The 'Exit from Brexit' illusion: why the Liberal Democrats cannot capture the 48%

The days of the 2010 coalition seem a long way away for the Liberal Democrats. Is opposition to Brexit a ticket back to relevance? Can the party make inroads into the core Remain vote? **David Cutts** *and* **Andrew Russell** *explain why this strategy, although logical, is unlikely to succeed.*

Brighton was the focal point for the latest attempt by the Liberal Democrats to make the party relevant in British politics once more. In the midst of consistent flat-lining party and personal polling rating, Sir Vince Cable sought to rally his flagging party, using his Leader's speech at the Liberal Democrat conference to redefine their identity as a 'movement for moderates' and to condemn those with an 'erotic spasm' for Leaving the European Union. Leaving aside the fluffed lines, disquiet over Sir Vince's decision to retain the leadership until Brexit is completed (whenever that may be!), and open disagreement at all levels of the party about the coalition legacy, it is a good time to remind ourselves of the monumental challenge facing the Liberal Democrats.

The consequences of losing the third party mantle to the SNP

The heady days of the 2010 coalition, when the third party held the Deputy Premiership and five cabinet posts, seem a long way away for the Liberal Democrats. A party that had always bemoaned its lack of media coverage found itself outside the spotlight due to their exceedingly poor electoral performance. The parliamentary rules of the game compounded their sudden exclusion. As leaders of the third party, Paddy Ashdown, Charles Kennedy, Menzies Campbell, and Nick Clegg all benefitted from the convention of being able to ask weekly questions of the country's leader in Prime Minister's Questions. Suddenly, after 2015, this reward went to the SNP. Tim Farron, and since 2017 Vince Cable, had to be content with being called to challenge David Cameron or Theresa May only once a month. Within a short space of time, the Liberal Democrats had retreated not only from the inner circle of government but become virtually invisible in the public performance of Westminster politics. They had become a party on the margins of political life in Britain.

The leadership of the party has maintained that the UK's imminent departure from the European Union constitutes the arena in which the Liberal Democrats could, and should, fight their existential battle. The issue they can utilize to cut through to the wider electorate. Early signs might have enabled the party to glimpse the difficulty here. The party's traditional Europhile outlook was surprisingly at odds with many of its traditional voters.

The Liberal Party had protected itself from the danger of wipeout from Labour after universal suffrage by clinging on to pockets of support in peripheral areas. Voters in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland and some agrarian communities of the south-west and rural Wales remained loyal to the Liberals despite their national eclipse. This phenomenon saved the party in the 1950s and provided a baseline for the Liberal revival of the 1970s under the banner of Community Politics. Crucially, the freedom to vary appeal to voters on local agendas allowed the Liberal Democrats to be different in different locations. Nick Harvey, then MP for Jeremy Thorpe's old fiefdom of North Devon – and the party's sole Eurosceptic MP – and the particularization of the geography of the vote in the 1990s allowed the Liberal Democrats to prosper in farming and fishing communities despite – not because of – the party's European policy.

Needless to say, the 2015 and 2017 elections demonstrated how hard the party has been hit, even in regions of traditional strength. Indeed it seems the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition succeeded where the industrial revolution, the enfranchisement of the working class, and the secularization of Britain had all failed in wiping out the Liberal reservoirs of support: in the Celtic fringe, Scottish seats were lost to the SNP; Welsh constituencies and those in the south-west of England fell to the Conservatives. And the English seats typified by employment in farming and fisheries – sometimes a source of almost curious Liberal Democrat support – revealed themselves to be hotbeds of anti-Europeanism in the 2016 Referendum.

Whatever happened to being the party of the 48%?

If the Liberal Democrats were unlikely to re-capture areas of traditional strength that had backed Brexit, what about the chances of the party making inroads into the Remain vote? The 2016 Referendum revealed considerable support for staying in the EU from the British public, and the main parties would continue to find it difficult to mobilise around the issue. The Conservatives' clear split on Europe had been apparent since the 1990s but now threatened to fragment the party altogether, while Labour's policy on Brexit was unclear as some of their northern heartlands in particular contained deep pockets of anti-EU resentment. Despite the apparent difficulty that the two main parties faced in appealing to the significant Remainer vote, the largest unequivocal Europhile party standing in all of Britain failed to capture a significant slice of the 48% cake.

As we've outlined, the Liberal Democrats' poor public visibility might have contributed to this inability to mobilize the 48%. During the campaign, Farron had been the only major party leader not to take place in a televised debate. Partly the failure to rally voters was due to the weirdly partisan nature of the Remain campaign (parallel Conservative and Labour Remain messages rather than genuine cross-party appeals for unity) but mostly it contributed to the strangely subterranean nature of the profile of the Liberal Democrats after coalition. It was both a symptom and cause of marginalization on the very issue on which the party could realistically claim to be the most united, and the most distinctive in British politics.

The EU Referendum seemed to hand the Liberal Democrats a golden chance, a ticket back to relevance in British politics and an opportunity to capitalize on the 48% of support for Remain. And with Theresa May's internal travails and an inability to sell the Chequers plan to European leaders in Salzburg, disenchantment with Brexit seems to be growing. Surely this is the time when the Liberal Democrats could make inroads into the core Remain vote?

Why the Remain vote won't translate into a Liberal Democrat vote

This line of thinking overlooks some fundamental difficulties for the party, which have their foundation in the Liberal Democrat twin threat – structure and agency. The party isn't in a position to convert latent Remainer support in much of the country and where it might be it is still failing to rebrand its image, which suffered from being Tory-enablers during the austerity coalition.

The 48% (and perhaps increasing!) is unlikely to be made up from dedicated Europhiles. Indeed one of the core messages from the Remain campaign had been that the EU was far from perfect and could be reformed. The vast majority of British relations with Europe since 1975 had also been presented as a battle against the more damaging instincts of Brussels and the wider European project. Simply put, the 48% contains a large residue of reluctant or contingent support for the EU as the lesser of two bad options. As such, it is unlikely that these contingent supporters would switch straight to the Europhile Liberal Democrats just to exit from Brexit.

A further slice of the 48% might have democratic issues with trying to overturn the result. There are likely to be Remainers who feel that once a decision was reached in the Referendum it is necessary to abide with the result. This indeed seems to be the policy of much of the government, including Mrs May (prior to Chequers at least).

A third portion of the 48% is likely to constitute those voters who, on balance, preferred to stay in the EU but whose party politics are defined by other issues. It is possible to be an ardent Remainer but also think that other issues – austerity, unemployment, health, immigration – are the ones that determine vote choice in an election rather than a binary on/off, in/out, yes/no referendum. When you add this partisanship to the contextual difficulties facing the Liberal Democrats (after 2015 the party just isn't in close contention in enough Westminster constituencies to be a viable choice to many voters) we can see how the particular incidence of structure and agency combine against the party. The existence of an issue in which the Liberal Democrats might rally a significant number of voters does not mean that the Liberal Democrats can rally a significant number of voters.

For a party still coming to terms with its reduced relationship with the British public after the coalition, the knowledge that it is still toxic to many of its former voters (those borrowed from the anti-Conservative axis of the centre and protest leftist voters disillusioned with the Labour government's record on civil liberties and foreign policy), this is problematic to say the least. The combination of structural and agency difficulties combine to make it almost impossible for the Liberal Democrats to recover in the short term.

Exit from Brexit is a logical strategy to pursue right now. It might even be the only card that the party can play from an extremely weak hand in the poker game of British politics. However the strategy's potential for success is much more limited than might be initially assumed and even its most rabid advocates might be disinclined to convert to the Liberal Democrats as the party most likely to achieve it.

Note: Cutts and Russell are currently authoring a book on the Liberal Democrats, provisionally titled "From Despair to Where?" for Manchester University Press. This post first appeared on [LSE British Politics and Policy](). It represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.

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