

Will Chesham and Amersham kick-start a Liberal Democrat revival? Not until the party unites its old and emerging electoral geographies



David Cutts, Andrew Russell, and Joshua Townsley explain why the Chesham and Amersham by-election represents a small but significant step forward for the Liberal Democrats. They nevertheless write that talk of the party's revival should carry a strong health warning.

It was the by-election that the national media largely ignored – written off as a ‘run of the mill’ Conservative hold. Since it was first established in 1974, the Conservatives had never once failed to win more than half of the vote in the suburban Buckinghamshire seat of Chesham and Amersham. As such, the scale of the Liberal Democrats’ recent success shocked many. The 25% swing from Conservative to Liberal Democrat was just shy of the legendary Orpington by-election victory in 1962, often credited as the starting point of the Liberal revival. Consequently, the same pundits who dismissed the Liberal Democrats chances are now speculating about the collapse of the so-called ‘blue wall’, the viability of a ‘progressive alliance’, and a subsequent resurgence of the Liberal Democrats in the south of England.

It is worth remembering that Liberal Democrat by-election success is nothing new. Even during the coalition the party held Eastleigh. In 2016, they won Richmond Park, and in 2019 they overcame the Tories in Brecon and Radnorshire on a 12% swing. In all three cases, the seats soon returned to the Conservative fold. By-elections level up the playing field for third parties and no one exploits incumbent weaknesses better than the Liberal Democrats when the conditions are right. The party builds support when the electorate becomes disillusioned with its key rival. Local credibility from being solidly positioned in second place also matters. As such, the party can court lent support from both disgruntled incumbent supporters and tactical switching anti-incumbent voters. The quality of the candidate is vital to push the ‘local voice’ narrative, combined with a ruthless message focus on issues tailored for the local context and designed to exploit incumbent discontent. Then, the Liberal Democrats unleash the campaign machine. Methodical at first as they gather information, the party builds a presence and raises their public profile. In a blink of an eye, yellow posters appear everywhere and voters who once complained that no parties ever bother to ask their opinion are suddenly subsumed by leaflets, grassroots canvassing, and the remote campaign. As polling day approaches, the constituency is smothered in a yellow blanket of activists who descend from afar to mobilise the vote.

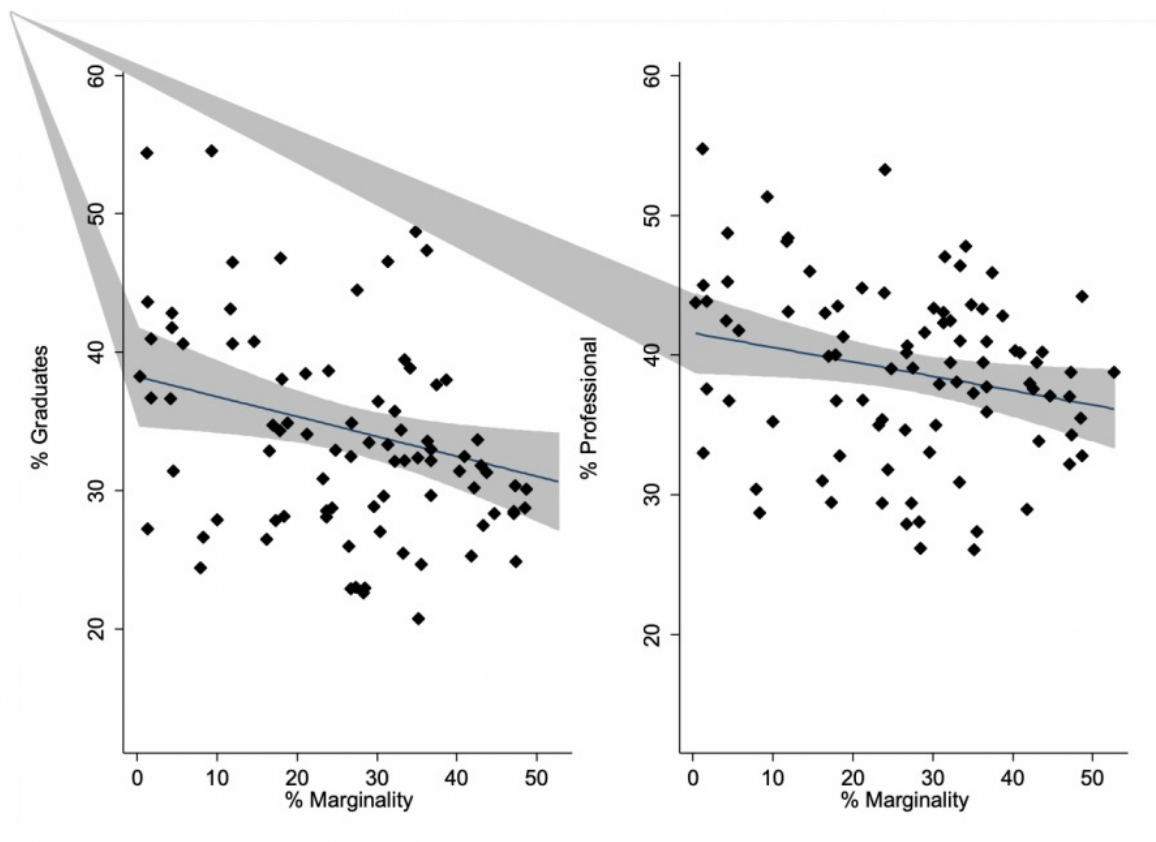
This by-election blueprint has long been part of the Liberal Democrats’ armoury, and when the party is on the front foot it can become near-impossible to stop. Chesham and Amersham is now the latest in a growing list of examples. Discontent with the Conservatives over HS2 and planning reform in this suburban Buckinghamshire seat was palpable among small ‘c’ Conservative voters. Despite nationally supporting low-carbon transport links such as HS2 and recognising the need to build more houses (pledging 300,000 per year in the 2019 manifesto), the Liberal Democrats tailored their message to exploit local disillusionment. This chameleon approach is hugely appealing in one-off situations but can become problematic in general elections when voters consume national rather than local party positions – something the Liberal Democrats have previously found to their cost. The party was also helped by a lacklustre Conservative campaign. The Conservatives were complacent, and even when ‘alarm bells’ started ringing, the much-vaunted Conservative campaign machine that has helped punch through Labour’s traditional heartlands in the Midlands and the North proved ineffective in a defensive situation. While the Green vote proved fairly stubborn, Labour supporters were willing to engage with the Liberal Democrats anti-Conservative stance. This may be a sign that Coalition-based antipathy among Labour voters towards the Liberal Democrats may be diminishing now that the Corbyn era has come to an end.

It would be easy to label Chesham and Amersham as one of those historic Liberal Democrat by-election wins, where temporary disillusionment with the incumbent Conservatives over local issues was ruthlessly exploited by the professional Liberal Democrat campaign machine. Yet the result suggests something much deeper may be occurring. So far, the Conservative party has benefitted from the post-Brexit realignment and demographic reconfiguring of the British electorate. In 2019, Johnson managed to combine older, white, socially-conservative non-graduates in the Midlands and the North with traditional Conservative voters in Remain-leaning seats across the south of England. But this coalition looks increasingly brittle for a number of reasons. First, seats across the home counties are rapidly changing as progressive, younger professional graduates relocate in large numbers to escape the cost of living in London. Second, the demand for 'levelling up' in 'Red Wall' seats has led to some disgruntlement in the home counties among traditional supporters, who complain about being taken for granted.

Chesham and Amersham typifies the Conservatives' problems. At first glance, it fits the 'blue wall' narrative of a Remain-leaning, south of England seat with a large graduate electorate. Like nearby Liberal Democrat-held St Albans, it is in the top 10% of graduate-heavy seats and in the top 3% of constituencies containing professionals. Mirroring recent trends across Oxfordshire, Cambridgeshire, and Surrey, the Liberal Democrats had also established a local presence by winning control of Amersham town council in the local elections. It is therefore not a surprise that Liberal Democrat party strategists believed the seat had swing potential.

Yet worryingly for the Conservatives, Chesham and Amersham does not share other 'blue wall' characteristics. More than 40% of the electorate own their house outright, putting it closer to old Liberal Democrat seats such as St Ives and Cornwall North rather than St Albans. Only 11 of the top 50 seats with the highest outright home ownership voted Remain. It is also not a typical young professional seat being in the top 25% of seats with an aged 65+ population. Nor did Chesham and Amersham have a strong Liberal Democrat local government presence. Beyond the local gains in Amersham, the party failed to breakthrough in the new Buckinghamshire council elections in May, and had only two seats on now-abolished Chiltern District council. There are nearby target seats where the Liberal Democrats have much stronger local government platforms from which to build.

Figure 1: % Graduates and % professionals by Liberal Democrat marginality (where the LDs are in second place – based on 2019 constituency boundaries).



So can the Chesham and Amersham by-election kick-start a Liberal Democrat revival? Taking the credibility issue into account, there are 28 seats where the Liberal Democrats currently occupy second place and are less than 20% behind the incumbent. Notwithstanding boundary changes, 25 of these 28 seats are held by the Conservatives and 17 have been held by the Lib Dems recently. Twenty voted Remain and nearly two-thirds are located in the southern belt stretching from South East Cambridgeshire to Winchester. As Figure 1 shows, around two-thirds share 'blue wall' characteristics of 30% or more graduates and 40% or more professionals. Yet not all are located in the south – Cheshire, Harrogate and Knaresborough, and Sheffield Hallam. The remaining third are remnants of the Liberal Democrats old, predominantly Leave-leaning seats where Liberal voting has been more resilient than elsewhere.

Beyond the 20% marginality threshold, it becomes clear that there is a ceiling on the party's advances. Nearly 75% of the remaining 60 seats where the Liberal Democrats are in second place voted Leave and possess a much more stable demographic make-up than long shot 'blue wall' seats such as Henley, Tunbridge Wells, and Witney. But the Liberal Democrats are well-placed to benefit from fractures in the 'blue wall', and even build a heartland presence. Chesham and Amersham represents a small but significant step forward. However, it remains questionable whether a resource-strapped third party in the heat of a national election can capitalise fully on potential Tory woes. Moreover, knocking down the 'blue wall' will only get it so far. For the Liberal Democrats, bringing together its old and emerging electoral geographies represents the bigger prize. Until then, talk of the party's revival should carry a strong health warning.

Note: the authors' new book on the Liberal Democrats will be published by Manchester University Press in 2022.

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