



# Junior coalition parties in the British context: Explaining the Liberal Democrat collapse at the 2015 general election



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## ABSTRACT

The Liberal Democrats' performance in the 2015 general election provides an opportunity to examine the only case in the post-war period of a national junior coalition partner in British politics. Comparative research highlights competence, trust and leadership as three key challenges facing junior coalition parties. This article uses British Election Study data to show that the Liberal Democrats failed to convince the electorate on all three counts. The article also uses constituency-level data to examine the continued benefits of incumbency to the party and the impact of constituency campaigning. It finds that while the incumbency advantage remained for the Liberal Democrats, it was ultimately unable to mitigate the much larger national collapse.

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## 1. Introduction

At the 2010 British general election, the Liberal Democrats won 23 percent of the vote and 57 seats. It was an electorally relevant share of seats that, following five days of negotiations, facilitated the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. Despite arguably satisfying the office-seeking and policy-seeking criteria associated with coalition theory (Bale, 2012), the electoral prospects for the Liberal Democrats were bleak. The comparative literature on coalitions suggests that junior coalition parties tend to struggle in subsequent elections, and often face an uphill battle to get noticed by the electorate (Bolleyer, 2008; Dunphy and Bale, 2011). The challenge for junior parties in coalition is to be competent in government, while maintaining party distinctiveness and popular leadership (Boston and Bullock, 2012; Paun and Munro, 2013). The case of the Liberal Democrats provides a unique opportunity to apply the comparative literature on junior coalition parties to the British context.

Following heavy defeats in local, sub-national and national elections during the 2010 parliament, the Liberal Democrats ran a

highly defensive campaign ahead of the 2015 general election (Coetzee, 2015). It was unsuccessful. The Liberal Democrats won 7.9 percent of the vote and just 8 seats. 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 lost heavily to the Scottish National Party. Their efforts over a generation to win an electorally relevant share of seats have now collapsed and will take a monumental effort to rebuild.

This article examines the reasons behind the Liberal Democrats' collapse at the 2015 general election. The first section places the Liberal Democrats' experience within the comparative literature on junior coalition parties, and outlines various explanations for their collapse. The second section analyses the Liberal Democrats' particularly defensive campaign strategy in the 2015 general election, and examines the continued importance of incumbency to the party. It finds that while the incumbency effect still reaps benefits for the Liberal Democrats, it was not enough to withstand the fall in the national vote. The third section utilises data from the 2015 British Election Study to identify the individual reasons behind voting (or not) for the Liberal Democrats. It finds that the Liberal Democrats suffered badly due to a lack of perceived competence

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and influence, and badly lost the trust of their electorate.

This article contributes not only to analysis of the Liberal Democrats, but also informs broader comparative literature in two key respects. First, the 2010–2015 Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition was the first formal UK coalition in the post-war period, and examining the Liberal Democrats' collapse in the 2015 general election informs broader analysis of junior parties in coalition. It explores whether junior parties must always suffer in coalition and the key tasks for them to overcome the challenges they face. Second, the article also examines the continuing success of constituency campaigning and incumbency strategies, shown to be important both to the Liberal Democrats but also to political parties more broadly (Fisher et al., 2011, 2015; Smith, 2013). How successful was this in the 2015 general election? This article examines these questions.

## 2. The comparative perspective and electoral context

The comparative literature on coalitions works from two main criteria. First, as parties are office-seeking, they should share as many of the spoils of office with as few parties as possible (Riker, 1962). When achieved, this is known as the minimum-winning coalition: a government that has an overall majority (winning) amongst the smaller number of parties (minimum). Second, parties are also policy-seeking, and look to form coalitions that broadly coincide with their principles and policy programmes (Axelrod, 1970). When achieved alongside office-seeking priorities, the resulting government is the minimum-winning connected coalition.

When the Liberal Democrats joined the Conservatives in coalition following the 2010 general election, they arguably satisfied these two main criteria (Bale, 2012). Needing 326 MPs to pass a Queen's Speech and budget, Labour, with 258 MPs, could not even begin to think about governing without the support of the Liberal Democrats' 57 MPs. Meanwhile, the Conservatives on their own with 307 MPs would have also found themselves short should a 'rainbow coalition' of the centre-left (including the Liberal Democrats) try and defeat them. Even if the Conservatives could pass a Queen's Speech, they would have been unable to govern comfortably. The subsequent Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, with a de-facto majority of 80, was therefore the minimum-winning coalition. The Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition also arguably satisfied the policy-seeking requirement. The Liberal Democrats' professionalisation in recent years has been accompanied by a more equidistant strategy that made a coalition with the Conservatives easier to navigate (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011).

Boston and Bullock (2012) note the tension that exists between governmental unity and party distinctiveness. This tension is particularly strong for junior parties in coalition without a history of government and coalitional compromise (Bolleyer, 2008), such as the Liberal Democrats. How did the Liberal Democrats perform in the 2010 parliament in this regard? Bennister and Heffernan (2015) argued that the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition was defined by consensus and compromise, with both sides operating from a position of mutual trust and respect. Despite doubts that it would be the case (Bale, 2012), the coalition lasted the full five years with remarkably few threats to its existence. What of party distinctiveness? An analysis of the 2010 coalition agreement between the two parties showed that both parties satisfied the main commitments of their manifesto, and the Liberal Democrats in particular were in a position to deliver much of the minutiae of their manifesto (Quinn et al., 2011). However in doing so, they gave ground to the Conservatives on the key issues of deficit reduction, tax, welfare, education, health, immigration and defence policy (Bale and Webb, 2015). As Bale (2012: 328) wryly notes, the

coalition agreement showed 'what happens when vegetarians negotiate with carnivores'.

The unity/distinctiveness dilemma invites a key question in relation to how junior parties are perceived in coalition: who do voters blame or credit for a coalition government's performance? Comparative evidence suggests that the lead governing party within a coalition, the 'proposer' of the coalition and the party with the 'chief executive', will bear most of the responsibility with voters for government performance (Duch et al., 2015; Fisher and Hobolt, 2010). This suggests that in the UK context of 2010–2015, the Conservatives were more likely to be credited or blamed by the electorate than the Liberal Democrats for the government's performance. Indeed, while the Liberal Democrats can claim successful implementation of some of their policies<sup>1</sup>, polling conducted in 2014 suggested that the Liberal Democrats' key policy delivered in government, such as increasing the income tax threshold, was primarily associated by the voters with the Conservatives (Bennett, 2014). As Behr (2014) argues, 'one difference between opposition and government for Liberal Democrats has been that, before coalition, no one noticed what they said; now, no one notices what they do'. In short, by prioritising coalition unity in the early years of the coalition, they sacrificed party distinctiveness (McEnhill, 2015).

The Liberal Democrats' lack of influence and distinctiveness suggests that their collapse can be explained by their voters feeling betrayed by the party (Cutts and Russell, 2015). More generally, Muller and Strom (1999) highlight the importance of maintaining party legitimacy, while Dunphy and Bale (2011) suggest that parties risk losing their identity in coalition with a larger party. Dommert (2013) suggests that a number of decisions by the Liberal Democrats created a schism between their rhetoric as an opposition party and their rhetoric in government, fostering a perception of distrust and betrayal.

Junior coalition parties also face a number of other challenges. First, they must appear competent as a party in government (Muller and Strom, 1999). Clarke et al. (2009) argue that competence has increasingly shaped party competition in Britain. Green (2015) argues that the Liberal Democrats' perceived competence on their key policy issues increased support for the party. However as this support has been gained based on difference from the two major parties (Green and Hobolt, 2008), the argument arises that they might have lost competence on key issues after aligning themselves too closely to the Conservatives in coalition. Indeed, on the three key valence issues ahead of the 2015 general election (the economy, immigration and health care), the Conservatives were more trusted than the Liberal Democrats (YouGov, 2015).

As well as perception of competence of parties' key policy issues, the competence and popularity of party leaders is also argued to be important. Stokes (1992) argues that an assessment of a party's competence is shaped 'from its experience with the parties and the leaders, and the results they achieve, over time'. The assessment of a party leader is thus something to be considered alongside assessment of a broader political party (Clarke et al., 2009; Whiteley et al., 2013). At the 2010 general election, party leader Nick Clegg was a source of electoral advantage for the Liberal Democrats (Cutts, 2012; Middleton, 2015). However, his popularity plunged throughout the 2010 parliament, and he was regarded as

<sup>1</sup> The threshold at which people start paying income tax was £7475 in 2010–2011, and now stands at £10,600 (as of the financial year 2015–2016). The pupil premium ring-fences money in the education budget to go directly to the most deprived schools in the country. The coalition government abolished identity cards and child detention, radically reformed the pensions system, and implemented much of the Liberal Democrats' environmental policy.

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