



Political Studies Association

PSA Media Briefing

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The Liberal Democrats

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The Liberal Democrats - Dr David Cutts (University of Bath)

The electoral fate of the Liberal Democrats in May is currently the focus of much debate. Following the highly publicised policy u-turn on tuition fees, the Liberal Democrats have struggled to poll above 10% nationally and are now fighting the Greens for fourth place. Over the electoral cycle, the party suffered numerous by-election embarrassments and recorded large scale second order election losses including a substantial reduction in their local councillor base. And with Nick Clegg's net leader satisfaction ratings consistently below the other main party leaders; the 'party of protest' crown long since passed to others; and recent credible evidence from the British electoral survey (BES) that its drop in support is broadly proportional to prior strength, many commentators feel that the party faces an uphill task to avoid being reduced to its pre-1997 levels of representation in Westminster. But can the Liberal Democrats avoid an electoral meltdown or will the comfort blankets of incumbency advantage, a strong local platform and intensive nationally coordinated locally operationalized campaigning bear fruit and enable the Liberal Democrats to buck the national trend. This brief presentation addresses these issues and details how the party's joined-up national and local campaign strategy in those seats it currently holds could yet save the party from electoral catastrophe.

The first two slides provide a brief overview of the Liberal Democrats' electoral woes post 2010. The decline in support was almost immediate with the party regularly polling just 10% of the national vote or below from December 2010. For long periods support has remained static with any possible recovery halted recently by the rise of the Greens. At one point earlier this month, the Liberal Democrats polled as low as 5% (YouGov) and are now regularly battling the Greens for 4th place. The once 'by-election kings' have become paupers with lost deposits in 11 of the 19 by-elections (excluding those in Northern Ireland) over the Parliament. The loss of 10 MEPs at the 2014 European election was a 'new low' and followed seat losses in the devolved elections in Wales and Scotland and a reduction in its councillor base of more than 1300 since 2010. At the same time, 'I agree with Nick' remains a distant memory. In an era of more personalised politics, Nick Clegg's approval and net satisfaction leader ratings have regularly propped up the rest, for a time well a drift from the others, although recent indications suggest he is at least now vying with Ed Miliband in the approval stakes. Here there is a brief reminder that the Liberal Democrats have a much lower social and partisan base than the two main parties. And that two of the key drivers of its success pre 2010 - its ability to position itself in order to mop up protest votes and the role of a popular party leader in enhancing the party's credibility as an electoral force worth voting for – are now largely redundant. Given this, it is hardly surprising that the party has turned once again to its safety net of the local – stressing the local popularity of incumbents; working hard locally in constituencies with a strong local platform; and intensive local party activism.

However, whether this is enough to save them remains open to debate (slide 3). Recent evidence from the British Electoral Survey (BES) indicates that the party is losing most of its support in seats where they start from a strong position and losing least in their weaker seats – in other words mirroring changes in other elections over the cycle where their drop in support has been broadly proportional to prior strength. In contrast to Ashcroft polling which suggests that the Liberal Democrats are likely to do better in seats where an incumbent stands, the implications from the findings are that the party stands to lose several more seats than the national polls with uniform swing would suggest. This is essentially the crux of the debate – just how influential is the local

(incumbent popularity; local platform; campaigning) on Liberal Democrat support; and how will this play out in 2015?

The local popularity of incumbents is notoriously difficult to calculate (Slide 4). But recent evidence suggests that Liberal Democrat incumbents can benefit by as much as 8% (reflecting candidate-centred incumbency built on a personal vote) while the two main parties more generally record incumbency electoral advantages of between 1-2% (more party than candidate centred). With 11 party incumbents not standing in 2015, it suggests that the party already faces a battle to save roughly a fifth of its seats. Based on previous evidence, party first time incumbents benefit more than the two main parties from the famed 'sophomore surge' – with 11 first term MPs (including Thornton in Eastleigh) it is possible that this may be a factor in holding key seats.

The importance of local election success in securing and maintaining a local base of support and acting as a platform for Liberal Democrat success at the national level is well established (Slide 5). Despite large scale losses at the local level over the electoral cycle, a number of Liberal Democrat strongholds have bucked the trend and increased their local base (Bath; Carshalton and Wallington; Chippenham; Eastleigh; Sutton and Cheam; Westmoreland and Lonsdale). Indeed, closer inspection of the data suggests that the party maintains a strong local councillor base in 18 incumbent seats (the majority in excess of 40% councillor strength). Given that we exclude seats in the Highlands and Cornwall where Independents are in abundance locally, there is evidence that in the places that matter (the seats they are defending) the Liberal Democrats, by and large, still maintain the capabilities to mount a successful defence. A strong local platform is vital for building and sustaining the local candidates' personal profile and more generally enhancing local campaign activity. And as the following slides show this is integral to the party's strategy in 2015.

A large number of previous academic studies have emphasised the importance of local campaigning on the electoral outcome. Moreover, they have time and again provided strong evidence that, of all the parties, Liberal Democrat campaigning is the most effective. This is illustrated in slide 6.

Given the electoral context, it is clear that the party is running a strongly defensive campaign centred on the seats it already holds (slide 7). **Note – one caveat to this is that it is supporting activity in a handful of non-held seats – the two stand out here are Watford and Montgomeryshire. From 2014 internal polling of key strongholds, the party sees young women aged 18-35 as the cohort most likely to remain loyal to the party (among undecided voters) and are actively targeting this group from the centre.

Nationally, the party's strategy is to remind the electorate that it is a party capable of operating in government and working in the national interest; that it took tough decisions and is fiscally responsible. It is seeking to maximise credit for policies where it can (pupil premium; increasing the tax threshold etc.) but recognises its message has become blurred. This is backed up by polling evidence – for instance only 19% correctly identified the party's flagship tax policy on raising the threshold as a Liberal Democrat policy!!

To counter this problem, part of the national strategy is to promote party policy successes in government by illustrating how the local constituency has benefited – this is an integral part of the joined up national-local campaign in its key strongholds (slide 8): national messages directly adapted to suit the local context (e.g. x amount of school children have free school meals in Hornsey and Wood Green thanks to the Liberal Democrats pupil premium policy). To aid the joined

up national-local campaign effort the party has sought (over the past few years) to learn the lessons of the Obama 2012 campaign. Two major consequences have come from this: a) an emphasis on personal contact (up to election day BUT also in advance of the long campaign period which they believe has enabled the party to maintain a base of support in its key strongholds); b) the sole right to use CONNECT (the electoral software used by the Obama campaign) – this is superior to the other software systems used by its opponents and has enhanced capabilities that enable national campaign strategists to oversee fluctuations in support within and between key seats and adapt local messages to suit different types of waverers/undecided voters. There is clear evidence that the party is upping its game here in the seats that matter.

Building on from this, it is important to restate the electoral battlegrounds that face the Liberal Democrats (slides 9 and 10); 37 of the 57 seats are LD-Con battlegrounds; 17 are LD-Lab contests. In Scotland, the party is vulnerable to the SNP surge and has little or no message to directly combat this bar emphasising personal incumbency and mobilising an anti-SNP tactical vote. Elsewhere a number of these LD-Con battlegrounds depend on where the squeezed Labour vote from 2010 who voted Liberal Democrat goes in 2015. Here national-local joined up messages and personal contact is focussed on reducing the Green vote (and looks to be fairly successful in places). But there is little evidence that the party has a strategy of dealing with UKIP. Indeed evidence from the BES suggests that they may be underestimating the number of traditional Labour voters who are generally more socially Conservative on issues such as immigration but flirted with the Liberal Democrats as a protest in 2010 and have subsequently moved to UKIP. And whilst this may not result in any UKIP successes, this does suggest that the Liberal Democrats cannot rely on a pool of support that it squeezed to vote for it in 2010. More generally, the situation on the ground is pretty volatile with the party adapting campaign tactics and techniques on a constituency by constituency basis.

In summary (slide 11), how well the Liberal Democrats hold up in 2015 may determine which party wins the most seats nationally. If Labour perform reasonably well against the Conservatives in their head-to-head battles but loses seats in Scotland, its prospects of winning the most seats may rely on it taking seats off the Liberal Democrats. And, at the same time, on the Liberal Democrats winning most of the seats it holds where it is primary opponent is the Conservatives. By contrast, if the Conservatives win a large proportion of its battles with the Liberal Democrats, these gains may offset losses incurred from Labour. Either way, if the Liberal Democrats maintain a large proportion of its seats or it is reduced to pre 1997 levels of representation, the party could still find itself back in government.

Can the Liberal Democrats Keep Their Seats?

David Cutts (University of Bath)



Figures: Electoral Performance Post 2010

- 2010: 57 seats (-5); 23% vote (+1%)
- More than 1300 councillor seats lost
- Lost 10 MEPs in the 2014 European Elections
- In 11 out of 19 by-elections since 2010 (excluding NI) – Lib Dems have lost their deposit
- Lost 12 seats in the Devolved election in Scotland – only hold 5 seats in Holyrood and 5 in Cardiff

Key Figures: Polling and Clegg

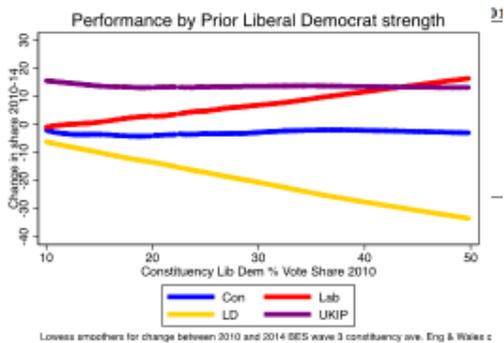
- Hit the 10% national poll figure in Dec 2010 – little evidence of a recovery – recently 5% (below the Greens!).

• Clegg – least popular of unpopular leaders

Recap – Key drivers (in the past)

- Low social and partisan base
- Party of Protest (gone!)
- Party Leader (gone!)
- The local – popularity of the incumbent; the local base; the local campaign (The only show in town!)

BES Evidence



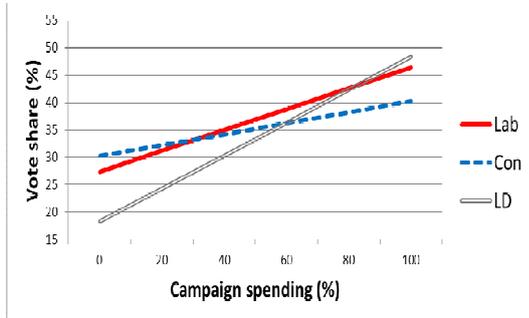
Popularity of Incumbent Candidates

- Liberal Democrat incumbents can benefit by as much as 8% (reflecting candidate-centred incumbency built on a personal vote)
- Conservative/Labour incumbent electoral advantage of between 1-2% (more party than candidate centred).
- 11 Retired/Resigned LD MPs in 2015 (+ Portsmouth South)
- Sophomore Surge for 11 First time MPs?

The Local Platform

- 14 LD incumbents (seats with 40% + councillor base); 18 seats (30%+) – excludes Highlands/Cornwall
- ****All 18 seats LD/Con battlegrounds****
- LDs have lost 213 seats in the LD/Con (37) seats
- LDs have lost 186 seats in the LD/Lab (17) seats
- LD Local platform seat share in LD/Con seats is 33.5% (-8.6% since 2010) – declined by a fifth!
- LD Local platform seat share in LD/Lab seats is 13.7% (-13% since 2010) – seat share halved!

Local Party Campaigning in 2010



National Campaign

- Strongly Defensive (incumbent seats)
- Flirting with the odd gain – Montgomeryshire and Watford
- Internal Polling – young women 18-34
- Core messages – party able to work in govt; fiscal responsibility (not cut as much as Tories – or borrow as much as Labour); pupil premium etc...
- BUT – the ‘fog’ of coalition...
- Polling evidence suggests few aware of LD policies or successes in coalition

Joined up National-Local Campaign

- National messages (policy successes) adapted to suit the local seat/contest
- Influence of the 2012 Obama campaign:
 - a) Personal contact – in non-election period to maintain base – now used to build and maintain popularity of the local incumbent
 - b) Use of CONNECT – electoral advantage on the ground (compared to competitors) – link-up between local and national

The Four S's and Party Strategy

- 57 'mini general elections'
- Safe; Stay at Home; Squeeze; Switch
- Squeezing Conservatives in LD-Lab battlegrounds – emphasis on working with them in Coalition
- LD-Con battlegrounds remain the key – what will happen to the squeezed Labour vote here (anti-Conservative coalition)?
- Strategy for Greens – national/local message; vulnerable to tactical LD message

SNP & UKIP



- LD strategy less clear: fight against SNP dependent on local popularity of the incumbent
- UKIP – little or no national/local strategy to combat UKIP. Could this be a mistake?
- 2014 BES – 36% of UKIP party identifiers in LD held seats voted LD in 2010....old Labour (socially Conservative)

Conclusion

- “Not how few seats we will win, but how many”
- Rear guard effort to hold onto incumbent seats
- All about the local.....and the joined up national-local campaign
- Perception that in many LD held seats (particularly where fighting the Conservatives) – huge number of undecideds (perhaps more than there has ever been!)
- Either way could yet be back in government!!
