

within parameters set by the government – such as, for example, the contracts for difference mechanism for supporting renewable power, introduced by the coalition, or biodiversity net gain.

She agreed with Professor Carter that the coming election offered real opportunities. It would be important for the Liberal Democrats to retain a strong environmental stance, not least to help persuade Green and Labour voters to support Liberal Democrat candidates in winnable seats. She predicted that the Conservatives would stress the costs of green policies; Liberal Democrats should

not pretend there were no costs, or that no change in behaviour would be required, but should highlight the need to ensure that the burdens were fairly shared, and stress the need to protect the life chances of future generations. She also felt that the party had not been good enough at spelling out the benefits to people in the present, in terms, for example, of health and jobs. She recognised the challenge of promoting ambitious green policies in rural areas in particular, but pointed to the party's recent policy paper on food and farming, which had pledged additional support

for farmers moving to systems which built in environmental considerations.

She looked forward to the general election manifesto stressing the Liberal Democrat commitment to the environment, not just because it was the right thing to do, not just because humanity was facing a global crisis, but also because it was such a key element of what made Liberal Democrats who they were.

**Duncan Brack is the Editor of the *Journal of Liberal History*. In 2010–12, he was a special adviser to Chris Huhne, Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change in the Liberal Democrat–Conservative coalition government.**

# Reviews

---

## The Liberal Democrats: voters and strategies

David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley, *The Liberal Democrats: From hope to despair to where?* (Manchester University Press)

Review by Chris Butler

Academic interest in the Liberal Democrats has waned substantially since the party's electoral collapse at the 2015 general election. This new text by David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley is thus a very welcome resource, for both scholars and others interested in the fortunes of the Lib Dems. The book's stated aim is to analyse the fortunes and prospects of the party, particularly reflecting on

the strategic dilemmas it faces as a third party in a majoritarian system.

The authors are well qualified to undertake this endeavour. Cutts and Russell have both published substantially on the party for twenty years. Townsley is described as a visiting fellow at the London School of Economics, but the most relevant part of his biography is his role as the party's deputy head of insights and data

in the run-up to the 2019 general election.

In many ways, the book acts as a sequel to Russell's 2005 book, *Neither Left nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* with Ed Fieldhouse (Manchester University Press) in its focus on who Liberal Democrat voters are and how well (or indeed, poorly) the party maintains its electoral coalition. Whereas Russell's book included

an opening section detailing the party's history from the Whigs to the merger, this book rarely looks back beyond 2005. The first seven chapters offer a history of the party's electoral strategies and success from the 2005 general election until 2019, while the final two chapters offer more of an overview of the changing geography of the party's support and the effectiveness of its campaigning tactics.

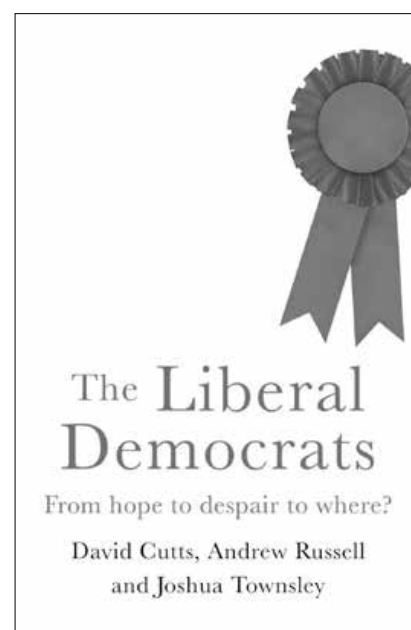
The analysis focuses on the party's ability to maximise votes rather than venturing into how the party might best achieve its policy goals. The authors' general thesis is that the Liberal Democrats are hampered by a permanent political identity crisis, often resorting to short-term strategies to build electoral success, but which leave the party with only soft support and therefore vulnerable to the positioning of other parties and events elsewhere. A recurring argument is that the Liberal Democrats' ability to build electoral success is constrained by their lack of agency in a system that is still largely dominated by two parties. Additionally, they hold that the party remains damaged by the coalition and has lost its previous competitive campaigning advantage.

These arguments are generally well supported by a thorough analysis of data from the British Election Survey and post-election surveys of candidates' agents. The authors present a detailed overview of the demographics and political preferences of likely Liberal Democrat voters and of the intensity of the

party's campaigning in key seats at each election since 2010, thereby providing a uniquely rich history of the party's basis of support. Many of the arguments, such as how the party lost support during the coalition, have been made before but not necessarily in this much detail. The starkest finding is that opportunities for the party to take a popular stance on an issue in contrast to the main two parties, such as over the Iraq War, only seldom arise.

In some respects, however, the book gets a little lost in the intricate detail without analysing the bigger picture. By focusing so much on available quantitative data about the nature of Liberal Democrat support, the book does an excellent job of showing what happened to the party's support at each of the recent elections, but reveals less about what the party could have done differently. The authors are well connected to the party, and it is a shame that they don't enhance their analysis with greater qualitative investigation into what the party's strategy was at each election and what the constraints were on other alternative options.

Instead, the analysis is limited to the data that is most easily available. Whilst the British Election Study (BES) is generally regarded as the 'gold standard' of social science surveys in terms of having a truly representative large sample of participants, it does not ask questions about everything. So, for example, when testing which policies had



the greatest effect on Liberal Democrat support in 2010, the authors are able to look at the effects of the mansion tax but not of tuition fees, and they do not augment their analysis by looking for alternative sources of public opinion data.

Further, when analysing the party's support base in recent elections, the authors test the party's success in rebuilding its 2010 voter coalition. This analysis seems to have been undertaken simply because the data was available in BES rather than because the party ought to have been rebuilding its 2010 vote base. Why not instead look at how well the party did among those who were most ideologically or demographically inclined to vote Liberal Democrat? In earlier sections, the authors (rightly) criticise the party's 2010 voter coalition for being built on too much soft, tactical support, so it seems odd that for later elections they judge the party against the standard of its 2010 support base.

## Reviews

The bigger weakness is the failure to grapple with the party's dilemma of how best to increase both the number of voters and the number of seats. The two do not always go hand in hand: in 2019 the party received an additional 4.2 per cent of the vote share but lost seats; whereas in 2024 the party leapt to a record number of MPs while barely increasing its national vote share. The book's analysis of the party's support focuses on who voted Liberal Democrat nationally rather than on who supports them (or not) in winnable constituencies, which is arguably a more pressing concern for the party. The chapter on the changing geography of the party's support concludes that demographics have become more important to the party than geography. This is an important development with implications for the party's strategy – demographically based support may offer more opportunities for the party to develop a more stable base of supporters, but possibly at the expense of having so many local strongholds – however the strategic implications of this are not really dwelt upon. The authors recommend that the party leans into social liberalism on the basis of its greater support among socially liberal voters but offer little advice on how to turn socially liberal ideals into messages that are salient enough to win over voters more commonly concerned with the economy and public services.

The final substantive chapter on whether the party has lost its

relative campaigning advantage is innovative and very valuable, given how this has been an underappreciated aspect of the party's success in recent decades. Here, the authors argue that the party is no longer the relatively dominant force on the ground that it once was and advocate for it to be more innovative in its digital campaigns. However, I would be cautious about drawing such clear conclusions as the authors do. Earlier chapters reveal that voters increasingly report receiving campaign literature from the Conservatives. This may well have more to do with the explosion in national campaign spending on direct mail than the Conservatives mobilising an army of activists on the ground. The authors allow that the party's digital team also get to mark their own homework, with the 2019 digital campaigns being described as effective on the basis of interviews with the digital team and industry press but without any other supporting empirical evidence. For me, the key statistic in this chapter is how reluctant party members are to amplify their party's messages on social media, demonstrating the tension between motivating activists and running campaigns for a wider audience. However, the results from the 2024 election demonstrate that when the political opportunity arises, Liberal Democrat campaigning can still be ruthlessly effective.

Overall, this book offers a thorough history of what has happened to Liberal Democrat support and the

party's campaigning intensity in key seats between 2005 and 2019 and ably demonstrates how the effects of the party's choices are constrained by the positioning and perceptions of its two main rivals. But, as a guide for party strategists, it is limited by its analysis, never really offering the party a resolution to the central dilemma that they identify – how can the Liberal Democrats build up a strong and sustainable basis of support *and* parliamentary representation as the third party within a first-past-the-post system? Having now achieved the latter with the aid of substantial tactical anti-Conservative voting, the party needs to reflect on what the best long-term strategy would be to solidify support in these areas and expand its parliamentary representation without compromising on its policy goals. At the very end of the book, the authors speculate that, given the party's lack of agency and low levels of support, it may be more effective in the long run at influencing the agenda rather than at winning power. While this may be an uncomfortable conclusion for supporters of the party, it is worthy of greater discussion than the authors give it here.

Dr Chris Butler is a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Political Science at the University of Antwerp. His work on UK politics and how politicians respond to public opinion has been published in journals such as *Party Politics*, *Parliamentary Affairs* and *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

See page 2 for a special reader offer for *The Liberal Democrats: From hope to despair to where?*