

Polling Matters: Could the Lib Dems be kingmakers again and what do they do next?

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Polling Matters is an independent, non-partisan podcast providing expert polling news and analysis, with guests, in the run up to the General Election. In the most recent episode, Keiran spoke to PR and communications expert Mark Pack to get his take on the Liberal Democrats, how they might do at the General Election and what's next for Nick Clegg and the Party after May.



You can listen to this week's polling matters podcast [here](#).

With all of the understandable attention paid to the rise of UKIP in England or the SNP in Scotland, it is still surprising how little attention has been paid to the collapse of the Liberal Democrats this parliament. Having achieved 23% of the vote in 2010, the party's national vote share has languished in the single digits for some time with no obvious sign of improvement. In fact, if you plug last [Sunday's YouGov poll](#) into [electoral calculus](#) they end up with just 10 seats.

Of course, the [consensus among election forecasters](#) is that the Lib Dems will do much better than this. Current projections tend to have them on [around 25 seats](#) after the election and maybe more. The reason is simple enough, they tend to poll much better in areas where they currently have an established presence, so their national vote share may collapse but they could still hold on to enough seats to remain relevant. The Lib Dems will hope the upcoming election will be a national version of the [Eastleigh by-election](#) where they held on to the seat despite a sharp drop in vote share. Indeed, Lord Ashcroft polling does provide some evidence for this 'incumbency bonus' that is so crucial to the Party's prospects this election cycle.

Perhaps we shouldn't exaggerate the point though. Even if the Lib Dems ended up with 27 seats (the top end of current projections) this still more than halves their number of seats in parliament. Furthermore, there is a very good chance that the SNP will become the third biggest Party in Westminster, with serious implications regarding [short money](#) for the Lib Dems. When we consider that both Nick Clegg and Danny Alexander could also lose their seats (we should be sceptical about polling saying otherwise we cannot see) the General Election promises to be a really tough one for the Party.

And yet, with neither the Conservatives nor Labour looking on course for a majority, they could still hold the balance of power once more.

Perhaps the most interesting question then is what do the Lib Dems do in such a situation? A 'renewal of coalition vows' was for a long time my expected outcome. It remains possible but seems increasingly unlikely. If the parliamentary Party loses half its seats, one could ask what the benefit would be for the Lib Dems to sign up to more cuts and an in/out referendum on EU membership. At the very least you can see why they would be cautious.

Is a coalition with Labour more likely then? Perhaps. I would argue it gives the Lib Dems a real chance of showing that they are an independent, grown up Party prepared to do deals with either of the major Parties seeking to form a Government. It is much harder for them to form their own identity whilst continually propping up the same governing Party. There is a third option though of course, perhaps most likely of all, to sit it out and rebuild from the back benches, maybe providing votes on a 'confidence and supply' basis' to a minority government.

Of course, as Mark Pack rightly points out on the podcast, we should avoid over-emphasising how much choice the Lib Dems may have in the matter. Perhaps Miliband or Cameron will prefer to govern alone. Even if not, it is likely that the Lib Dems will realistically only have one Party to do a deal with and their negotiating position in that situation

will depend on the parliamentary numbers. Even if our constitution allows the second biggest Party to form a Government it is difficult to imagine this happening.

So if anything is clear in these unclear times, it is that the Lib Dems face a very difficult election where polling day is just the start. The decisions they make from May 8th onwards will have significant implications for the Party's long term future and very survival as a electoral force. We know that the number of people voting Lib Dem will drop sharply in May, how they come back from that is the biggest question of all.

About the Author

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