

## **The Liberal Democrats: Past, Present, and Future**

Over the summer of 2005 I had the privilege of interning for Mike Hancock, MP for Portsmouth South. Mr. Hancock is a member of the Liberal Democrats, the major third party in the United Kingdom. As the summer progressed I often asked my supervisor, Alan Lloyd, about what the party stood for, where they came from, and why they were able to get elected. Alan did the best he could to give me concise explanations, but these answers mainly left me a bit confused.

The proceeding paper I will examine how the Liberal Democrats came to be a party, where they tend to win elections and why. With said information I will attempt to provide an explanation of how the party can best move from half party status to electoral force.

### **Party Origins: The Formation of the Liberal Democrats**

To best understand the actions of the Liberal Democrats, it is critical that one understands how the party came to exist. Liberal Democrats can trace their origins back to the old Liberal party. The liberal party was formed during the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by William Gladstone. Gladstone's success was attributed to his ability to draw support from both the upper and lower class (Russell, 16). However, Gladstone's government was severely limited by factionalism. Despite the party's 100 seat majority in 1868, real reform was not possible. Both land reform and the Home Rule Bill for Ireland split the party irrecoverably. Seventeen Liberal MPs, members of Parliament, recast themselves as Liberal Unionists and entered into a series of

electoral pacts with the Conservatives. These realignments helped to bring the Conservatives to power in 1895.

It was not long before the Liberal Party regained its strength. In the early twentieth century Conservatives divided over economic protectionism. Thus, the Liberals, under Henry Campbell-Bannerman, were able to form a government ([www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk)). The next general election in January of 1906 became the zenith of the Liberal's electoral success, with the party securing 400 seats. This overwhelming electoral success did not translate into functional power, for the House of Lords' refused to pass 'The People's Budget' of 1909. This directly led to the election of 1910 where the Liberals lost over a hundred seats.

The First World War was disastrous for the Liberal party. War created much friction because the party had a strong pacifist element. The necessity of war led the party to compromise many of its values, freedom of trade, individual rights, and freedom of the press. For many this was too great a sacrifice. In May 1915 discontent over the handling of the war and the resignation of Liberal cabinet members led to the formation of an all-party coalition government. This was the end for the last Liberal government. As the war progressed the party split into two factions, those who supported David Lloyd George and those who supported Henry Asquith. The Conservatives, in tandem with the Lloyd George wing of the party, won the 1918 election. Asquith's Liberals were humiliated, winning just 28 seats, while their coalition counterparts walked away with 133 seats (Russell, 18).

Party decline continued into the inter war period. With the Liberals divided, the Conservatives easily became the largest party in the country. Lloyd George and Asquith later reunited the two factions around the theme of free trade for the November 1923 General Election. This was a direct response to the Government's plan to implement import tariffs. The

election results, 159 seats and 30 percent of the vote, suggested a Liberal revival, but this was just temporary for the party's gains came at the expense of Conservatives. The party actually lost support amongst urban working class voters. This showed the strength of the free trade vote rather than an arrest to Labour's encroachment on the Liberal support. This loss highlighted the shift to Labour as the dominant party of the left (Russell, 19).

In 1924 the Liberal Party fell to 40 seats and later to half that in 1931. By 1945 the party was devastated. It won only 12 seats in the General Election. Many first time voters chose Labour. By 1951 the Liberals were further reduced to six MP's (MacIver, 25). The progressive wing had been lured away by Labour and those who rejected socialism were adopted into a Tory party led by moderates. However, this poor showing was not the end for the Liberals.

The rebirth of the Liberal Party started in 1956 when a young Jo Grimond became the new party leader. Grimond gradually reshaped the Liberal Party as a party of the radical non-socialist center-left, the position it has held for itself through today. By 1958 the party's turnaround was evident when Mark Bonham-Carter achieved a breakthrough when he beat the Tories in the Torrington by-election. This victory marked a new phase of Liberal politics after the Second World War.

Several by-election victories during the 1960's significantly aided in the party's recovery. However, by-election victories were not the only source of revitalization. Party recovery can also be attributed to Grimond's emphasis on strengthening the party at the local level (Russell, 23). Liberals saw local governments as more open to change, thus great emphasis was placed on local elections. Grimond's strategy worked; In Liverpool, the party increased its representation from one in 1968 to become the largest single group on the council by 1973. By the mid-1970s the Liberals had established themselves as a force in local politics. The Liberal Party became the

largest party on six local councils; and the second largest party on approximately another 20. By 1966 the Liberals had increased their representation in Parliament to 12, but the decade ended with a setback, in 1970 the party's seats were reduced by half (MacIver, 24). This type of gain and loss was typical of the Liberal revival. Party failure at the decade change can be attributed to the strengthening of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, traditional strongholds of the party, and the inability of the party to draw support away from Labour.

In 1967 a change in leadership occurred; Jeremy Thorpe replaced Grimond as the head of the party. The rise in student political activism during this period brought many young voters to the party. This support made possible a Liberal share of one-fifth of the votes in the 1974 General Election. Despite their sizeable percentage, the Liberals only walked away with 14 seats. The Conservatives won the popular vote but gained fewer seats than Labour (Russell, 28). However, Labour did not have the seats to establish a majority in the Commons. The defeated Prime Minister, Edward Heath, was not ready to cede power so he offered to create a coalition with the Liberals. Talks broke down over electoral reform and Labour formed a minority government

The party was again damaged in 1976, when a sex scandal surrounding leader Jeremy Thorpe broke. Thorpe was forced to step down and David Steel was elected party leader. Things again looked up for the Liberals for later that year they entered into coalition government with James Callaghan and Labour. Although Steel emphasized the gain in credibility the party made by being part of government the liberals were actually hurt by the coalition. Association with an unpopular government caused substantial losses in local elections and some disastrous by-election results. The Lib-Lab pact formally came to a close in July 1978. Despite the

separation, the 1979 General Election was again disastrous. The party's image was still tainted by its past association with Labour (MacIver, 26).

The defeat of the Labour Party in 1979 brought to light the strains and bitter conflicts between left and right factions of the party. This period of great turmoil helped to create a new era of third party politics in Great Britain. Led by the Gang of Four, Roy Jenkins, David Owen, Bill Rodgers, and Shirley Williams, the Social Democratic Party, SDP, was officially launched on March 26, 1981. The new party initially consisted of 14 members, 13 former Labour MPs and a lone Conservative (Russell, 31). Over the next two years another 15 Labour MP's defected to the party. The SDP and the Liberals joined forces in the early months of 1981 to form the Alliance. In their manifesto, *A Fresh Start for Britain*, the parties announced their wish to not compete against one another.

The electoral impact of the Alliance was immediate. The Warrington by-election in July was a real testament to the party's growing popularity. With the Liberals standing aside, SDP took 42 percent of the vote and came within 1,800 votes of defeating Labour in one of its strongholds. Alliance support surged to an unprecedented level for a third party. In February 1981, just before the SDP was formed, the Liberals stood at 20 per cent in opinion polls. By October, Gallup was polling 40 percent for the Alliance and an astonishing 50 percent in December. Alliance candidates won half of the 214 local government by-elections between July and December of 1981. Several opinion polls in the autumn and early winter of 1981 forecast a sweeping Alliance victory in the next general election (MacIver, 27).

Despite early success, the new party had serious internal problems. The agreement between the Liberals and the SDP to contest half of the parliamentary seats at the forthcoming election proved to be a source of great tension. Many Liberals assumed that the SDP would

contest a selection of seats, a hundred at most. This was not the case; the compromise called for a 50/50 share. SDP newcomers were not keen to yield primacy to Liberal candidates who had little to show for past efforts. This tension did not destroy the party, but it did decrease popular support.

Alliance was most hurt during this time by an upswing in the economy and Thatcher's invasion of the Falklands (Russell, 31). Before the Falklands, the Conservatives had an approval rating of 30 percent. This jumped up by half in the four months following the invasion. This popularity led the Conservatives to call a general election in June of 1983. For the Alliance the election was a bitter disappointment. Despite securing 25.4 percent of the vote and finishing only 2.2 percent behind Labour, the Alliance won just 23 seats. SDP candidates did especially bad, 23 of the 28 original members lost their seats. Liberals fared much better with a net gain of 4 seats. The most pronounced result of the election was Roy Jenkins's resignation as leader of the SDP. Jenkins's was replaced by Michael Owen, A staunch party member who had no intention of fully merging with the Liberals.

Between 1983 and 1987 the Alliance was in disarray. While it consolidated its position in local government and scored occasional by-election successes, its credibility as an alternative governing party remained in doubt (MacIver, 29). Significant tensions over defense policy nearly split the party in 1986. The 1987 general election was again troubling to the Alliance. The party's campaign ended up highlighting the differences between the two factions. It became clear that, given the choice, Owen, the SDP leader, would support the Conservatives in the event of a hung parliament, while Steel, the Liberal leader, would side with Labour. This dual leadership approach only further hurt the party in an election that focused on strong leadership.

The weekend following the 1987 election, Liberal leader David Steel called for a formal merger of the two wings of the Alliance. Owen immediately rejected the idea. At a special conference in January 1988 the Liberals formally agreed to a merger with the SDP to form a new political party. Despite resistance from Owen and others, the SDP membership also approved a full merger. Thus, the Social and Liberal Democrats, SLD, were born on March 3<sup>rd</sup> 1988. The first year was hard for the party, support collapsed and a steady stream of members and activists abandoned ship. The SLD and the remainder of the SDP seemed intent not only on splitting the former Alliance vote but also destroying one another. The European Parliament election of 1988 highlighted how much damage had been done to the Social and Liberal Democrats. SLD received only six percent of votes while the Greens scored almost fifteen percent ([www.liberalhistory.org.uk](http://www.liberalhistory.org.uk)). Fortunately for the party things got better. By 1990 the SDP had left the national scene, due to abysmal election results.

However the SLD still had a major problem, voters were confused by the identity of the party. Gallup found that nearly three-quarters of those surveyed in September 1990 either did not know the new party's name or got it wrong. In response, the party took on the new name, Liberal Democrats (Russell, 35). This name found favor with members from both sides of the former Alliance.

The first real success for the new party can be attributed to the unpopularity of the poll tax. With an impressive by-election victory at Eastbourne, the party was able to reestablish itself as a contender. This success was repeated in the Ribble Valley by-election a few months later. By September of 1991 the Liberal Democrats had successfully established themselves as the third party in British politics.

## **Party Growth: The Party after Merger**

The 1992 general election results were disappointing to the Liberal Democrats. The party received only 20 seats despite taking 18.3 percent of the vote (MacIver, 37). This was even more disappointing than usual because many expected that more seats would be taken due to specific targeting on 20 seats where a swing of only four percent was needed for a victory. Also disappointing, was the loss of seats gained in by- elections from 1990 to 1991. These results left no chance of a coalition government and defined Labour as the party of opposition.

As the decade progressed, things improved for the Liberal Democrats. By 1995 the Liberal Democrats had more elected councilors in Britain than the Conservatives (Russell, 38). By the mid 1990's, during the unprecedented unpopularity of the Conservative regime, the Liberal Democrats joined in an unofficial anti-Conservative alliance with Labour. Upon assuming control of the Labour Party in 1994, Tony Blair was quick to send conciliatory messages to the Liberal Democrats. As the two parties worked together on the Scottish Constitutional Convention, their closeness precipitated talk of coalition. By May 1995, Liberal Democrat leader Paddy Ashdown announced the end of equidistance, the party's willingness to unite with either the Conservatives or Labour. Blair made it known to Ashdown that he wished to incorporate Liberal Democrats into his government. However, this idea lost momentum after Labour swept the 1997 general election and was later destroyed after the parties' argument over proportional representation.

Despite this disappointment over leadership, the 1997 general election was not a loss for the party. Through specific targeting, the Liberal Democrats were able to more than double their representation while receiving approximately one percent less of the total vote. In the 2001 election the party increased both its share of seats and percentage of the vote. A net gain of six



seats and 1.5 percentage points brought the party to 52 seats and 18.3 percent of the vote. This increase continued as many voters became dissatisfied with the war in Iraq. Liberal Democrats won seats from Labour in by-elections at Brent East in 2003 and at Leicester South in 2004. The party also narrowly missed taking Birmingham Hodge Hill and Hartlepool. 2005 was another successful election for the Lib Dems. A total of 10 seats were gained along with 22 percent of the vote, the party's highest pull since 1987. Many of the party's gains came in previously Labour held urban constituencies, Manchester Worthington, Cardiff Central, and Birmingham Yardley. The party also achieved over 100 second place finishes behind Labour candidates.

Despite this success the future place of the Liberal Democrats is quite unsure. The party's increased support in recent years has come from both former Labour and former Conservative voters who favor the Lib Dem stance on issues such as civil liberties, electoral reform, and the war in Iraq. However, while these two groups of potential supporters might agree with the party on these matters, differences on economic policy present an obvious problem.

### **The Credibility Gap: Translating Support into Seats**

After reviewing the history of the Liberal Democrats it becomes quite clear that the party is plagued by the problem of under representation. The party averages between 15 and 20 percent of the national vote, yet it typically holds half that percentage in Parliament. This discouraging outcome can be attributed to Duverger's Law; first past the post electoral systems tend to precipitate two party systems (MacAllister, 228). In this situation voters are most often forced to pick between the two parties that they believe likely to win.

When Duverge's law is applied to the Liberal Democrats it is often called the wasted vote syndrome. This occurs when voters who are supportive of a party and its policies are unwilling to vote for that party because they believe that the party has little chance of winning in either their constituency or on a national level (Russell, 173). In order to overcome the wasted vote syndrome, the party must bridge the credibility gap by convincing voters it has a chance of winning. Fortunately for the Liberal Democrats, this process has already started. To prove this all one need do is examine the general election of 1997 where the party lost a slight amount of its national vote, yet more than doubled its Westminster representation.

### **Traditional Liberal Heartlands: Where the Party has always Gained Seats**

The geographical distribution of Liberal seats has always been particularly interesting because of its patchy nature. Traditionally the party performed particularly well in Scotland and Wales, winning about 86 percent of rural seats. In England the party fared well in the Northeast, East Midlands, and Southwest, where the party tended to win over 50 percent of the seats. The Liberals tended to perform particularly poorly in large cities, except for Edinburgh, Leeds, and Bradford. Here the party's victories were typically restricted to slum areas. Middle class areas such as the South East were another area where the party fared poorly.

This fragmented support can be explained by several factors. The strength of the Liberal Party in the rural areas of Wales, Scotland, and the Southwest of England can be traced to the high levels of religious non-conformity in these areas. Traditionally, nonconformists looked to the Whig Party as their natural allies against the oppression of the Anglican Tories but when the party dissolved the Liberal Party became the source to which nonconformists looked to for protection of their rights (MacAllister, 230). In Wales this tradition of Liberal support was

especially strong due to a desire to preserve the Welsh language. This strength remained, even when the country realigned during the early twentieth century and the party lost favor, because once embedded in a local political culture, traditions of voting can survive external influences.

Another reason these areas stayed true to the Liberal Party is their isolation. During 1920s voters throughout Western Europe became immersed in the struggle between conflicting influences. In Britain, industrialization squeezed out the Liberal Party when the conflict between capitalism and militant labour took center stage in the political arena (Russell, 137). The decline of liberalism in sections of Britain was further aided by the weakening of regional identity as the country became much more homogeneous. Because the rise of industrialization and the homogeneity it brought with it bypassed the isolated rural areas of Scotland, Wales and Cornwall, it is no surprise that these areas stayed loyal to the Liberals.

### **Emerging Heartlands: Where the Party is Gaining Seats**

The Liberal Democrats were able to significantly enlarge their share of seats to better match their percentage of the vote during the election of 1997. To effectively understand this enlargement one must study the factors that made it possible for the Lib Dems to win seats outside their traditional heartlands. These gains included five seats in the greater London area and seven seats in the Southeast. The party was able to expand its influence by using local elections as stepping stones. These elections are easier to win because wards are much smaller than parliamentary districts. Voters are easier to sway at the local level because they need not worry that voting for a third party might possibly alter the national balance of power. This is demonstrated by the fact that during the 1990's, Liberal Democrats polled between 24 and 27 percent of the vote in local elections while the party polled about ten points lower nationally

(Russell, 150). Said elections also help foster national success because once a party is well represented on the local council it is better able to convince the electorate that it is a credible force in that area, able to compete with the major parties, and not just a wasted vote. In fact, in 24 of the 30 constituencies the Liberal Democrats captured from the Conservatives in 1997, the party held a majority on the local council. Also, in these 30 constituencies the Liberal Democrats won 62 percent of the council seats contested between 1994 and 1997. This ability to use local success as a springboard has not gone unnoticed by other parties. One Conservative politician is even quoted as saying, “Divert all your resources into stamping them out even if it means losing some seats to Labour because Liberals are like cancer cells, once they take root you know they’ll be invading and spreading all over your borough” (MacAllister, 235).

Another way in which the Liberal Democrats have been able to convince the electorate that they are a credible political force is through their victories in by-elections. By-elections are valued because they provide a relatively quick way to bridge the credibility gap in an area. The party as a whole benefits from these elections because they not only tend to fair well in said elections but are also often able to retain their victories in subsequent general elections (Russell, 152). The party has won 17 by-elections since 1983. However, the level of success between 1997 and 2001 was dampened by the fact that most by-elections occurred in Labour strongholds (MacAllister, 239). However, this period of time was still successful for in 2000 the Liberal Democrats achieved one of their greatest by-election victories, overturning the safe Conservative seat of Romsey. The party’s overall success in these elections is attributed to their ability to coordinate highly organized local campaigns, a strong part of the party’s grassroots tradition.

In 1991 the Liberal Democrats won 21 percent of the vote in local elections, six percentage points lower than the elections of 1987. Naturally one would expect that the party

would have lost a number of seats. However, this did not happen. In fact the opposite occurred, 500 seats were gained. Why did this happen? The answer is proximity. Upon examination, it was found that Liberal Democrats performed better in areas where they already held seats (Russell, 153). This occurs because voters in wards that neighbor Liberal Democrats seats are more likely to see the party a credible local force and therefore support the party. This phenomenon also occurs at the national level. In the 1997 general election the party not only won in the Southwest, a party heartland, but also in Wessex and the Southwest of London, areas not far from the party heartland in the Southwest. It should be noted that in this election most of the party's second place finishes came in this same southern part of the country. When looking at the country as a whole there are very few constituencies led by the Liberal Democrats that are not contiguous to or close by other Liberal seats.

### **Analysis: What Predictors Actually Explain Party Success in 1997**

When the predictors of Liberal Democrat success are analyzed using linear and logistic regression some interesting discoveries about Liberal Democrat success in the general election of 1997 are made. As suggested above, a key mechanism for bridging the credibility gap is strong representation in local government. In constituencies where the party was at least equal to the largest force on the local council the party averaged an extra 5.6 percent of the vote in the 1997 general election. This increase in the share of the vote did not occur in all constituencies where the party performed well in local elections between 1994 and 1997. For example, the party won all the local council seats in the Birmingham Yardley constituency between 1994 and 1997 yet still did not finish near the incumbent Labour MP. Nevertheless, success in local elections has a

positive impact on Liberal Democrat support. For every additional 10 percent of council seats won between 1994 and 1997 the Liberal Democrat's vote share increased by 1.5 percent.

By-election success was also a significant predictor. The party performed between two and four percent better in seats where there had been a by-election victory since 1983. Surprisingly, being contiguous to a seat that the party already held was not significant. While most Liberal gains tended to be contiguous or close to other Liberal seats, a Liberal Democrat seat did not have a statistically significant impact on Liberal Democrat support. This can be explained by the large number of constituencies that border party seats. One example of this is the seat of Lewes, which neighbors seven other constituencies, none of which are Liberal Democrat held.

Liberal Democrat success can also be explained by other factors such as campaign spending and being designated a target seat. The party performed better in seats where they spent more. For every additional 10 percent spent in a constituency, the party's share of the vote increased by two percent. Although when local council success was entered into the analysis this impact only translated into an increase of one percent. Whether the party had designated a seat a target seat also had a significant impact. If a seat was given this special status, the chance of victory was over seven times more likely. The party performed consistently better in these seats, pulling between four and eight percent more of the vote. This increase isn't that surprising given the increased resources these constituencies received during the campaign period. Thus, the notion that local campaigning is crucial to Liberal Democrat success is reinforced.

When analyzing the 1997 general election one should not forget to examine the areas where Liberal Democrats have traditionally done well. For every time the party won a particular seat between 1918 and 1935, a time of greater party strength, the likelihood of success rose by 35

percent (Russell, 161). Religious non-conformity also predicted success. The party was nine percent more likely to win a seat for every one percent increase in the constituency's number of non-conformists. These statistics confirm that the areas defined as traditional heartlands are still important to party success.

## **Analysis; Explaining Wins and Losses in 2005**

Now that I have looked closely at factors that predict Liberal Democrat success I will try to explain why the Liberal Democrats won and lost where they did. To start off I looked at the party's number one target seat, Taunton. This constituency is located in the Liberal Democrat heartland, the Southwest. At time of the election it was contiguous with three other Liberal held seats. The Conservatives only won the seat by four tenths of a percent of the vote in the 2001 election, so it is no surprise this seat was heavily targeted in 2005. Interestingly, Liberal Democrats lost the majority they held on the local council in May of 2003 ([www.tauntondeane.gov.uk](http://www.tauntondeane.gov.uk)). Despite this, the Liberal Democrats had enough momentum from the other factors to win the seat. The party should continue to consider this seat a target in the next election because the party only won by one percent.

Another party win in the Southwest came at Falmouth and Camborne. Even though the party listed this seat in about the middle of its target list due to a third place finish, losing by 15 percentage points in the 2001 general election, it is not that surprising the party won the seat ([news.bbc.co.uk/1/01/ukfs\\_news/hi/uk\\_politics/vote\\_2005](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/01/ukfs_news/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005)). The Constituency is surrounded by other Liberal seats in Cornwall, a place of historical strength. Liberal Democrats hold a strong majority on the Cornwall County Council, over five times the seats held by the defeated Labour Party. This large ratio is also seen on the two district councils within the constituency. In the

district of Carrick the Liberal Democrats hold 29 seats while Labour only holds one ([www.carrick.gov.uk](http://www.carrick.gov.uk)). With such a strong party presence in the area and such a weak Labour presence on local councils, it is likely that the Liberal Democrats will turn Falmouth into a party stronghold.

The party's win at Cardiff Central, an urban district, is also quite interesting. Although the party does well in the Celtic fringes, this success usually occurs in rural areas. In fact, there is no other Liberal Democrat held Parliament seat in the Cardiff metropolitan area. The seat was third on the Liberal Democrats list of targeted seats. This designation can likely be attributed to the party's close second place finish in 2001, a loss by a little less than two percent. As of 2005 the Liberal Democrats held the majority on the local council ([www.cardiff.gov.uk](http://www.cardiff.gov.uk)). This I believe to be the main reason the party was able to win the seat.

The Liberal Democrats also won in the Welsh constituency of Ceredigion. This seat was formerly held by Plaid Cymru, The Party of Wales. The constituency is rural and bordered by two Liberal Democratic seats. The local council elections of 2004 saw a slight gain for Liberal Democrats and a larger gain Plaid Cymru, at the cost of the Independents. Plaid Cymru holds a three seat majority ([www.ceredigion.gov.uk](http://www.ceredigion.gov.uk)). In the 2005 general election the Lib Dems were able to swing the vote by six percent to gain a narrow victory. The reason the Liberals won Ceredigion is most likely due to the fact that district is located in party heartlands and the fact that the party has lost national support since the Welsh Assembly was formed in 1998.

Scotland is another area in which the party was able to win even if the party did not control the local council. In Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch, and Strathspey the party won its number five target seat, beating Labour by ten percentage points. The constituency borders three other liberal constituencies, yet the independents have a firm grip on the Highland Council



([www.highland.gov.uk](http://www.highland.gov.uk)). In contrast, the party's other victory in Scotland came at Dunbartonshire East. This constituency, located in the central section of the country, is entirely surrounded by Labour. However, the Dunbartonshire County Council has a clear Liberal Democrat majority ([www.eastdunbarton.gov.uk](http://www.eastdunbarton.gov.uk)). This constituency is only the second seat in Central Scotland to be won by Liberal Democrats in recent years.

The party's gain in the Northwest at Westmorland and Lonsdale is interesting because the seat does not possess either of the characteristics that have been able to explain the wins I have examined so far. The constituency is not near any other Liberal seats and the party has noticeably fewer councilors than both Labour and the Conservatives on the Lancashire County Council ([www.lancashire.gov.uk](http://www.lancashire.gov.uk)). On Election Day specific targeting of the seat was the key to success according to *The Independent* (Woolf). With such a narrow margin of victory, fewer than 500 votes, I believe this to be the best explanation.

Manchester is the other area of the Northwest where the Liberal Democrats gained seats. The victory at Rochdale is well explained by the predictors of Lib Dem success. By-election success brought the party to power in 1972, where it stayed for 20 years. Liberal Democrats also hold the majority on the metropolitan borough council ([www.rochdale.gov.uk](http://www.rochdale.gov.uk)). This is not true for the City of Manchester where the party won the Worthington seat. Remarkably, the party was able to more than double its take of the vote to win a narrow majority. I feel the cause for this shift is hard to decipher because the constituency was not that high on the party's target list, only 145. Although I can't explain this win, I believe that the neighboring Liberal Democrat seats of Hazel Green and Cheadle aided the party in being seen as a credible force.

The party was also able to win in other urban constituencies, Bristol, Leeds, Solihull, and Birmingham. Although Bristol West is the only constituency in Bristol held by the Liberal

Democrats, one need not look far to find other party strongholds, Bath and Northavon. This is hardly surprising considering Bristol is located in the Southwest. The Liberal Democrats hold a strong majority on Bristol City Council, nearly half the seats ([www.bristol-city.gov.uk](http://www.bristol-city.gov.uk)). Despite trailing Labour by eight points in the last election, it is not that surprising that the Lib Dems were able to win in Bristol. As for Birmingham Yardley, a constituency with a vote turnover similar to that of Bristol West, the reason for victory is less obvious. On the Birmingham City Council, the Liberal Democrats rank third behind both Labour and the Conservatives ([www.birmingham.gov.uk](http://www.birmingham.gov.uk)). The constituency is also located in the West Midlands, an area with little party representation. Interestingly, the seat was number 19 on the target list, right behind Bristol West. In my opinion being named a target seat and a decent second place finish in 2001 best explain the 2005 victory. The party was also able to win next door in Solihull. Without a majority on the local council and a far from close finish in 2001, 19.6 points behind the Conservatives, the win is a bit odd ([www.solihull.gov](http://www.solihull.gov)). I believe this victory can be attributed to intensive campaigning in this district and in Birmingham Yardley. The win at Leeds North West is equally perplexing. The Liberal Democrats are not the majority party on the city council ([www.leeds.gov.uk](http://www.leeds.gov.uk)). In the 2001 election they came in third behind the Conservatives. As for geography, there are few Liberal Democrat held seats in Yorkshire and the Humber. Although the Lib Dem held seat of Harrogate and Knaresborough is not too far away, I feel that this propinquity is not sufficient to explain the party gain.

In the greater London area the Liberal Democrats were able to win at Brent East and Hornsey and Wood Green. The win at Brent East is interesting seeing as how the seat was 467 on the party's target list ([news.bbc.co.uk/nol/ukfs\\_news/hi/uk\\_politics/vote\\_2005](http://news.bbc.co.uk/nol/ukfs_news/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005)). On the Brent Borough Council the party comes in a distant third behind Labour and the Conservatives with ten

seats ([www.brent.gov.uk](http://www.brent.gov.uk)). Although the district is immersed in a sea of Labour, the Liberals were able to win a by-election victory in 2003. This win was attributed to opposition for the war in Iraq. Hornsey and Wood Green is another seat that's victory is attributed to opposition to the war in Iraq. The Haringey Borough Council has a large Labour majority ([www.haringely.gov](http://www.haringely.gov)). In 2001 the Liberal Democrats came in roughly 15 points behind Labour. If not for the pro Iraq War position of former MP Barbara Roche, the seat would likely still be held by Labour.

The only seat the party won in the East came at Cambridge, a rather small seat geographically, compared to others in this Conservative heartland. As for the local council, the Liberal Democrats hold the majority ([www.cambridge.gov.uk](http://www.cambridge.gov.uk)). However, because Cambridge is a university town, it is likely there was a strong anti war vote, considering the party trailed the Conservatives by 25 points in the 2001 election

Of the 99 seats targeted by the party, 72 were held by the Conservatives. Interestingly, Cambridge was one of only three Conservative target districts actually won by the Liberal Democrats. All other wins, except Ceredigion, came at the expense of Labour. However, all party losses were to the advantage of the Conservatives.

Four of the five loses came in the South of the country, an area of more pronounced party strength. In the Southwest, both Devon West and Torridge and Weston- Super-Mare, the Liberal Democrats lost by less than two points. While Devon West is flanked by other Liberal held seats on either side, Weston- Super-Mare is surrounded by Conservatives. In the most recent election both parties had their very narrow majorities turned into noticeably more broad minorities. As for the local councils, West Devon Borough Council is controlled by the Conservatives and Torridge is led by those with no party affiliation. In the Weston- Super-Mare area, the Conservatives hold a one seat majority over the Liberal Democrats on the North Somerset

Council ([www.n-somerset.gov.uk](http://www.n-somerset.gov.uk)). In the Southeast the Liberal Democrats lost both Guildford and Newbury, seats with very few Liberal districts nearby. Guildford was an especially sad loss, seeing as the party lost by less than one percent. The Liberal Democrats also hold a strong second place position, behind the Conservatives, on the local council ([www.guildford.gov.uk](http://www.guildford.gov.uk)). On the West Berkshire County Council, the Liberal Democrats are even closer to being the majority party, trailing the Conservatives by a mere three seats ([www.westberks.gov.uk](http://www.westberks.gov.uk)). Even though this balance of power on the council is more even, the party lost its seat at Newbury by approximately six more points than it did at Guildford. The Liberal Democrats one loss not in the South came at Ludlow, a constituency near the Welsh border in the West Midlands. Directly west of the seat lies the Liberal Democrat seats of Montgomeryshire and Bercon and Radnoshire. Ludlow shifted from a four point win to a five point loss. Upon examining all these losses in terms of predictors of success, I am not really able to give a strong reason as to why these seats were lost. However, all of these seats lacked at least one of the predictors of success. It is my belief that the party should not have lost at Ludlow, Newbury, or Devon West and Torridge because the party won these seats by a decent margin.

## **Predictions and Suggestions for the Next General Election**

I believe that the Liberal Democrats could make some significant gains in the next general election. To do this the party should re-examine its list of seats to target. The list should obviously include all of the seats lost in 2005, seeing as how the party lost none of these by very large margins. More Labour seats should be targeted considering that 40 percent of all Labour target seats were won, while only four percent of Conservative target seats were won ([news.bbc.co.uk/1/0/ukfs\\_news/hi/uk\\_politics/vote\\_2005](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/0/ukfs_news/hi/uk_politics/vote_2005)).

In the Southwest the Liberals should re-target Totnes, target seat number 14 in 2001. In 2005 the gap between the two parties narrowed by about three points, slimming the majority to slightly less than four points. Although it would likely take more than one election to gain the seat, the Lib Dems would do well to give more attention to Plymouth North and South. In both these Labour held seats the party gained about nine percentage points in the 2005 election. Dorset West would be another seat worth re-targeting in the next general election. The party was able to reduce the majority to about four and a half percent in 2005. The same is true for Wells where the 2005 majority was slightly under six percent. As for the Bristol area, Bristol South and East would be good seats to target, both came in second to Labour in 2005.

Looking at Wales I feel that the Liberal Democrats will have a hard time winning many more seats. In the seats that they do not win, a third place finish or a 20 percent share of the vote is quite common. I do think the party should target the districts surrounding Cardiff Central despite the noticeably lower share of the vote received. It is my hope that the Liberal Democrat's majority on the local council and the 2005 success at Cardiff Central will strengthen the party's chance of future success. The other constituency I feel that the party should target in the next election is the Labor held seat of Wrexham. Although the party would have to overturn a 22 percent majority, it is one of the few seats where the party came in second place.

As for Scotland the Lib Dems would do well to heavily re-target Aberdeen South. This Labour held constituency borders Aberdeenshire West and Kincardine. In the 2005 general election the party gained nearly five points, leaving Labour with a slim majority, a little over three percent. A victory here could help to win over Aberdeen North where the party more than doubled its share of the vote in 2005. The Labour held seat of Glasgow North is another constituency that the Liberal Democrats could pick up. Its propinquity to Dumbartonshire East

and a gain of nine points in 2005 make it a worthy target. Like in Wales, I feel that the party will have a hard time picking up new seats due to the fact that the Liberal Democrats tend to finish third or come in 15 points below the winner.

In the Northeast the Liberals only hold one seat, yet they tend to come in second in most of the districts. However, most of these second place finishes come well behind Labour. With some substantial campaigning I feel that the party could win in City of Durham, Blaydon, and Newcastle upon Tyne North. Prospects are equally bleak in the Northwest. The party tends to come in third place in most constituencies. In my opinion, the party should target few seats here. Liverpool Wavertree along with Oldham East and Saddleworth, a seat near the party win at Rochdale, would be worthy targets because of their rather close second place finishes in 2005.

Yorkshire and Humberside is another area where the Liberal Democrats will have a hard time breaking the credibility gap. With the North dominated by the Conservatives and the South a Labour stronghold, the party must find a way to sneak in through the back door. I feel that the three Hull constituencies are the best place to do this. In 2005 the Lib Dems finished second in all three. The energy created from a citywide campaign could provide the impetus needed to make a breakthrough.

The Midlands are another area where the party should limit their targeting. In the West efforts should focus on the seats of Birmingham Hodge Hill and Ladywood. Their proximity to Birmingham Yardley and strong second place finishes in 2005 provide legitimacy. As for the East, Cambridgeshire East and Cambridgeshire Southeast, both Conservative seats, would be wise seats to target seeing as they surround the party's recent win at Cambridge. Norwich South, like Aberdeen South, would be a good seat to re-target. In the last election the party made significant gains here, overtaking the Conservatives to gain second place.

As for the Southeast and London, the party has more options. Orpington, a district previously won in a by election, is a seat that could be returned to party control seeing as how the Lib Dems are still holding strong in second place. Holborn and St Pancras is another London constituency that could be captured. In the last election the party increased its share of the vote by 12 percent. The same occurred in nearby Islington South and Finsbury, here the Liberal Democrats would only need a shift of two points to take the seat. Outside the London metropolitan area there are numerous seats where the Liberal Democrats come in second, yet they are at least 10 points behind the Conservatives. I think many of these seats could be one after heavy targeting in the next election. The only seat I believe that will easily be won in the next election is Hampshire East. This victory is likely seeing as the party increased its share of the vote in 2005 by over five percent; bringing the party within ten points of a win.

## **Conclusion**

Upon compilation of my research I have come to discover that the Liberal Democrats are a party of great resiliency. It is truly amazing that they are still a viable party after nearly ceasing to exist more than twice in the last century. Furthermore, there is no doubt that the party is gaining ground as an electoral force. However, these gains do not overshadow the fact that the party is at risk for loss in and around their great heartland, the Southwest. .

As for those that feel the Lib Dems should pick a place on the British political spectrum, opposing Labour or the Conservatives, I feel this to be an unwise choice seeing as how the party wins against Labour and loses to the Conservatives, but often by very little. To primarily focus on one party would most likely relegate the Liberal Democrats back to a lesser status. The best approach is to cluster targeting of seats in areas where Liberal Democrats have already broken

the credibility gap. Such targeting will allow the party to foster new heartlands, the only real choice for widespread national gains.

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