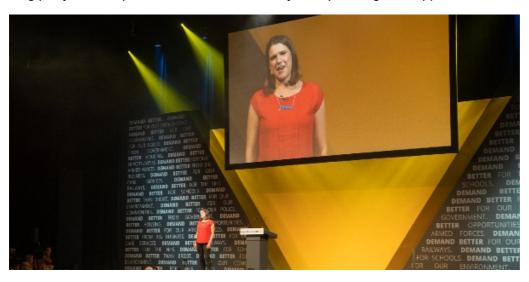# The empty centre: why the Liberal Democrats need to demonstrate competence and unity to win votes

Liberal parties in western democracies which advocate broadly centrist economic policies, such as the Liberal Democrats, have performed badly in some recent elections, even though their policies are often in tune with a large proportion of the electorate. Using survey data **Roi Zur** *finds they have little scope for winning votes by shifting in either direction on the left-right spectrum. Instead they need to demonstrate they are a credible and competent governing party, able to prevent Brexit, and are not just expressing their opposition to it.*

Lib Dem leader Jo Swinson. Picture: *Jwslubbock/* *CC BY-SA 4.0/Wikimedia Commons*

Recent polls show that the Liberal Democrats are expected to win a vote share closer (or even exceeding) their pre-2010 results. But how far can the Lib Dems' resurgence go? And what can the Lib Dems do in order to maximise their vote share in the next general election? In a recently published article in the British Journal of Political Science I examine the recent electoral defeats of centrist parties, such as the Lib Dems and the German Free Democratic Party (FDP), in four Western democracies. The major finding of this work is that the Lib Dems (and similar centrist parties) enjoy favourable conditions with regard to the electoral competition, but their ability to capitalise these conditions depends on the way voters perceive their ability to govern, competence, trustworthiness, and the popularity of their leadership.

On economic policies, parties on the right usually advocating for low taxes and little social benefits, while parties on the left favour high taxes and more social benefits. Voters judge parties based on these conflicting policy positions and vote for the party that they are closest to on this left-right spectrum of preferred policies. In this regard, the Lib Dems have very favourable conditions. Many voters perceive the Tories as 'too right-wing' and Labour as 'too left-wing', and the amount of these voters who position themselves broadly in the centre has increased in recent years. The evidence for this comes from surveys conducted by the British Election Study (BES). When asked to place themselves and the parties on a 0–10 Left-Right scale, a plurality of British voters perceived the Lib Dems as the closest party to their own position. Moreover, over time both Labour and Tories are perceived as more polarised, potentially leaving a large policy space in the middle for the Lib Dems. The same pattern holds in other countries. Why, then, did the Liberal Democrats' vote share shrink so dramatically over the last two elections?

The answer lies in what political scientists term as 'valence attributes'. Valence attributes are matters on which voters *do not* possess conflicting preferences, such attributes as parties' (and party leaders') images with respect to honesty, competence, empathy and unity. That is, all voters prefer the competent Prime Minister over the incompetent one, the trustworthy party leader over the deceiving one, and the unified party over the party that cannot govern itself (let alone the country). In this regard, the Lib Dems are disadvantaged. For example, in the 2015 post-election study conducted by the BES, over 33% of the respondents stated that the Conservative Party is the 'best party on most important issues' facing the country. Only 3.3% of the respondents answered 'Liberal Democrats' when asked the same question. Similarly, when asked to rank how united each party is, little over 20% stated that the Lib Dems are fairly or very united, while over 50% stated the same answers regarding the Tories.

Simply put, many voters who would be expected to prefer the Lib Dems' manifesto over the major parties go with their second choice because they simply don't see the Lib Dems as trustworthy or competent. This dynamic accelerated after the Conservative–Lib Dem coalition agreement of 2010. For example, think of a voter that has a policy preference that is as similar to the Lib Dems as to the Tories. This voter would be 'indifferent' between the parties on policy issues and will make her/his voting decision mostly based on the parties' image of valence. In the 2010 general election such a voter was only slightly more likely to vote for the Tories (over the Lib Dems), but in 2015 the same voter was more than 10 times more likely to vote for the Tories. Things didn't brighten up for the Lib Dems in 2017, when the same policy-indifferent voter was more than eight times more likely to vote Tory instead of Lib Dem. Similar results are found with respect to the competition between Labour and the Lib Dems.

What, then, can the Lib Dems do to improve their vote share? I try to answer this question by comparing two party strategies: parties can change their (perceived) policy positions / manifesto or change voters' perception of their valence attributes. Here I find that the Lib Dems cannot do themselves any good by shifting their economic policy positions further left or right. Specifically, in the 2017 general election they could have gained (at most) one additional percent of the national vote by changing their policy position (if they shift too far left they potentially lose the support of voters slightly to the right of them and vice versa). For comparison, based on voters' self-identification on a left-right spectrum, Labour could have gained roughly 11% more than their actual vote share in the 2017 general election if they would have presented more moderate position on economic issues.

On the other hand, the Lib Dems are much better off when they focus their campaign strategy on convincing voters that they are a trustworthy, competent, and honest party. Such a strategy could have improved the Lib Dems' vote share by almost 10% of the national vote, assuming that the other parties do not change their campaigns. Note, however, that even this hypothetical increase in the Lib Dems' vote share is limited relative to similar outcomes for the major parties. If all parties focus on non-policy attributes, the Lib Dems are expected to gain less than both Labour and the Tories. Taking these two outcomes together, I concluded that the Lib Dems (similar to the other centrist-Liberal parties) are stuck in the middle between two (higher-valence) parties.

This argument holds beyond economic issues. With a polarised public on Brexit (and more broadly European integration) and a Labour party that doesn't take a clear position on the issue, the Lib Dems have a huge growing potential. But, here again, taking a popular position is insufficient. In the appendix to the BJPS paper, and further [work in progress](), I show that the Lib Dems (similar to other Liberal parties), must improve their image of competence if they are to translate their popular positions into votes.

While this research does not 'predict' political outcomes, we can extrapolate some possible implications for the current and future resurgence of the Lib Dems. First, much of the current increase of the Lib Dems' numbers in polls comes from the rapid deterioration of the valence images of both major parties. Both major parties are perceived as more divided than at the time of recent general elections, both parties' leader are less popular, and voters perceive them as incompetent. If Brexit is not settled until the next general election, the Lib Dems should focus their campaign on convincing voters that Jo Swinson is a legitimate candidate for Prime Minister, and that they not only *want to*, but also *can* stop Brexit.

This article gives the views of the author, not the position of Democratic Audit. It draws on the article, '[Stuck in the middle: Ideology, valence and the electoral failures of centrist parties](), published in the British Journal of Political Science.

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