

Electoral system dynamics are fundamental to understanding why comparisons between the FDP and the Liberal Democrats are ultimately somewhat misguided

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*The recent German elections saw the demise of the FDP, the junior coalition partner whose support had plummeted while serving in government. This has prompted comparisons with the situation in which the Liberal Democrats find themselves. However, **Adam Evans** writes that, because the two parties operate in radically divergent electoral arenas, there are limits to how far one can take these comparisons and see the FDP's demise as a reason for the Lib Dems to break out into open panic.*



An unpopular Liberal junior coalition partner ejected out of parliament by the voters following a catastrophic collapse in popular support since the previous general election. It is unsurprising that the circumstances with which the Free Democrats (FDP) were humiliated at the polls in the 2013 German general election have led to a number of mischievous comparisons, including by Liberal Democrat parliamentarians (see [here](#) for a sample) between the fate of the FDP and that which might await a similarly unpopular Liberal junior coalition partner, the British Liberal Democrats.

It is certainly the case, that there a number of areas of similarity between the FDP and the sister party in the Liberal International, the Liberal Democrats. As has been alluded to above, the Liberal Democrats have also witnessed a sustained and significant decline in popularity since they formed a coalition government with the UK Conservatives in May 2010. This slump has not only seen the party's poll rating more than halve from their 2010 General Election result of 23%, but has seen the party battered in mid-term elections, as befell the FDP in various landtag elections during the course of the 2009-2013 German Parliament, losing eleven MSPs in Scotland during the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election, for example, and hundreds of councillors in the local elections that have occurred since 2010. The personal popularity of these party's leaders have also been a source of similarity, with Nick Clegg, like the FDP's Guido Westerwelle and then Philip Roesler, deeply unpopular among the voters at large (although it is worth noting that unlike the FDP, the Liberal Democrats have not been forced into a change of party leadership by poll ratings, so far).

Furthermore, the roots of the electoral dissatisfaction with both party leadership and party at large also appear to have much in common, with the FDP's failure to implement its 2009 election promise (sound familiar?) of tax reform an [integral part of their subsequent decline](#) and fall. It is worth acknowledging that it was the period around Autumn 2010, when the Liberal Democrats officially performed their u-turn on tuition fees, that saw Clegg's personal ratings slipping into minus territory in Autumn 2010 (when the coalition's fees policy was announced and debated in Parliament) and have over time only worsened, with YouGov's average for Clegg at -50% in July 2013.

However, there are limits to how far one can take these comparisons and see the FDP's demise as a reason for the Liberal Democrats to break out into open panic. The editor of the website *Liberal Democrat Voice*, Stephen Tall, has written [a list of reasons](#) against such blind comparisons (he would do, wouldn't he), but this article will focus on a different reason, the electoral system. The German mixed member proportional system used for elections to the Bundestag splits the 598 seat (though as will be explained shortly this is rarely the actual size of the Bundestag) Parliament between 299 constituency members and 299 members elected via the regional list. Electors are therefore given two votes, one for their locality and one, which effectively acts for the nation. The *zweitstimme* (or second vote) means that any party with over 5% of the national vote (designed to avoid the sort of parliamentary fracturation that occurred during the Weimar period), or which secures at least three constituencies as the PDS did in 1994, gains representation in the Bundestag which is in varying degrees proportional to the party's vote share (this is why the Bundestag normally extends beyond its official size, as overhang mandates are elected to

ameliorate disparities between the party's first past the post representation and its share of the vote).

These electoral system dynamics are fundamental to understanding why comparisons between the FDP and the Liberal Democrats are ultimately somewhat misguided. The FDP's previous parliamentary representation was entirely dependent on the *zweitstimme*, with all 93 of its' *MdBs* secured in the 2009 German Federal Election elected from the list. Aside from the 1990 election, the last time the FDP has won constituency representation was 1957, therefore meaning that the party has overwhelmingly been dependent on its share of the second vote to secure representation in the Bundestag, leaving the party vulnerable to broad changes in political popularity, as happened in 2013.

The Liberal Democrats on the other hand exist within a completely different electoral system. Westminster representation is based wholly on single member constituencies, elected via first past the post, a system that means that national dynamics interact with local politics and the personal popularity of local candidates. Indeed, it has been one of the ironies of British politics that a party so committed to proportional representation has in many ways been rather masterful, admittedly in only a minority of constituencies, in exploiting the local-personal dynamics of first past the post. While the national opinion polls suggest a substantial overall decline in Liberal Democrat popularity, figures that would, according to [UK Polling Report](#), see the party reduced from 57 to 24 seats on a Uniform National Swing, the Liberal Democrats' effectiveness at campaigning on the ground in areas of party incumbency means that the party's collapse in the national polls is unlikely to result in a similar decline in their parliamentary representation. Indeed, [recent polling by Lord Ashcroft](#) has suggested that in Con-LD marginals, the Lib Dems have only seen a 0.5% swing to the Tories since 2010, polling 29% to the Conservatives 32% as opposed to his national figures which place the Lib Democrats on just 8%.

Comparing the FDP and the Liberal Democrats may seem rather attractive, but its beauty is only skin deep. Despite cosmetic similarities, the two parties operate in radically divergent electoral arenas, with very different degrees of electoral dependency. Where the FDP relied upon national vote share to secure representation, the Liberal Democrats have not had the luxury of proportional representation, with their parliamentary basis reliant, instead, on local and personal dynamics that will arguably shield the party from the worst excesses of their national polling collapse.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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