

The Tories have dominated the policy agenda and delivered on their ideology much more successfully than the Lib Dems in coalition

Katharine Dommett undertakes a comparative study of the current Conservative and Liberal Democrat ideology and explores whether they have respectively delivered on their goals in coalition.



Many grassroots Conservative members and party advisers may be feeling somewhat jittery after a period of sustained poll leads for the Labour Party. But despite lying some [14 points](#) behind Labour, the Conservatives still have many reasons to be cheerful.

Unlike the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives have dominated the coalition's agenda – diagnosing the need for smaller government, greater diversity in service providers and localism. Furthermore, they have implemented these principles in key departments of state – introducing sweeping reforms in health, education and welfare.

In contrast the Liberal Democrats have ceded significant ground; adopting many Conservative ideas (or at least publicly appearing to), projecting an inconsistent picture of their own vision for society and securing only limited policy victories. The Conservatives are therefore seen to dominate the coalition's agenda in terms of both policy and ideology and they are also demonstrating their own ideological credibility by delivering on ideas outlined and pledges made pre-coalition.

Although some commentators may dismiss the importance of these trends by deeming ideology to be dogmatic and pejorative, this dynamic is significant when assessing the coalition. This is because whilst negative depictions of the coalition's ['ideological objectives'](#) and ['ideological blinkers'](#) are indicative of public depictions of ideology, ideology nevertheless remains a fundamental component of what helps us, the public, to understand what parties stand for, what they are likely to do in office and whether they deliver on their stated aims and values.

For this reason a comparative study of the Conservatives' and Liberal Democrat's ideology is highly informative as it can help us to gauge not only how reliable parties are once in office, but also – in the context of a coalition – whether one party's pre-coalition ideological agenda dominates. This is what makes it interesting to study the Conservatives' and Liberal Democrats' relative success in communicating and delivering on ideology, particularly as an examination of the parties' rhetoric pre- and post-coalition formation reveals significant Conservative dominance.

Prior to the general election David Cameron projected a clear ideological vision and programme of government founded on the ideas of 'social responsibility, not state control; the Big Society, not big government'. Indeed, he repeatedly stated that Britain required 'a society with much higher levels of personal, professional, civic and corporate responsibility; a society where people come together to solve problems and improve life for themselves and their communities; a society where the leading force for progress is social responsibility, not state control'.

The party emphasised these ideas, advancing the notions of Big Society and small government to present an ideological vision founded on the ideas of small state, cooperation, decentralisation, responsibility, community, and deficit reduction. In this sense a clear ideological agenda was outlined pre-coalition.

Comparing this benchmark with rhetoric and action post-coalition formation, the extent of Conservative dominance is revealed. Since 2010 Cameron's Conservatives have remained wedded to the above ideas and began implementing them through policies such as the Localism Bill, free schools and the Big Society

bank. This illustrates the party's ideological reliability in terms of delivering stated aims, but the party's ideology also dominates the coalition's agenda as a whole.

To illustrate, in the coalition agreement the foreword co-authored by Cameron and Clegg was peppered with Conservative principles, stating: 'the days of big government are over... We believe that the time has come to disperse power more widely in Britain today; to recognise that we will only make progress if we help people to come together to make life better'. This indicates the predominance of Conservative ideas and underlines the party's superiority in the current government, adding prestige to perceptions of ideological trustworthiness.

In contrast the Liberal Democrats appear far less reliable and very much the junior partner in the coalition. As with the Conservatives, the party did outline a clear pre-coalition vision based on the ideas of fairness, equality of opportunity, freedom and choice which was translated into policies such as an amnesty for asylum seekers, scrapping tuition fees and lifting people out of tax. However, unlike the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats appear to move away from their previously stated values and have achieved limited success in implementing their policies.

Whilst the party secured a referendum on AV and a move towards Lords reform, significant compromises were made over tuition fees, new nuclear power stations and immigration. These changes – whilst portrayed as unavoidable – raise questions about the party's reliability in implementing its ideology; concerns likely to affect their future electoral fortunes. This issue is compounded when considering party rhetoric. Whilst some pre-coalition themes such as fairness and choice remain, the party's ideological rhetoric has shifted substantially and has co-opted key Conservative themes, specifically around the deficit.

For instance, in a recent speech on the economy [Clegg stated](#) that the coalition needs to 'meet our real aim: jobs; businesses investing; entrepreneurs getting off the ground', going on to argue that 'we don't just have economic responsibilities here, but a clear moral responsibility too'. The themes of responsibility, enterprise and the importance of business closely align with Conservative pre-coalition rhetoric, indicating that as well as not enacting their own ideas the Liberal Democrats have capitulated to many Conservative principles. This trend not only underlines the dominance of Conservative ideology in the coalition, but also raises questions about the Liberal Democrat's ideological identity and trustworthiness.

In line with this analysis, it appears that relative to the Liberal Democrats the Conservatives have reason for optimism. Not only are Conservative ideas dominating the coalition's rhetoric and being implemented in key departments of state, but in advancing a consistent ideological message the party appears to be ideologically reliable and trustworthy. As the 2015 election approaches, these traits are likely to prove vital. Whilst both coalition partners will have to defend their actions, the Liberal Democrats will also have to regain public trust and re-forge a distinct identity. This places the Conservatives at a distinct advantage as they will be able to concentrate on fighting Labour rather than re-defining their own position; a dynamic which should give them ample reason to be cheerful.

This is the third in a series of posts by contributors to the recent 'Conservatives in Coalition Government' conference organised by the [Political Studies Association Specialist Group for the study of Conservatives and Conservatism](#) and the [Centre for British Politics at the University of Hull](#). The views expressed are those of the author alone and not those of the Political Studies Association or the University of Hull.

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