives helped pave the way to Westminster for many a Liberal Democrat candidate. Above all else, the key reason why the

Liberal Democrats were able to win so many seats from the Conservatives was the unprecedented scale of the collapse in Conservative support, much of which headed for Reform. It was Reform who eroded the foundations of the Conservative 'blue wall', thereby making it possible for Sir Ed Davey's bulldozer to knock over the bricks.

Scotland

Elsewhere, the only other seats gained by the party were four from the SNP north of the border. Two of these – Caithness, Sutherland & Easter Ross, and North East Fife – had been represented by the party in the 2019–24 parliament; but in both cases it was estimated that the SNP would have had a narrow majority if the new parliamentary boundaries had been in force. At the same time, the party recaptured the Mid-Dunbartonshire (formerly East Dunbartonshire) that had been lost by the party's leader, Jo Swinson, in 2019, and in what was the most remarkable of the party's gains, captured Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire, where the Liberal Democrats started off in third place but where the two predecessor constituencies (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch & Strathspey, and Ross, Skye & Lochaber) had both been in Liberal Democrat hands until 2015.

However, as with the party's advances in the blue wall, these successes were the exception rather than the rule. The party's share of the vote increased on average by 14.1 points in the six Scottish seats that the party either gained or retained. Outside of this group, the party's share of the vote increased by more than 5 points in just one other seat, Gordon & Buchan. Across Scotland as a whole, the party's share of the vote (9.7 per cent) barely increased at all (+0.2 points). Its ability to perform as well as it did in the Scottish seats it did win appears to have rested heavily on its ability to limit the increase in Labour support

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within them to an average of just 4.6 points when across Scotland as a whole Labour's support was up by nearly 17 points (in contrast to just a half-point increase in England and a 4-point fall in Wales). Of course, in this instance the principal target of the apparent tactical switching was the SNP rather than the Conservatives.

The downside

The Liberal Democrats were so successful in winning seats in 2024 because they did what a smaller party has to do if it is to win seats under the single member plurality electoral system, that is, to concentrate its vote geographically. Its success in so doing is reflected in one commonly used measure of variation, that is, the standard deviation of the party's share of the vote across constituencies. This

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increased from 10.0 in 2019 to as much as 13.2 in 2024, well above the previous high of 11.0 recorded in 2001 in the wake of the party's efforts under Paddy Ashdown to concentrate its support. This meant that the party's support was now much less evenly spread than that of the Conservatives (the standard deviation of whose support was 10.8, down from 16.7 in 2019, and reflected in the fact that the Conservatives' 24 per cent of the vote yielded just 19 per cent of the seats), let alone that of Reform UK, for whom the equivalent figure was 6.7, only slightly above the 6.2 figure for Ukip in 2015.

But there is also a sharp downside to the fact that the increase in party's support was more or less confined to those seats where it was starting off in second place to the Conservatives – the party now looks poorly placed

to profit from any unpopularity that should now befall the new Labour government. As we noted earlier, even after the 2019 election – and despite the weakness of Labour's performance – the Liberal Democrats were second to Labour in just ten constituencies. Meanwhile, on average the Liberal Democrat vote fell on average in these seats in 2024 by 8.3 points, with the Greens (+9.9 points) typically being the party making most progress within them. At the same time, the party struggled to hold its own (an average fall of 0.6 points) in Labour-held seats where the Liberal Democrats started in third place or lower.

As a result – and despite the fact that Labour itself made little progress in terms of votes outside Scotland – there are now even fewer seats, just six, where the Liberal Democrats lie second to Labour. Moreover, in only two of these, (Burnley, 8.6 per cent majority)

and Sheffield Hallam (15.9 per cent), is the party now within 20 points of the winning Labour candidate. In contrast, Reform are second to Labour in

eighty-nine seats (and behind by 20 points or less in thirty), while the Greens are in that position in forty constituencies (though behind by 20 points or less in just three). In short, the Liberal Democrats' chances of making significant by-election gains from the government in this parliament, let alone of making gains at Labour's expense at the next election look remote indeed.

Meanwhile, the party now finds itself primarily on the defensive in seats where it is in competition with the Conservatives. Despite the collapse in the Tory vote, at eighty-four, the number of constituencies where the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats shared first and second place is actually seven down on the ninety-one seats at the 2019 election. The only difference is that, whereas after 2019, the Liberal Democrats were (on the estimated

results for new constituencies) in first place in six of them, now they are first in sixty-four. In short, the 2024 election has created few new opportunities for the party to make further gains from the Conservatives. Rather, with twenty of the seats the party now holds vulnerable to a swing of 5 per cent to the Conservatives, and as many as forty-four to a 10 per cent swing, the party is potentially vulnerable to any revival in Tory fortunes.

A new strategy?

Sir Ed Davey's gamble paid off, but it has seemingly left the party ill-equipped to make further progress in the circumstances that now pertain of a newly elected Labour government that could well struggle to maintain its already limited popularity given the difficult fiscal and economic legacy it has inherited. The gamble focused on harnessing anti-Conservative support among a geographically limited section of the electorate while largely eschewing any attempt to increase the party's

support across the country as a whole. One consequence of being part of what in effect was a tacit anti-Conservative alliance that left Labour largely unchallenged elsewhere is that the party gave voters living outside the 'blue wall' little reason to stick with it. According to the polls conducted immediately after the 2024 election nearly three in ten (29 per cent) of 2019 Liberal Democrat voters switched to Labour this time around – many of them, incidentally, opponents of Brexit, among whom the polls suggest support for the Liberal Democrats was down by 4 points on 2019. Having captured the blue wall, the question that now faces the Liberal Democrats is how they can break out beyond it – and become a party that is competitive nationwide once more.

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1 John Curtice, 'The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2023 local elections: Breakthrough or consolidation?', *Journal of Liberal History*, 120 (2023).

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- Improving our website.
- Helping with our presence at Liberal Democrat conferences.
- Organising our meeting programme.
- Commissioning articles, and locating pictures, for the *Journal of Liberal History*

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