Analysing the electoral incentives and obstacles to co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats

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Abstract

The continued possibility of hung parliaments in Westminster requires political parties to contemplate co-operation alongside competition. This is a particularly important and timely issue for the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, who both suffered heavy defeat in the 2015 general election. This paper utilises constituency elections data and public opinion data, and analyses the electoral incentives and obstacles to co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. Inevitably, it finds that there are both benefits and costs for both parties, but that ultimately co-operation represents a big risk for both parties in their current formation. Alongside this, public opinion both broadly and amongst their own supporters is far from enthusiastic. Brought together, these conclusions show that there is potential for co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats based on electoral concerns, but there are big risks too. Without a big change in each party’s thinking there are more reasons to be pessimistic at present.
Introduction

This chapter addresses the electoral incentives and obstacles to co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, as well as analysing public opinion towards co-operation between the two parties. This is an important issue for the broader study of political parties and elections. The hung parliament at the 2010 general election was a result of a long term process of party system change, and the relationship between political parties and their potential to co-operate with each other has therefore become a more pressing issue (Blick and Wilks-Heeg, 2010, Lees, 2011, Sowemimo, 2011). While the 2015 general election delivered a Conservative majority, it far from heralds a return to majoritarian politics played out in a two-party system. The range of results in a future general election that could generate a hung parliament is larger than ever before (Curtice, 2015), and the issue of the electoral incentives and obstacles to parties co-operating remains an important question to be addressed.

It is also a particularly important one for both Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The long-term trend away from a two-party system in the electoral arena (Webb, 2000), and more recently in the parliamentary arena (Curtice, 2010, 2015), makes a majority Labour government a more unlikely prospect. However, co-operation with other parties is not necessarily an easy option to overcome the problem. When Labour is defeated in a general election, the view that Labour should join with other non-Conservative parties in a broad ‘progressive alliance’ often gets more prominence. Of course, it is not so simple. Co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats in its various guises in 20th century British politics has largely been a failure. From Labour’s perspective, Fielding and McHugh (2003) argue that any notion of a ‘progressive alliance’ is unlikely to provide a basis for electoral success as it alienates other sections of Labour’s electorate. For the Liberal Democrats, co-operation with Labour has yet to deliver any lasting positive change in their fortunes, and the prospect of a coalition with an Ed Miliband-led government has been argued to have damaged the Liberal Democrats’ electoral performance at the 2015 general election (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015).

Co-operation may take place before or after an election. Most understandings of co-operation are post-electoral, through coalitions or other legislative agreements (Martin and Stevenson, 2001, Riker, 1962). However co-operation can also be pre-electoral, through electoral pacts and agreements, or the promotion of tactical voting (Fisher, 2004, Golder, 2005). In both forms, Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation will affect future voting behaviour. Votes are
usually valued not intrinsically, but for their contribution to winning office (Strøm, 1990). On the one hand, co-operation between the two parties might increase the flow of votes to each party where they need them most: in constituencies where they have a realistic prospect of winning. On the other hand, co-operation might increase the flow of votes to other parties if it changes voters’ perceptions of each party for the worse. The trade-offs between winning some votes and losing others provides both electoral incentives and obstacles to co-operation.

This chapter thus applies the electoral element of the thesis’s theoretical framework: to what extent does co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrat improve each party’s electoral prospects? Does co-operation increase the chances for both parties winning office? First, the chapter focuses on the incentives and obstacles to pre-electoral Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation. In doing so, it outlines each party’s current electoral position, as this is the situation from which both parties will need to consider the potential for co-operation. Had the 2015 general election delivered a hung parliament and a majority in the House of Commons for Labour and the Liberal Democrats, any analysis of co-operation would be very different. As it is, the two parties’ perilous electoral situations present a different electoral context to work from. Second, the chapter analyses the incentives and obstacles to post-electoral Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation. Throughout the chapter makes use of constituency election data, interviews with key Labour and Liberal Democrat figures, and secondary survey data from the British Election Study, Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement and a survey by YouGov ahead of the 2015 general election.¹

The conclusions of the chapter show that there are electoral incentives to pre-electoral co-operation. From Labour’s perspective, their electoral prospects continue to be damaged by a weak Liberal Democrat party. For the Liberal Democrats, losing Labour-leaning supporters cost them badly at the 2015 general election. However, co-operation brings with it big risks. For Labour, co-operation with a social and economic liberal party is likely to further alienate Labour’s former core, social conservative vote. For the Liberal Democrats, co-operation with a social democratic party that has recently failed to convince the electorate that it can be credible and competent in government risks losing Conservative-leaning voters. To overcome these challenges requires strategic thinking and radical changes in their approach to party competition, and there is little evidence of this taking place in either party. The chapter also

¹ YouGov kindly provided the researcher with the dataset to allow more thorough analysis of public opinion to Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation. The original YouGov report can be found at https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/04/24/ranking-coalitions/.
outlines that should the parties be in a position to co-operate in government, their own supporters do not provide much of an incentive to co-operation. Very few Labour voters were enthusiastic about a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition at the 2015 general election, and one third even disapproved. While Liberal Democrat voters had broadly similar views to a coalition with Labour or the Conservatives, they strongly favoured David Cameron as Prime Minister over Ed Miliband. Brought together, these conclusions show that there is potential for co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats based on electoral concerns, but there are big risks too. Without a big change in each party’s thinking there are more reasons to be pessimistic at present.

**Theorising electoral incentives and obstacles to pre-electoral co-operation**

Strom et al. (1994: 316) argue that the more disproportional the electoral system, the greater the incentive for pre-electoral pacts or alliances. On this basis, the UK would have many cases of pre-electoral co-operation to analyse. As it is, there have only been a small number in the last century (Wager, 2015). There have been two main reasons for this. First, for periods of the twentieth century the UK (1945-1974) largely resembled a two-party system, with electoral competition restricted mainly to the Labour and Conservative parties. With only two parties competing for office in a winner-takes-all system, even with a disproportional electoral system there is little electoral incentive to co-operate (Golder, 2005). However, this has not been the norm in British politics. Prior to 1945, Britain had much more nuanced multi-party competition, and since 1974 the two-party system has been largely upheld in Westminster only (Bogdanor, 2004). In the electoral arena, Britain has resembled what Sartori calls a moderate pluralist party system: a two-party system has survived in Westminster only due to the disproportional electoral system. First-past-the-post has imposed a high threshold for smaller parties to gain parliamentary representation, which has kept the ‘effective number of parliamentary parties’ artificially low in the UK (Webb, 2000: 12). However, even then there has been a move away from two-party politics, to the extent that the 2010 general election delivered a hung parliament.

The argument then is that disproportional electoral systems and multi-party competition provides electoral incentives parties to co-operate (Golder, 2005). In the UK there are 650 (as of 2015) single-member districts brought together to form the legislative chamber. One
section of the electorate, such as the right on a spatial dimension, is represented by one political party, and another, the left, is represented by two (or more) parties. The one party on the right will win more districts than the left parties as their votes will be split across them. The rational act would be for the left parties to form a pre-electoral pact, recognising that in some districts it would be much easier for one of them to win without the competition of the other. Short of that, parties could promote tactical voting. As Fisher (2004: 157) defines it, a tactical voter is ‘someone who votes for a party they believe is more likely to win than their preferred party, to best influence who wins in the constituency’. Evidence from elections in Britain suggests that tactical voting is commonplace in general elections, and in 2010 one in six voters voted tactically (Johnston and Pattie, 2011a).

Applied in practice to British politics, the left/right spatial dimension example throws up a too simplistic problem. It is not a case of one party on the right (the Conservative Party) and two or more parties (Labour and the Liberal Democrats) on the left. However, as shown in the ideology and policy chapter of this thesis, Labour and the Liberal Democrats can be argued to share many common principles, values and policies that would facilitate a governmental programme. There are also arguments that both parties have electoral incentives to consider co-operation. First, it is important to examine the precariousness of both parties’ current electoral position.

Following the 2015 general election Labour have 232 seats, which is 94 short of a majority in the House of Commons. While the constituency boundaries and the electoral system particularly favoured Labour between 1997 and 2010, the balance has now shifted in the Conservatives’ favour. The Conservatives previously ‘wasted’ a lot of their votes on coming second to the Liberal Democrats. Now, those votes have elected Conservative MPs, and it is Labour ‘wasting’ votes in second place to the SNP in many seats in Scotland. The intricacies of the 2015 general election now mean that there are now fewer marginal seats than ever before (Curtice, 2015). For Labour to achieve a majority, they will need a swing of over 9 percentage points from the Conservatives, a fate not achieved by Labour since the 1997 general election. This is assuming that the electoral boundaries remain the same. This is unlikely: the Conservatives’ plans to change the electoral boundaries will damage Labour’s electoral prospects even further. However, Curtice’s (2015: 39) analysis of the current boundaries shows that any result between a Conservative lead in vote share of 5.8 percentage points over Labour and a Labour lead in vote share of 12.5 percentage points over the
Conservatives will result in a hung parliament. While a Labour majority government looks difficult to achieve, a hung parliament is not an unreasonable expectation.

However, Labour did not just lose the 2015 general election due to some intricate changes in constituency competition. Labour lost because voters did not trust them on the economy, which continued from 2007, they did not like the prospect of an Ed Miliband-led government, they lost support in key constituencies to UKIP, and looked soft and out of touch on key issues like immigration and welfare. Even a substantial improvement in their electoral prospects may not bring about a majority Labour government, and Curtice’s analysis of Labour’s difficulties makes no mention of the realistic possibility that Labour’s vote share is not necessarily at rock bottom. Diamond and Radice (2015: 16-20) show that Labour’s support amongst certain groups has actually fallen since the 2010 general election, hardly a high point of Labour support in itself. As shown in Table 1, only 40 per cent of voters thought that Labour was close to the middle class in 2015, compared with 55 per cent in 2010. Broadly the same responses are given in relation to proximity to homeowners. Just over one third of voters said that Labour was close to people in the south of England, compared with over half in 2010. In all three areas, Labour was heavily behind the Conservatives in 2015 in who the public perceives them as close to, and further behind than they were in 2010.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>The middle class</th>
<th>Homeowners</th>
<th>People in the south of England</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservatives</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference</td>
<td>-14</td>
<td>-28</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Any efforts to widen Labour’s electoral base between 2010 and 2015 failed badly. As of 2015, Labour have just three seats south of London. Bar one (Brighton Pavilion for the Greens), every other seat is held by the Conservative Party. As Diamond and Radice (2015: xi) argue, the ‘risk for the Labour Party, like social democratic parties across Europe, is further electoral defeat and, then inevitably, permanent irrelevance’. The likely implementation of boundary changes, reductions in constituencies and voting registration
changes will damage Labour’s electoral prospects even further (Baston, 2014). An increasingly multi-party competitive arena adds to Labour’s difficulties in winning a majority (Green et al., 2015), and Labour needs to be alert to this (Byrne, 2012, Diamond and Radice, 2015, Sowemimo, 2011).

Jeremy Corbyn’s Labour Party shows little cause for optimism in this regard. Noting that Labour lost due to incompetence and distrust on the key issues of the economy, welfare, immigration and leadership, Bale (2016: 1) argues:

It will not win an election five years later by being even less determined to balance the books, by being led by someone who looks and sounds even less prime ministerial, and by being seen as an even softer touch on welfare and immigration. Throw in being regarded as a danger to the defence of the realm and the security of its people, too, and you have a recipe for total and utter disaster.

Whatever the incentives and obstacles of co-operating with other parties, Labour faces fundamental electoral challenges in the coming years.

If life is difficult for Labour following the 2015 general election, with 232 seats and 30.4 per cent of the vote, spare a thought for the Liberal Democrats. At the 2015 general election, they received just 7.9 per cent of the vote and won just 8 MPs, a drop from 23 per cent of the vote and 57 MPs at the 2010 general election.

In urban areas of northern England where they had built up support as the opposition to Labour in both local and Westminster elections, they were heavily beaten. Standing against the Conservatives in the south west of England, long-standing Liberal Democrat MPs were wiped out. In Scotland, along with Labour and the Conservatives, they succumbed to the advances of the Scottish National Party (Johnson and Middleton, 2016: 1-2).

The Liberal Democrats, and their Liberal and SDP counterparts before them, have long struggled for electoral relevance. Between 1992 and 2010, the Liberal Democrats ruthlessly targeted constituencies, winning council seats, a majority on the council and subsequently the parliamentary seat (Cutts, 2014). It has been labelled the ‘snowball effect’ (Harrison, 2007), or ‘creeping Liberalism’ (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005). Following the 2010 general election, the Liberal Democrats won enough seats to have coalition potential, and following
five days of negotiations with Labour and the Conservatives joined the Conservatives in coalition.

It was electorally disastrous for them. With their previous voters, the Liberal Democrats were not perceived as competent in government, lost trust and failed to hold on to seats they had worked hard to represent (Cutts and Russell, 2015, Johnson and Middleton, 2016). The 2015 general election showed the weakness of the Liberal Democrat vote. In parliament, with just 8 MPs in the House of Commons, the party has little to offer the other parties. Only on a small number of issues will their position make the difference between a vote in parliament passing or failing, although this will be different in the House of Lords, where they currently have 108 peers. However, fundamental challenges remain. They cannot even quickly return to their pre-government position as a ‘party of protest’. In an increasingly multi-party arena, they will face strong challenge from UKIP and the Green Party on single valence issues.

Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats are therefore in a very difficult position. Prior to the 2015 general election, based on opinion polling and election forecasting, both held realistic hopes of entering government. As it happened, they were both heavily beaten. This has led some in both parties to suggest that co-operation might electorally benefit each other in the future (Cable, 2016, Reed, 2015). While the two parties remained distinct entities, and competed fiercely in certain seats, they effectively formed an anti-Conservative alliance towards the end of the 20th century (Leaman, 1998). Both parties, though particularly the Liberal Democrats, benefitted from tactical voting by each party’s supporters to defeat Conservative candidates in seats in the 1997 and 2001 general elections (Evans et al., 1998). Curtice and Steed (1997) estimate that tactical voting won the Liberal Democrats 14 seats in the 1997 general election, while more focused analysis of constituency results by Herrmann et al. (2015) estimates that 21 of the Liberal Democrats’ victories in the 1997 general election were as a result of tactical voting, compared with 9 for Labour.

There are clear theoretical electoral incentives for co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats. However, it necessarily follows that co-operation is not an act without electoral consequence (Strøm, 1990): parties will look to co-operate in order to reap electoral benefit, but just as it is possible for there to be electoral benefits it is possible for there to be electoral costs too. Party elites cannot accurately know what voters’ reactions will be to pre-electoral co-operation (Gschwend and Hooghe, 2008). Despite the wish of some ‘progressives’, the argument that you can get a plurality of soft left voters together to outvote
the Conservatives in a majority of seats through some clever process of electoral trickery is
fantasy. Labour co-operating with the Liberal Democrats has the potential to win both parties
votes that might help win seats from the Conservatives. It also has the potential to cause some
of both parties’ current or previous support to go elsewhere in opposition to the idea. In short,
Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation brings with it two key assumptions:

1. Co-operation will encourage Labour supporters to vote Liberal Democrat in seats
where the Liberal Democrats can defeat the Conservatives, and vice versa.
2. In those seats, this will outweigh the number of Labour and Liberal Democrat
supporters who will desert the party in opposition to co-operation.

Table 2 shows the number and makeup of seats where the Liberal Democrats are in
competition with the Conservatives following the 2015 general election, as well as those
where Labour and the Conservatives are in competition. This will highlight the potential
areas where Labour or the Liberal Democrats might withdraw a candidate to further the
electoral prospects of the other. Following the 2015 general election, there are 50 seats where
the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives are the primary competitors. Of those, 46 are
Conservative-held and 4 Liberal Democrat-held. Meanwhile, there are 380 seats where the
Conservatives and Labour are the primary competitors. Of those, 207 are Conservative-held
and 173 Labour-held.

| Table 2: Seats showing the nature of Labour/Liberal Democrat/Conservative competition, 2015 general election |
|-------------------------------------------------|-------|
| N of seats where Conservatives and Liberal Democrats are primary competitors | 2015  |
| (Conservative-Liberal Democrat) | 50    |
| (Liberal Democrat-Conservative) | (46)  |
| N of seats where Labour vote exceeds either majority | 18    |
| N of seats where Conservatives and Labour are primary competitors | 380   |
| (Conservative-Labour) | (207) |
| (Labour-Conservative) | (173) |
| N of seats where Liberal Democrat vote exceeds either majority | 31    |

Source: 2015 British Election Study constituency dataset.

As a starting point, this chapter focuses only on seats where the weaker co-operating party’s
constituency vote is higher than the winning party’s majority. This is on the basis that it is
only worth discussing those seats where the entire Labour or Liberal Democrat vote going to
the other party would have enabled victory for the other party, or substantially strengthened
its majority if the seat was already held by a Labour or Liberal Democrat candidate. This in
itself is very unlikely, but highlights that any seat where the weaker party’s vote would not
generate a different result is not worth including in a discussion of seats for a potential pact. It
also focuses on constituency results from the 2015 general election as a starting point. While
focusing on the most recent one election leaves argument vulnerable to shifts in public
opinion and changes in constituency boundaries, this would be the case too over a long period
of time, and it is where parties currently are. Focusing on 2015 provides a useful starting
point from which to understand where Labour and the Liberal Democrats may co-operate in
the future.

There are 31 seats where the Liberal Democrat vote is higher than the Conservative or
Labour majority and 18 where the Labour vote is higher than the Conservative or Liberal
Democrat majority. In total, it leaves 49 seats where an electoral pact might be discussed.
Using Johnston and Pattie’s (2011b) measurement of marginality, 42 of these are very or
fairly marginal, and 7 very or fairly safe. None are ultra-safe. The only fairly or safe seats are
ones held by the Conservatives. The full list of seats is shown in the Appendix. They do not
represent a definite list of constituencies where Labour or the Liberal Democrat might
withdraw a candidate. This section has served to show that if either party is to consider co-
operation with each other, then there are a group of seats that provide electoral incentives that
might serve as a starting point. There remain incentives and obstacles beyond that, which are
asymmetric in each party. The following section thus outlines the specific incentives and
obstacles for each party in different anti-Conservative contexts.

**Liberal Democrat-Conservative seats**

This section sets out the incentives and obstacles to co-operation in Liberal Democrat-
Conservative seats. Previous research has suggested that in the 1997 general election, the
Liberal Democrats benefitted heavily from Labour-minded supporters switching their vote to
the Liberal Democrats in seats where only they could realistically defeat the Conservatives
(Evans et al., 1998, Herrmann et al., 2015, Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005: 157-160). However,
this was at a point where the two parties converged on a series of policy areas, and together
effectively formed what Russell and Fieldhouse (2005: 160) labelled an ‘anti-Conservative’ alliance in key marginal seats. Since then, the two parties have diverged on a series of policy areas, and the Liberal Democrats have co-operated in government with the Conservatives. Indeed, data from the British Election Study shows that while in 1997, 60 per cent of voters thought the Liberal Democrats were closer to Labour than the Conservatives, just 34 per cent of voters thought the same in 2010.

However, it remains that there are a number of constituencies where the Liberal Democrats are far better placed to defeat the Conservatives than them. Since the Liberal Democrats’ inception, their primary electoral competitors have been the Conservatives (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005). There are 18 seats where Labour withdrawing their candidate might help this end. Table 3 shows these in more detail, outlining whether or not the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats are the incumbent party and Labour’s share of the vote in the constituency between 1997 and 2015. This is important, as the increase between 2010 and 2015 highlights the problems with Labour’s negative approach towards the Liberal Democrats following the 2010 general election.

Following the 2010 general election, Labour targeted the Liberal Democrats as much as, if not more than, the Conservatives. As one of Ed Miliband’s former advisers outlined to me:

> We knew of the 1.5 million Lib Dems who left Labour after Blair and Iraq, and they were there for the re-seizing after Blair left. Gordon [Brown] never really won them back… but Ed [Miliband] definitely tried to win them back, and we thought there were lots of Lib Dems in key seats… it was definitely a strategy of ours to pin it on the Lib Dems in the first couple of years to get the low-hanging Lib Dem fruit back to Labour (private interview).

They particularly focused on the Liberal Democrats’ ‘broken promises’ over tuition fees, spending cuts and the top rate of income tax (Eaton, 2014, Hurst, 2010). In terms of winning votes, it was successful. Labour won many more votes in the 2015 general election from former Liberal Democrat voters than the Conservatives, and won as many votes from former Liberal Democrat voters as they did from former Conservative, Green and UKIP voters put together (Green and Prosser, 2015). It goes some way to explaining why Labour’s vote share
in England increased by 3.6 percentage points at the 2015 general election, compared with an increase of just 1.4 percentage points in the Conservative vote share in England.

Table 3: Seats where Labour’s vote share exceeds the majority in a Conservative-Liberal Democrat constituency, 2015 general election

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Incumbent</th>
<th>Lab 07 (%)</th>
<th>Lab 08 (%)</th>
<th>Lab 09 (%)</th>
<th>Lab 10 (%)</th>
<th>Lab 15 (%)</th>
<th>Majority (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bath</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>16.4</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Berwick-upon-Tweed</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Brecon and Radnorshire</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>21.4</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>10.5</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Cheadle</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>12.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Colchester</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>30.5</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>19.8</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Eastbourne</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Hazel Grove</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>15.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Kingston and Surbiton</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>23.0</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>4.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Lewes</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Portsmouth South</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>25.3</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>19.5</td>
<td>12.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. St Ives</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>9.3</td>
<td>5.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Sutton and Cheam</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>11.8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Thornbury and Yate</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>10.6</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>8.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Torbay</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>14.7</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Twickenham</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>11.5</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Carshalton and Wallington</td>
<td>Lib Dem</td>
<td>23.9</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>8.7</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Norfolk North</td>
<td>Lib Dem</td>
<td>25.1</td>
<td>13.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>5.8</td>
<td>10.2</td>
<td>8.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Southport</td>
<td>Lib Dem</td>
<td>12.1</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>12.8</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Labour vote share</td>
<td></td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>13.9</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Election results, British Election Study constituency dataset.

However, it also explains why the Conservatives gained more seats from the Liberal Democrats than Labour at the 2015 general election. Labour gained plenty of votes from the Liberal Democrats, and it helped win 12 seats from them in the 2015 general election. However, many of the votes that Labour gained from the Liberal Democrats were also in

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2 The focus here is only on England, as this is where the Liberal Democrat-Conservative seats are. There are no seats in the rest of the UK where the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives are the primary competitors.
Liberal Democrat-Conservative marginals. Indeed, in those seats where the Liberal Democrats were fending off a Conservative challenge, more votes went from the Liberal Democrats to Labour than to the Conservatives (Green and Prosser, 2015). This is highlighted further in the constituencies listed in Table 7, where Labour’s vote increased on average by 4.4 percentage points. This contrasts with an increase of 1.4 percentage points across Britain. Paradoxically, Labour’s gain in Liberal Democrat votes was the Conservatives’ gain in Liberal Democrat seats (Johnson and Middleton, 2016).

This played a part in helping the Conservatives win a majority in the House of Commons at the 2015 general election. Green and Prosser (2015) estimate that 2010 Liberal Democrats switching to Labour in 2015 cost the Liberal Democrats seven seats to the Conservatives’ benefit. Labour putting forward a broader electoral appeal will help them tackle the Conservatives in constituencies where they have a local presence and strong organisation. However in other seats, Labour needs either to begin to win in seats it has never looked in contention, or recognise that another party is better placed to win (Green and Prosser, 2015). Electorally speaking, the latter is a much easier option, and presents a strong incentive to cooperation with the Liberal Democrats. If Labour supporters in Liberal Democrat-Conservative seats can be persuaded that the Liberal Democrats are a substantively better option than the Conservatives to the point that they will vote Liberal Democrat, then Labour’s electoral prospects are improved. In short, a strong Liberal Democrat party damages the Conservatives electorally more than it does Labour.

A key issue that arises from this is the extent to which Labour can actually help rectify the Liberal Democrats’ current weak position. That a strong Liberal Democrat party damages the Conservatives is one thing, but it only acts as an incentive to Labour-Liberal Democrat cooperation if Labour can help sufficiently strengthen the Liberal Democrats. While the Liberal Democrats lost some seats to the Conservatives at the 2015 general election due to lost votes to Labour (Green and Prosser, 2015), this is not the only reason the Liberal Democrats lost. They lost mainly due to the electorate perceiving them as incompetent, untrustworthy and unpopular (Johnson and Middleton, 2016).
How important are potentially switching Labour supporters to the Liberal Democrats defeating the Conservatives? Figure 1 shows the average Labour vote share in key Liberal Democrat-Conservative seats. The increase between 2010 and 2015 supports Green and Prosser’s (2015) argument that voters went from the Liberal Democrats to Labour between those elections. However prior to 2010, the argument that Liberal Democrat incumbents were dependent upon Labour supporters switching their vote is certainly open to challenge. In the identified Liberal Democrat-Conservative seats, Labour’s vote share in 1997 averaged 18.7 percentage points yet the Liberal Democrats won 15 of them. In 2001 and 2005, Labour’s average vote share was higher than it was in 2015, and the Liberal Democrats were able to win all of the seats in Table 7 other than Eastbourne. While Labour’s support declined heavily in Liberal Democrat-Conservative seats 2010 and may have returned to hinder the Liberal Democrats in 2015, the broader trend in these constituencies between 1997 and 2015 is not Liberal Democrat victories on the back of Labour support.

Whatever the presence of tactical voting by Labour supporters, the success or failure of the Liberal Democrats in the seats it has contested against the Conservatives has been primarily dependent on the Liberal Democrats’ popularity on certain policy issues (Green and Hobolt, 2008), and local factors and contexts (Cutts, 2006, Cutts et al., 2010, Russell et al., 2001). While Labour supporters may have assisted the Liberal Democrats, they still remain small in number in these constituencies. If there were so many of them to make conclusive difference in every seat every election, then Labour would contest the seats much more competitively than they do now. The Liberal Democrats have previously proved at least equally adept at
winning and holding on to votes from former Conservative supporters as they have Labour ones. There have been two key strands to this.

First, the Liberal Democrats have sought to develop a programme of policies distinctive from the left/right context. In short, the Liberal Democrats have claimed themselves to be ‘not left nor right, but radical’ (Russell and Fieldhouse, 2005). As the electorate have become more instrumentally focused on competence on valence issues rather than left/right ideological differences (Clarke et al., 2009, Crewe and Denver, 1985), the Liberal Democrats have been able to gain support by being distinctive on key policy issues such as home affairs, Europe and the environment (Green and Hobolt, 2008).

Second, key to the Liberal Democrats’ success against the Conservatives has been their personal incumbency and popularity. As Smith (2013) argues, prior to the 2015 general election one of the most difficult tasks in politics was to remove a sitting Liberal Democrat MP. Iain Dale (2014), Conservative candidate in the Liberal Democrat-Conservative marginal seat Norfolk North in 2005, remarked: ‘every single house we went to… [delivered] the same message: “Well, we’re really Conservatives but we’re going to vote for that nice Mr Lamb [the Liberal Democrat MP].”… That’s it, I know now I can’t win’. The importance of local contexts and incumbency to the Liberal Democrats has now been well noted (Cutts, 2006, Cutts, 2014, Johnson, 2014, Smith, 2013). Building arguments from a series of interviews with Liberal Democrat MPs and party strategists, Russell and Fieldhouse (2005: 192-198) stress the importance of tailoring messages to each individual constituencies. Tailoring the message in such a manner not only helps to stop the ‘third-party squeeze’ associated with first-past-the-post elections in a two-party parliamentary system, but also allows the Liberal Democrats to challenge the Conservatives in some areas and Labour in others.

One Liberal Democrat MP told Russell and Fieldhouse (2005: 195) that ‘we would like to try to minimise the perception that we are closer to Labour than we are to the Tories’. This is because in a lot of seats where the Liberal Democrats and Conservatives are primary competitors, how Labour supporters vote matters a little, but it is not the main factor in influencing who wins the seat. As one former Liberal Democrat MP told me:
My constituency in particular, has been for a long time, pretty much since I stood in 1992, has been Lib Dem vs Conservative. A few Labour councillors, but they finally disappeared in the late 1990s, and they’ve never reappeared. Every [council] ward is Lib Dem vs Conservative… At general elections, there has always been a heavy degree of tactical voting, certainly when I first got elected in 1997 and the immediate following election, Labour was virtually reduced to deposit-losing levels, and that has remained a significant factor. At the last general election, we lost some of that tactical support. The Labour vote went up considerably, but it was still way way behind the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives (Cable, 2016).

Another former Liberal Democrat MP agrees, highlighting the importance of former Labour voters, but argues that broadly these votes left Labour not out of tactical considerations but out of a changing view.

Our vote in 2010 had consisted of people who were Lib Dems, and enthusiastic about us for various reasons, both local and national… Quite a large number of working class voters who would have been Labour in the 60s and 70s and came over to us in the 80s and 90s and so forth, they didn’t greatly like the austerity, they didn’t like immigration. There was a new party that stands up for people who are not in the mainstream which was UKIP… people initially thought UKIP’s rise would damage the Tories but I was always nervous about the impact on us… so there was definitely a Labour vote, but that didn’t go up much in 2015, partly lack of enthusiasm across the country but they’d also been killed in our area (Laws, 2016).

This suggests then that while those voters who moved back to Labour between 2010 and 2015 might have partially cost the Liberal Democrats at the 2015 general election, it was far from the only factor, and other considerations must be taken into account.

There are probably a few seats, including mine actually, which had we not seen some drift in the tactical vote would have been held, just about. But it wasn’t the key factor. We basically lost the Conservatives, and they panicked a lot of voters. That was more important than the tactical vote (Cable, 2016).
I think what killed us was a lot of soft Lib Dem-Conservative type voters, non-council house, working… aspirational voters who just did not like the idea of Ed Miliband, the SNP, and bought into the idea that their seat might decide the government. A bit of left splintering off, but not huge… the Labour vote didn’t really go up… a large transfer of working class to UKIP and then this… late in the day switch [of people] who sort of voted Lib Dem without being very political… this time round bought the idea that they wanted the status quo to continue, and the best way for that was to vote Conservative. They definitely didn’t want Ed Miliband and they certainly didn’t want the SNP (Laws, 2016).

This presents an important obstacle to Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation. Would co-operation with Labour turn away more Conservative-minded supporters than attract Labour-minded ones? Prior to the 2005 general election, this fear was raised by many Liberal Democrat MPs, to the extent that then leader Charles Kennedy was forced to signal his opposition to governmental co-operation with Labour (Russell, 2005).

Much of this will depend on the positions of Labour and the Liberal Democrats ahead of future general elections. Co-operation between the Liberal Democrats and a Labour Party winning over previous Conservative supporters, such as at the 1997 general election, might present less of an obstacle than co-operation with a Labour Party vacating centrist, valence politics. In 1997 and 2001, and to a lesser extent in 2005, Labour was able to win elections because it was more popular and perceived as more competent than the Conservatives (Johnston and Pattie, 2011b). The present position of the Labour Party is unlikely to be one amenable to many Conservative supporters (Diamond and Radice, 2015, O'Hara, 2015).

This is the key challenge for the Liberal Democrats, balancing a multitude of types of soft support. Labour and Liberal Democrat co-operation in Liberal Democrat-Conservative seats might well bring some Labour supporters back to the Liberal Democrats. Holding all other things constant, this is a clear incentive to co-operation. However, the flow of the vote outwards could be even greater. Why should a Conservative-leaning voter support the Liberal Democrats, if it makes a Labour-led government more likely? If a likely Labour-led government is one that appears competent, trustworthy and aiming to govern in the hallowed centre ground, then to vote Liberal Democrat is perhaps less of a risk. However, when the potential outcome is a Labour government radically different to the Conservatives then the risks are much great. As one former Liberal Democrat MP told me:
The same kind of voters who were scared by the prospect of a Miliband-led government will be even more scared by Corbyn, and they may well continue to vote Conservative for reasons of fear (Cable, 2016).

Consideration should be given to how the Conservatives might react to such Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation. During the 2015 general election campaign, the Conservatives strongly highlighted the prospect of an Ed Miliband-led government supported by the Scottish National Party. Various Conservative Party press releases highlighted ‘Nicola Sturgeon walking all over Ed Miliband’, ‘Ed Miliband is in the pocket of Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon has him on a leash’ (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2015: 172). Current and former Liberal Democrat MPs have spoken of how this ‘fear’ peddled by the Conservatives was very successful in former safe Liberal Democrat seats (Cable, 2015, Clegg, 2015). If the Liberal Democrats were to co-operate with a Labour Party as it stands after the 2015 general election, the Conservatives would campaign as strongly again. As one former Liberal Democrat MP told me:

What they [the Conservatives] don’t want to face are Lib Dem candidates who look moderate and sensible. What they [the Conservatives] would love to do is put us all in a box marked ‘Jeremy Corbyn’ and galvanise as large a number of voters against that proposition, which they would have no difficulty doing (Laws, 2016).

**Labour-Conservative seats**

An electoral pact would also suggest a Liberal Democrat withdrawal in certain Labour-Conservative seats. If a pact is initiated alongside a clear and public statement of support for co-operation between the two, then Liberal Democrat supporters might be persuaded to move to Labour. Even without a pact, evidence continues to suggest that supporters of a party with no chance of winning in a constituency will switch allegiance to a competitor they can still support (Johnston and Pattie, 2011a). All other things staying the same, a successful transfer of support would lead to 17 gains for Labour over the Conservatives, and 14 held seats strengthened even further. At the 2015 general election, this would have prevented a Conservative majority.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Constituency</th>
<th>Incumbent</th>
<th>Majority (%)</th>
<th>Lib 2015</th>
<th>Dem 10-15</th>
<th>Lib Dem (+/-)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Bedford</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>-15.7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Bolton West</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>-13.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Brighton Kemptown</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>-15.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Bury North</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.1</td>
<td>-14.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Croydon Central</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>-11.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Derby North</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>-19.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Gower</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>-15.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Lincoln</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>-15.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Morley and Outwood</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>-13.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Plymouth Moor View</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>-13.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>-20.5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Telford</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>-13.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Thurrock</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>-9.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Vale of Clwyd</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>-10.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Warrington South</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>-21.9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Watford</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>18.1</td>
<td>-14.3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Weaver Vale</td>
<td>Cons</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>-15.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Average vote share**

4.2 -15.4

Source: 2015 British Election Study constituency dataset.
However, that this would have actually happened is unlikely. The average 2015 Liberal Democrat vote in the seats in Table 4 was 4.2 percentage points. This is down from 15.1 percentage points in the same seats at the 2010 general election. As noted earlier, the Liberal Democrats’ vote collapsed across the entire country, and fell on average by 15.4 percentage points in the Labour-Conservative seats shown in Table 4. It therefore stands to reason that those people who voted Liberal Democrat in the 2015 general election in those constituencies had a strong commitment to the party. Bar one (Watford3), each of the seats in Table 8 is a marginal seat with little Liberal Democrat support, and yet those Liberal Democrat voters chose to support an unpopular party that had no chance of winning. Labour may have already won all of the Liberal Democrat supporters they could in the 2015 general election. This is supported by broader evidence of voting behaviour, which suggests that those with strong identification to a party are less likely to vote strategically in an election (Carvalho and Winters, 2014, Johnston and Pattie, 2011a). It begs the question: why would those people vote Labour if the Liberal Democrat candidate was removed?

One response is: where else would they go? If the Liberal Democrats publicly declare that they are co-operating with Labour, then those supporters would arguably be more inclined to support Labour than another party. Even if only some of them change their vote to Labour, then Labour’s electoral prospects might be improved. However, it is a very questionable strategy for so few votes. It is incredibly difficult to accurately anticipate shifts in support depending upon a withdrawing party’s instruction (Gschwend and Hooghe, 2008).

Another obstacle to such co-operation for Labour is that by aligning themselves so strongly with the Liberal Democrats, they alienate other elements of their support. This is already a big problem for Labour. In broadening their electoral appeal ahead of the 1997 general election and beyond, the party alienated some of its formerly solid working class support. Theoretically, this is not a new debate. Przeworski and Sprague (1986: 57-79) argue that as parties neglect their core support eventually their core support will neglect them. During the early 21st century, the trade-off was arguably worth it as Labour gained more voters from non-manual and non-unionised occupations (Fielding and McHugh, 2003). However more recently, Labour has failed to broaden its electoral appeal sufficiently while at the same time losing much of its former core support to UKIP (Ford and Goodwin, 2014, Roberts et al.,

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3 Watford was a three-way marginal constituency at the 2010 general election, with the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties achieving 34.9, 32.4 and 26.7 percentage points respectively. This changed to 43.5, 26.0 and 18.1 respectively in the 2015 general election.
This is not just a problem for Labour, but also social democratic parties across Europe. As Bale et al. (2009: 423) argue, most parties end up ‘mixing and matching, boxing and coxing, in the hope that they can stay competitive without surrendering too many of their values and too much of their credibility’. The key issue here is: would the number of Liberal Democrat votes gained make up for leakage to UKIP? Co-operation with the Liberal Democrats might win over some new voters, but it is a risky strategy that would likely alienate other Labour supporters too.

Other than in Watford, where the party retains good local representation, there is little disincentive for the Liberal Democrats not to withdraw their candidate in these seats. There is no chance of them winning these seats at the next general election. These seats alone cost the Liberal Democrats £12,500 in lost deposits at the 2015 general election, so there is certainly a financial incentive. However, as with Labour in Liberal Democrat-Conservative seats, it would be an admission of defeat. For a party that claims to represent all corners of the UK, they would be withdrawing from seats across England.

More specifically for the Liberal Democrats, it would potentially limit the Liberal Democrats’ scope as a political party. While co-operation with the Conservatives might be off the table in the short term due to the nature of electoral competition between the two, the Liberal Democrats have co-operated with the Conservatives in government. They defended their actions to the country, and while the new leader Tim Farron sought to distance himself from the 2010 coalition government, he maintains it was the right decision to join the Conservatives in coalition. It would be a decisive shift in rhetoric, strategy and identity to break with that past and align the Liberal Democrats with Labour, against the Conservatives. This would not just be being anti-Conservative, which is a perfectly reasonable course of action for an independent political party, but would be signal of support for Labour over the Conservatives. As one former Liberal Democrat MP told me:

> I think that there are reasons why people go out and support the Lib Dems rather than voting Conservative or Labour. There have to be good reasons to join a small party rather than a large party. I never like the idea that we are pro- or anti- one of the big parties. We’re an independent party, we think that the differences between us are significant enough that we want to actually join a small party and fight our way through that much more difficult path (Laws, 2016).
To align with Labour in such a significant way would be to challenge the Liberal Democrats’ identity as an individual party. It was enough to concern Liberal Democrat activists in the late 1990s (Brack, 2007) and it would presumably concern them again.

**Incentives and obstacles to pre-electoral co-operation**

This chapter has so far shown the different incentives and obstacles to co-operation for both parties. As outlined in the theoretical framework, co-operation has the potential to improve a party’s electoral position and subsequently the prospects of achieving office. However, it is very difficult to predict with confidence the benefits and costs of co-operation. In a party system with different electoral competition in different constituencies, trying to predict the flow of vote shares from one party to another becomes more complex. However, if parties can be confident that co-operation will lead to more votes being accurately converted into seats, they are more likely to pursue that electoral objective (Strøm, 1990: 588).

For Labour, co-operation with the Liberal Democrats might help prevent a Conservative majority, and potentially make a Labour-led coalition more likely. If the Liberal Democrats strengthen their position, this will be primarily at the expense of the Conservative seats, and at the same time Liberal Democrat-leaning supporters voting Labour in key Labour-Conservative seats could help Labour. Viewed in this context, co-operation is an appealing prospect. However the Liberal Democrats’ electoral position is so fundamentally weak following the 2015 general election, and they face a monumental battle to rebuild credibility both in their strongest areas and across the country (Cutts and Russell, 2015, Johnson and Middleton, 2016). One of Ed Miliband’s former advisers thinks that co-operation is an unlikely strategy for Labour, but it might be short sighted for Labour not to think about it in the long term:
The game has changed. You can’t underestimate how irrelevant the Lib Dems are now… the hatred of the Lib Dems is there, but it’s now a historical and local issue… Tim Farron is now systematically ignored by everyone. He has trouble getting his own delegation to show up. The irrelevance of the Lib Dems is now absolutely immense. So, it’s a historic dilemma. That [19]97 dilemma is one for the history books, not for the future. Which I do think could be short sighted. The Tories will have a rough two or three years… but I think the Lib Dems will be the beneficiaries of that… most places south of Birmingham and west of London wouldn’t contemplate voting Labour. So the Lib Dems will pick up… [but] the prospects of understanding that logic are low… probably in the long term that’s not right (private interview).

The Liberal Democrats’ membership boost after the general election and local by-election victories in the south west of England and elsewhere suggests that there is room for them to begin to recover in their former heartlands (Cutts and Russell, 2015). However, can it happen through co-operation with Labour? In a small but important number of seats there are enough Labour voters to suggest that co-operation would yield electoral benefits. However, it is very much dependent upon context and there is a very fine balance between attracting Labour-leaning supporters and losing Conservative-leaning ones. The Liberal Democrats’ electoral position remains primarily one in competition with the Conservatives, and the party’s proximity to Labour is always a problematic issue.

Given the perilous state of both parties’ electoral position following the 2015 general election, both parties face huge challenges. Overcoming them has the potential to deliver greater electoral benefit than just co-operating with each other. Neither party will benefit by just retreating to ideas of a ‘progressive alliance’: the argument that if only every non-Conservative voted as they should has little going for it. People do not vote rationally, and even if they did there is little that is rational about assembling an anti-Conservative coalition devoid of any other purpose. Not being a Conservative is not a sufficient foundation for a winning coalition of political parties: co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats only has incentives if both parties address their individual challenges. For Labour, this means addressing their perceived incompetence on the economy and leadership, and their questionable judgement on immigration and welfare. For the Liberal Democrats, this means winning back support at a local level, and showing the section of voters in society who might back them in the future that it can be trusted to represent them again. If the more fundamental challenges of party competition are addressed by each party, then Labour-Liberal Democrat
co-operation might be a successful strategy to defeat the Conservatives in key seats and help both parties achieve office. If not, it is likely to further boost the chances of a third term in office for the Conservatives.

**Incentives and obstacles to post-electoral co-operation**

So far, this chapter has addressed the pre-electoral constituency-level considerations for Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation. This is an important and often overlooked form of co-operation (Golder, 2005). However, it does not dismiss post-electoral co-operation, either in the form of coalition or confidence and supply ‘contract parliamentarianism’ agreements, which remain a fundamental part of party co-operation (Bale and Bergman, 2006, Debus, 2008, Martin and Stevenson, 2001). This section addresses public opinion, both broadly and specifically the attitudes of Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters, to post-electoral co-operation generally and between the two parties. If co-operation is to aid each party’s office-seeking intentions, then understanding public opinion is fundamental to understanding the broader incentives and obstacles for each party. Do the electorate support co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats? Do they support co-operation between parties more broadly? Are Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters more or less likely to support co-operation than others?

While researchers bemoan the lack of attention paid to pre-electoral co-operation, both comparatively and in Britain (Golder, 2005, Wager, 2015), the level of attention on post-electoral co-operation in Britain since 2010 has provided a wealth of data to study. The annual Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement tracks various attitudes to political issues, and focused a great deal on coalition government in their 2011 report. Their qualitative study yielded mixed responses to coalition. Many felt that coalition would help ‘defuse extreme situations’ that the country might face at any one time, while others argued that coalition would simply provide the governing parties with an easy excuse for not delivering on their manifesto (The Hansard Society, 2011: 27-28). Particularly amongst Liberal Democrat supporters, a strong argument was that coalition was synonymous with ‘betrayal’. This echoes arguments regarding the Liberal Democrats’ loss of electoral support during the 2010 parliament (Dommett, 2013, Johnson and Middleton, 2016).
This qualitative research can also be complemented by quantitative data on attitudes to coalition government. Figure 2 shows data from the 2015 British Election Study. One of the common arguments for the first-past-the-post system is that it delivers ‘strong and effective’ government, and it is a task for parties in coalition to respond to that (Boston and Bullock, 2012, Curtice, 2015). Based on the responses in Figure 2, the electorate prefer single-party government. Approximately only one fifth of respondents think that coalition government is more effective than single-party government. Another issue is that parties need to be able to show to the electorate that they can deliver policies in coalition (Duch et al., 2014). Between 2010 and 2015, the Liberal Democrats failed to do this (Johnson and Middleton, 2016). Based on the responses in Figure 2, voters do not think this is possible in coalition. Nearly two thirds of voters agree that parties cannot deliver on promises in coalition. Finally, a key trade-off of being in office is that there are electoral benefits and costs that you receive at subsequent elections (Strøm, 1990). The data in Figure 2 suggests that voters find this harder in coalition; with over half saying it is harder to attribute blame to parties in coalition than in single-party government.

**Figure 2: Public opinion on coalitions (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>0%</th>
<th>10%</th>
<th>20%</th>
<th>30%</th>
<th>40%</th>
<th>50%</th>
<th>60%</th>
<th>70%</th>
<th>80%</th>
<th>90%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Coalitions more effective than single-party government</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parties cannot deliver on promises in coalition</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harder to attribute blame in coalitions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
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Brought together, the results in Figure 2 suggest a distinct lack of support for coalition government. The electorate think that single-party government is more effective, that parties do not deliver on their promises in coalition, and that it is harder to distinguish between individual parties policies. Alongside this, the Liberal Democrats’ collapse at the 2015 general election might suggest an appetite to return to single-party government. However, while the Liberal Democrats suffered, this did not see a large upswing in the two main parties’ share of the vote. Indeed, this increased by just 2.3 percentage points, while even
after accounting for the Liberal Democrats’ decline minor parties just did as well (Green et al., 2015). Green et al. (2015) go further to suggest that the likelihood of a hung parliament incentivised voters to support smaller parties, which increases the likelihood of coalitions in the future. While the public’s attitude to it is hardly positive, nor is it entirely dismissive of the idea as a form of government.

Surveys ahead of the 2015 general election campaign also asked voters about their attitudes to different coalition outcomes that might happen. At this point, a hung parliament and a range of subsequent government was forecast by academics and commentators (Monk and Lambert, 2015). Figure 3 sets out public opinion ahead of the 2015 general election to a range of different outcomes, ranging from ‘very bad’ to ‘very good’. The darker the shade of responses, the greater the negative views on that outcome. A number of points can be made from Figure 3. Firstly, there is a preference for majority government over coalition. The most popular responses from the list are a Conservative majority government, followed by a Labour majority government. This chimes with the data in Figure 2, that majority governments are preferred by voters. However if a coalition was to have formed after the 2015 general election, then the Liberal Democrats appear to be the preferred partner with voters. Following the two majority governments, the next preferences are for a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition or a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. Further to that, a coalition of either Conservative-Liberal Democrat or Labour-Liberal Democrat generates fewer ‘very bad’ responses than a Conservative or Labour majority government. In contrast, when other minor parties like the SNP or UKIP were brought in, the number of ‘very bad’ responses rose sharply. This suggests that voters did give the Liberal Democrats some credit as a moderating force on the two major parties.

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4 Errors in sampling and weighting meant that opinion polls did not accurately reflect public opinion ahead of the 2015 general election, and the data should be viewed in this context.
Figure 3: Public opinion on outcomes of the 2015 general election (%)

Conservative majority

Labour majority

Conservative-Labour coalition

Lab-Lib Dem

Lab-SNP

Lab-LD-SNP

Con-Lib Dem

Con-LD-UKIP

Con-LD-UKIP-DUP

N: 2060
The next section shows again the list of potential government outcomes after the 2015 general election, but this time broken down into Labour and Liberal Democrat voters. The small sample sizes for Labour (N = 596) and Liberal Democrat (N = 128) mean we should proceed with caution, but they provide a snapshot of voters’ opinion to different possible outcomes. While we should expect Labour support for Labour-led outcomes and Liberal Democrat support for outcomes involving their party, any differences in specific outcomes beyond that will be interesting to measure. Did Liberal Democrat voters prefer the Conservatives or Labour? How enthusiastic would Labour supporters be about a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition? The results are shown in Figures 4 and 5.

Firstly, Figure 4 shows Labour voters’ attitudes to various outcomes after the 2015 general election. Firstly, there is broad support for any Labour-led outcome. This is unsurprising. However, there are more nuanced differences depending on which Labour-led outcome it is. The overwhelming preference is for Labour majority, with 94 per cent saying this would be a good or very good outcome. This contrasts with 64 per cent saying the same for a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition or agreement, 56 per cent for a Labour-SNP coalition or agreement, and 57 per cent for Labour-Lib Dem-SNP coalition or agreement. This does not present an overwhelming incentive to Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation. Over one third of Labour voters felt that a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition would be a bad outcome of the 2015 general election. Even where Labour voters supported it, they were not enthusiastic. Only 8 per cent of Labour voters thought such an outcome would be ‘very good’. More (14 per cent) thought a Labour-SNP deal would be ‘very good’.

There is not the data to compare attitudes to these outcomes with earlier general elections, but some tentative conclusions can be drawn from Labour voters’ attitudes. Research by Green and Prosser (2015) shows that Labour were the primary beneficiaries of the Liberal Democrats’ electoral collapse between 2010-2015, in terms of votes. As interviews quoted earlier in this chapter have shown, Labour targeted the Liberal Democrats as much as they did the Conservatives early in the 2010 parliament. Other research has highlighted that many of the Liberal Democrats’ 2010 voters left them in 2015 as they were angry with the party, suggesting a breakdown in trust (Johnson and Middleton, 2016). All of this appears to be reflected in Labour voters’ lack of enthusiasm to Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation. While they might support an outcome that gets Labour into government, and this provides an incentive to co-operation, it does not suggest much support beyond that.
Figure 4: Labour voters' attitudes to 2015 general election outcomes (%)

Conservative majority
Labour majority
Conservative-Labour coalition
Lab-Lib Dem
Lab-SNP
Lab-LD-SNP
Con-Lib Dem
Con-LD-UKIP
Con-LD-UKIP-DUP

Very bad | Fairly bad | Fairly good | Very good

N: 596
Source: YouGov, 21 April 2015
### Figure 5: Lib Dem voters' attitudes to 2015 general election outcomes (%)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Very bad</th>
<th>Fairly bad</th>
<th>Fairly good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conservative majority</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour majority</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservative-Labour coalition</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab-Lib Dem</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab-SNP</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lab-LD-SNP</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con-Lib Dem</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con-LD-UKIP</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Con-LD-UKIP-DUP</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**N:** 128  
**Source:** YouGov, 21 April 2015
Figure 5 shows the attitudes of Liberal Democrat voters. The small sample size means it is difficult to draw any conclusions with confidence, but there is a preference for a Conservative majority government (47 per cent approval) over a Labour majority government (34 per cent approval). However, this does not translate into any substantive preference for one particular Liberal Democrat coalition partner, with 75 per cent of Liberal Democrat voters supporting a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition and 70 per cent supporting a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition. However, as with public opinion more broadly, support fell sharply amongst Liberal Democrat voters for any outcome after the 2015 general election that included the SNP or UKIP in government. This is even when Liberal Democrats would be in government too.

**Figure 6: Lib Dem voters' preferred Prime Minister**

As shown earlier, interviews with key Liberal Democrat figures have suggested that the potential prospect of Ed Miliband as Prime Minister turned people off voting Liberal Democrat. This is supported by the data in Figure 6, which shows Liberal Democrat voters’ preferred Prime Minister after the 2015 general election. Unsurprisingly, Nick Clegg comes top but after that there is a strong preference for David Cameron over Ed Miliband. This underlies the importance of the each party’s individual competence and popularity for the potential for co-operation. While co-operation with a Labour Party that appears competent and popular with the electorate might be appealing to Liberal Democrat voters, and has appealed at previous general elections, it is not appealing if Labour is vacating the ground on which it has won in the past.

That 2015 Liberal Democrat voters had a preference for the Conservatives over Labour in the 2015 general election is perhaps unsurprising: between 2010 and 2015, the Liberal
Democrats lost a lot of voters due to perceptions of betrayal (Johnson and Middleton, 2016). This suggests that 2010 Liberal Democrat voters might be more amenable to Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation, and if the Liberal Democrats can win some of them back in the future, this might present an incentive to co-operation. To test this, Figure 7 compares the attitudes of 2010 and 2015 Liberal Democrat voters on a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition/agreement and a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition/agreement after the 2015 general election. Interestingly, there is not much difference. If anything, there is slightly less support for Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation among the 2010 Liberal Democrat electorate, though the sample sizes mean we cannot be confident here. There is much less support for a Conservative-Liberal Democrat co-operation among 2010 Liberal Democrat voters, supporting arguments that a lot of those voters left the Liberal Democrats due to their co-operation with the Conservatives between 2010 and 2015.

**Figure 7: Comparing 2010 and 2015 Lib Dem voters' attitudes to co-operation (%)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Very bad</th>
<th>Fairly bad</th>
<th>Fairly good</th>
<th>Very good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010 Lib Dems: Lab-Lib Dem coalition</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 Lib Dems: Lab-Lib Dem coalition</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Lib Dems: Con-Lib Dem coalition</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015 Lib Dems: Con-Lib Dem coalition</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The data in Figure 7 suggests that if the Liberal Democrats can recover some of their support from 2010 then Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation, then co-operation with Labour rather the Conservatives might be a more appealing prospect to their voters. However, whether it is
2010 or 2015 Liberal Democrat supporters, there was not overwhelming enthusiasm for Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation after the 2015 general election.

Conclusion

Both parties are at a critical juncture. Both parties lost heavily in the 2015 general election, and prepared for the eventualities of a hung parliament after the 2015 general election only to find a Conservative majority government elected instead. Both parties’ base of electoral support is now smaller than it was in 2010, and both face huge challenges to broaden it ahead of the next general election. This chapter has shown that the electoral incentives and obstacles to co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats are wide-ranging. For both parties, co-operation might bring about an opportunity to prevent a Conservative majority government, and subsequently a potential Labour-Liberal Democrat or Labour-led government. Given that parties are primarily office-seeking, then this provides a significant electoral incentive to co-operation. There are also individual incentives. Labour will be competing against a weakened Conservative Party if the Liberal Democrats are stronger. If the Liberal Democrats can count on the support of Labour supporters in Conservative-Liberal Democrat marginals then there is potential for the party’s electoral prospects to significantly improve, which is crucial for the party’s survival in the coming years.

However, the electoral obstacles are numerous too. In the short term, it is a huge move by Labour to change its position on the Liberal Democrats to one of open co-operation. Most Labour-minded Liberal Democrat supporters probably already voted Labour in the 2015 general election (Green and Prosser, 2015), and there are barely any left at all in Labour-Conservative marginal seats. To co-operate with the Liberal Democrats would be to spend political capital on a move that could achieve very little electoral benefit in Labour seats, or potentially backfire by haemorrhaging further support to UKIP and other parties. The idea that a strong Liberal Democrat party might damage the Conservatives was never given any consideration by the Labour leadership between 2010 and 2015.

However Labour is at such a point where it is the biggest party of a divided centre-left political spectrum, and the Conservatives were able to utilise that to great effect in the 2015 general election (Diamond and Radice, 2015). Should the Liberal Democrats’ electoral prospects not improve, the Conservatives will continue to be the beneficiaries of a weak
opposition in the south west and south east areas of England (Curtice, 2012). Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats are struggling to regain electoral ground in Scotland. Labour must respond where it can to try and win back some of those seats and improve its own electoral prospects. However, there are some areas that are out of Labour’s reach. Throwing a bone to the Liberal Democrats might ultimately be an advantage to Labour’s cause.

For the Liberal Democrats, to co-operate with Labour would be to effectively abandon the idea that the Liberal Democrats are open to co-operation with the Conservatives. To co-operate with Labour could have an immediate and negative impact on some of its more Conservative-minded support, and would certainly not automatically heal the wounds of the 2010-2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition for centre-left voters. However, given the perilous state of the Liberal Democrats’ electoral position, co-operation with another centre left party could potentially improve their electoral position and subsequent coalition potential in future hung parliaments.

Finally, public opinion to potential co-operation at the 2015 general election showed that voters have a clear preference for majority governments over coalitions, but not to the extent that it has caused a return to two-party electoral politics (Green et al., 2015). However, support amongst Labour voters for Labour-Liberal Democrat co-operation was weak, and while it would not have prevented a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition, it might have had consequences at subsequent elections. Liberal Democrat voters appeared to prefer co-operation with the Conservatives over Labour, and strongly favoured David Cameron over Ed Miliband. The evidence broadly reflects both parties’ current difficulties with the electorate, and this should be a more pressing priority beyond co-operation.

The electoral incentives and obstacles to co-operation are numerous and complicated, and have a substantial impact on the broader decisions that political parties must make about co-operation. Ultimately, they form part of a process that must be considered alongside other incentives and obstacles to co-operation, such as a party’s ideologies and policies, their organisations and their institutions. They also have to be considered along broader issues of party competition, such as competence, trust and leadership. The electoral and public opinion concerns here suggest that there are potential electoral benefits from co-operation between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, but huge potential costs too. Each party focusing on addressing their individual electoral issues, while not completely closing the door to co-operation, might be the best course of action.
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