7

Reward, Blame, and Guilt by Association?

The Electoral Collapse of the Liberal Democrats

In 2010, the Liberal Democrats recorded their highest general election vote share since 1983 (as the SDP-Liberal Alliance) and their largest number of seats since 1929 (as the Liberal Party). In 2015 they won only 8.1 per cent of the vote, only a third of what they managed five years earlier, making it their worst performance since 1970. As a result, they faced almost complete electoral wipe-out, winning only eight seats, losing forty-nine of the fifty-seven they had won in 2010. The fall in the Liberal Democrat vote was the largest single election drop in support for any party in Britain since 1931, when the Liberals had been similarly annihilated in the aftermath of a coalition.

Two years later, in 2017, some hoped that the Liberal Democrats—as Britain's most consistently pro-EU party—might ride an anti-Brexit wave to recovery. Instead, the Liberal Democrats only made a net gain of four seats and lost a further half point of vote share.

In this chapter we explore the reasons behind the 2015 collapse and failure to recover in 2017. Part of this story is well known—left-leaning Liberal Democrat voters deserted in droves (cf. Cutts and Russell 2015)—but the full picture is more complex. In many countries, junior partners do badly in elections following coalition participation (Buelens and Hino 2008). Parties in coalition governments always face a trade-off between the unity of the coalition government and the distinctiveness of their party image. Some argued that this dilemma was particularly acute in an adversarial political system such as Britain's (McEnhill 2015). As we will show though, it was not the nature of British politics that sunk the Liberal Democrats in 2015, but the nature of the Liberal Democrats' support. The Liberal Democrats were particularly poorly suited to withstand the potential electoral backlash of coalition because they had few partisan voters and relied heavily on tactical support. These problems were compounded by perceptions of viability—the more unpopular the Liberal Democrats became, the less likely it seemed they would be able to win seats. The less likely they were to win seats, the less point there was in lending the Liberal Democrats a tactical vote.

Electoral shocks. Edward Fieldhouse, Jane Green, Geoffrey Evans, Jonathan Mellon, Christopher Prosser, Hermann Schmitt, Cees van der Eijk, Oxford University Press (2020).
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These problems continued in 2017 with little sign of recovery. What the similarity in the 2015 and 2017 Liberal Democrat vote share conceals, however, is that there was considerable turnover beneath the surface. Less than a fifth of those who voted for them in 2017 had voted for them in 2010 before the coalition was formed. Moreover they only retained 50 per cent of those that supported them in 2015.

7.1 The 2010–15 coalition

The hung Parliament following the 2010 Election was, in part, the result of the long-term trend of declining support for the two major parties and the rise of the political fortunes of 'other' parties, particularly the Liberal Democrats (Chapter 2). The 2010–15 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government was the first peacetime coalition in Britain since the 1930s and was most British voters' first experience of coalition government. In this chapter we consider how the hung Parliament and the subsequent experience of coalition government acted as a shock to the British political system. Although, unlike the other shocks in this book, it was entirely a product of electoral politics, we can consider it an electoral shock for several reasons. First, it was not an inevitable outcome of the normal electoral process. The hung Parliament was contingent on a number of factors, including the closeness of the Conservative and Labour vote share and a strong performance of the Liberal Democrats, together with a long-term decline in the number of marginal seats which has reduced the tendency of the first-past-the-post system to deliver large majorities for the leading party (Curtice 2010). Indeed it was not just a hung Parliament that was contingent but a hung Parliament with a particular configuration of seats that meant the Liberal Democrats could only form a viable coalition with the Conservatives (Cowley and Kavanagh 2015). Even very small shifts in party support could have opened up a different set of post-election possibilities.

Second, the coalition was hard for voters to ignore: the Westminster Parliament had been considered *the* model of single-party majority rule (Webb 2000), yet the 2010 Government was clearly and unambiguously a coalition with Nick Clegg, the Liberal Democrat leader, taking a high-profile position as deputy prime minister. Third and perhaps most crucially, it had the potential for enormous electoral consequences. For most of the period since their formation in 1988, the Liberal Democrats had carefully navigated a path of 'equidistance' between the major parties to avoid alienating voters from either side of the political spectrum (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). However, in more recent elections the Liberal Democrats had positioned themselves as part of a 'progressive alliance', and were regarded by many as being more left-wing than Labour (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). Prior to 2015, many Liberal Democrat voters were Labour supporters voting tactically, and Liberal Democrat voters were generally more sympathetic to Labour than to the Conservatives (Russell, Fieldhouse, and MacAllister 2002). By entering a coalition

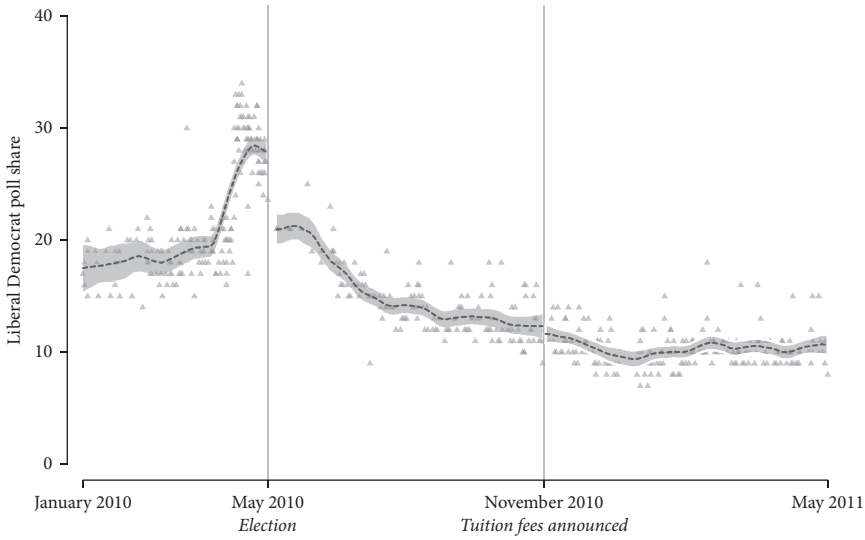

Figure 7.1 Liberal Democrat polling share in the run-up to and aftermath of the 2010 election

with the Conservatives there was a clear danger they risked upsetting the carefully constructed appeal they had spent many years building.

From the beginning of the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition, many observers believed it would not end well (Bale 2012). As the Victorian Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli—once remarked, 'England does not love coalitions.'

At first glance this appears to be true. Together, the coalition parties lost 14.4 per cent of the vote at the 2015 Election, the largest swing against a British government since the expansion of the franchise in 1918 (Green and Prosser 2016). Of course, however, this punishment was not equally shared between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. It would be fairer to say Britain does not love junior coalition partners. Figure 7.1 show the Liberal Democrat's polling performance in the run-up to and immediate aftermath of the 2010 Election. Public support for the Liberal Democrats plummeted almost as soon as they joined the coalition. By July 2010 the Liberal Democrats were polling at 16 per cent, 7 percentage points lower than their performance at the 2010 Election. By the end of August they had reached 12 per cent. By the end of 2010 they had polled below 10 per cent for the first time. The rapid fall of the Liberal Democrats in the polls—which occurred largely *before* the publication of the Browne Review of Higher Education Funding—belies the commonly held view that the Liberal Democrats were seriously damaged by the abandonment of their pledge to abolish tuition fees.[1] At the 2015 Election the Liberal Democrats lost two-thirds of their vote and

[1] Although the tuition fees issue became a stick that was used to beat the Liberal Democrats, its prominence in explanations of the collapse in Liberal Democrat support far outstrips the evidence

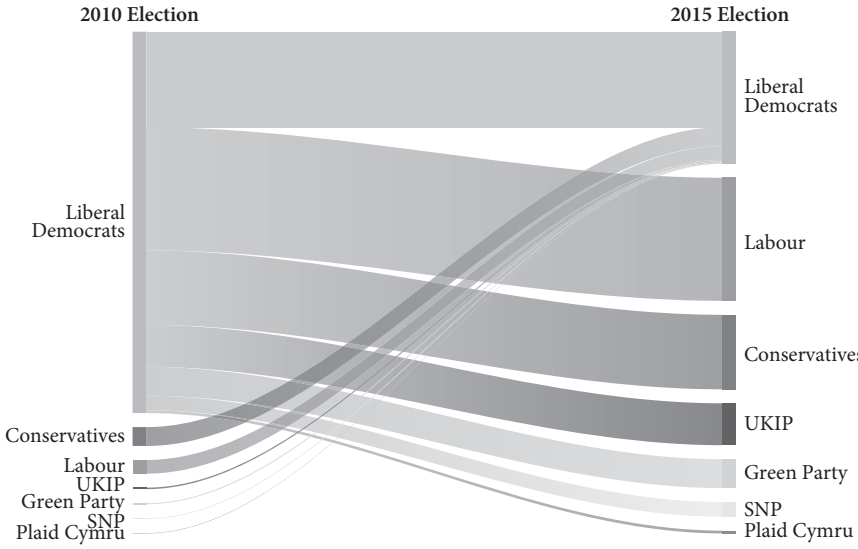

Figure 7.2 2010 and 2015 vote choice of 2010 and 2015 Liberal Democrats voters

forty-nine of their fifty-seven MPs. The Conservatives seemed to avoid punishment altogether and increased their vote share by 0.8 per cent, winning twenty-four more seats than they did in 2010.

In this chapter we show that the damage to the junior coalition partner was not simply the consequence of accountability in coalition government or dislike of coalition in general, but rather the consequence of this *specific* coalition. The most obvious consequence of going into coalition with the Conservatives is that the Liberal Democrats were punished by their left-wing supporters. However, this is only part of the story. Figure 7.2 shows the size of the flow of votes to and from the Liberal Democrats between 2010 and 2015. It shows that in 2015 the Liberal Democrats not only lost votes to Labour and the other progressive parties, but that a large chunk (20 per cent) of 2010 Liberal Democrat support actually went to their coalition partners, the Conservatives, and a not inconsiderable proportion (11 per cent) ended up voting UKIP—perhaps the ideological polar opposite of the Liberal Democrats in the British party system. These losses were compounded by the failure to recruit new voters. Figure 7.2 also shows that the Liberal

that it had a large effect on Liberal Democrat support. As well as the fact that Liberal Democrat support collapsed before the tuition fees announcement, other pieces of evidence suggest that, at most, tuition fees had a small impact on Liberal Democrat votes. In incumbent Liberal Democrat seats where they had won over 28 per cent of the vote in 2010, they lost only slightly more votes in seats with relatively large numbers of students (23.9 points) compared to seats with relatively few students (21 points) (Curtice, Fisher, and Ford 2016). Additionally, less than 1 per cent of lost Liberal Democrat supporters mentioned education (including tuition fees) in their most important issue responses.

Democrats gained a small number of voters from other parties in 2015. But for every vote they gained, the Liberal Democrats lost eight.

The Liberal Democrat to Conservative flow and the electoral geography of Liberal Democrat MPs are key to understanding how the Conservatives managed to win a majority at the 2015 Election. It is clear that Labour were the main beneficiaries of defecting Liberal Democrat voters. In terms of seats, however, the Conservatives won twenty-seven former Liberal Democrat seats to Labour's twelve. The explanation of this apparent discrepancy was the nature of party competition in Liberal Democrat seats. In most (thirty-eight) Liberal Democrat seats the Conservatives were the second largest party at the 2010 Election, while Labour was second in only seventeen. Competition in Liberal Democrat–Conservative seats was also much closer than Liberal Democrat–Labour seats. At the 2010 Election, the Conservatives had twice as many votes as Labour on average in Liberal Democrat-held seats. Consequently, although on average the Labour vote went up in Liberal Democrat seats and the Conservative vote went down, the Conservatives were better positioned to benefit from the collapse in Liberal Democrat support.

The small increase in the Conservative share of the vote in 2015 conceals large changes under the surface. Although the Liberal Democrats lost 15.1 percentage points of the vote, Labour and the Conservatives only increased their vote share by a combined 2.1 percentage points. At the individual level, the Conservatives lost large numbers of voters at the 2015 Election and were particularly damaged by the rise of UKIP, as we discussed in Chapter 5. However, the defection of voters from the junior coalition partner to the senior helped cover those losses.

In this chapter we show how the Liberal Democrats' choice to join the coalition and the backlash of their left-of-centre base not only had disastrous consequences in 2015 but also continued to damage their chances of recovery in 2017. We find that the Liberal Democrats faced a problem common to other junior coalition partners: the difficulty in claiming credit for government achievements. Ultimately, however, the electoral impact of these problems was minimal. Most of the Liberal Democrat collapse can be attributed to the nature of Liberal Democrat voters.

7.2 The nature of the Liberal Democrat vote

After their formation in 1988, the Liberal Democrats maintained a policy of 'equidistance' between the Conservatives and Labour. However, under the leadership of Paddy Ashdown and later Charles Kennedy, the Liberal Democrats repositioned themselves as part of a broader anti-Conservative alliance. During this period, centre-left voters were actively encouraged to switch tactically between Labour and the Liberal Democrats depending on the local electoral context (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). Building on local viability and carefully targeted campaigning,

they increased their number of seats to forty-six in 1997, peaking at sixty-two in 2005, aided by the convergence of the Conservative and Labour parties (Green 2015) and dissatisfaction with Labour over the Iraq War (Fieldhouse, Cutts, and Russell 2006).

That the electoral fortunes of the Liberal Democrats went hand in hand with their adoption of an anti-Conservative position means that it is unsurprising that many Liberal Democrat voters were angry and disappointed that their vote for the Liberal Democrats resulted in a Conservative-led coalition government. Moreover, compared to Labour and Conservative voters, Liberal Democrat support has been different in two regards. First the Liberal Democrat vote has historically been 'soft', with much lower levels of partisanship and a high reliance on tactical support. This lack of a strong partisan core meant that many Liberal Democrat voters viewed the Liberal Democrat participation in government unfiltered by a Liberal Democrat partisan screen, whilst some viewed it through the lens of Labour partisanship. Second it has been particularly reliant on local campaigning and support from tactical voters, which dried up in the wake of the coalition.

A weak partisan base

Compared to the major parties, the Liberal Democrats have always suffered from a lack of strong attachment to the party. The proportion of Liberal Democrat voters who say they have a Liberal Democrat party identity has historically been much lower than that of the two major parties (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). Liberal Democrat identifiers have also historically been less likely than other partisans to vote for their natural party (Crewe 1985; Norris 1997). Moreover, Liberal Democrat voters have also been the most likely to switch parties between elections (Crewe 1985; Russell and Fieldhouse 2005).

This was still the case in 2010 when they entered coalition. Figure 7.3 shows that, according to the BESIP, the proportion of Liberal Democrat voters in 2010 who identified with the party was substantially lower than the Conservatives or Labour, particularly those who identified strongly with the party. Also notable is the number of Liberal Democrat voters who identified with no party—indeed the Liberal Democrats won most of its votes among those who did not have a party identity in 2010—and those who identified with another party. In total, only half of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters identified with the party, and only one in ten of those saw themselves as very strongly Liberal Democrat, with 44 per cent of identifiers seeing themselves as not very strong Liberal Democrat. A fifth of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters had a Labour Party identity and 5 per cent had a Conservative Party identity.

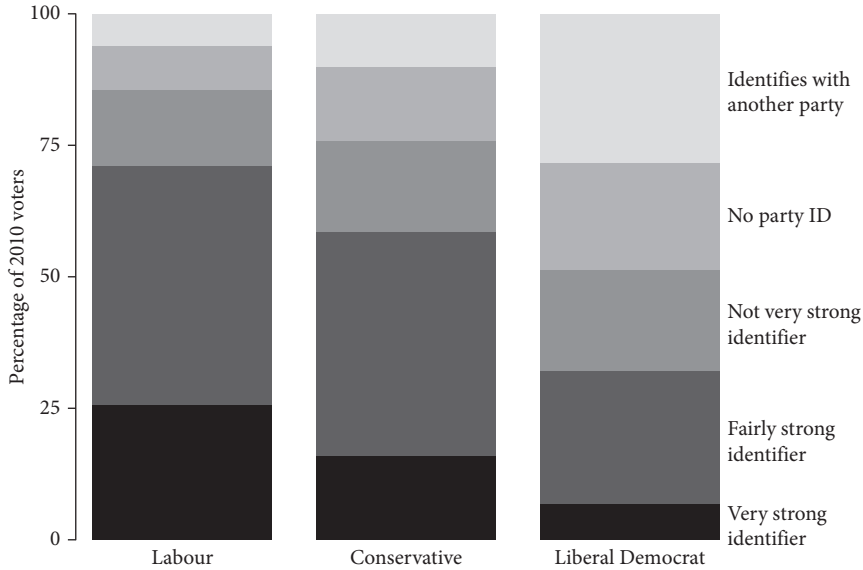

Figure 7.3 Party identity of Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat 2010 voters

The absence of a large partisan core to the Liberal Democrat vote meant that the problems faced by junior coalition partners were likely to land particularly heavily on the Liberal Democrats.

As we will see, Liberal Democrat partisans were more likely to give the party credit for positive changes during the coalition government. Previous research shows that partisanship 'raises a perceptual screen through which the individual tends to see what is favourable to his partisan orientation (see Chapter 4). The stronger the party bond, the more exaggerated the process of selection and perceptual distortion will be' (Campbell et al. 1960, 133). Partisan voters are more likely to receive favourable information about their party because they pay attention to information relevant to their own party, receive communications from the party, and have more interactions with party activists (Adams, Ezrow, and Somer-Topcu 2014). Partisans are also more likely to engage in motivated reasoning—political cognition is an affectively driven cognitive process and partisan voters are likely to process political information in ways which maintain their existing partisanship (Lodge and Taber 2005; Lodge and Taber 2013; Redlawsk 2002; Erisen, Lodge, and Taber 2014). This helps explain why partisan voters are likely to see their party as being more influential in a coalition (Meyer and Strobl 2016).

If the Liberal Democrats had started with a stronger partisan base in 2010 it is likely that their role in the coalition would have been seen favourably by a larger number of people and that more of their voters would have weathered the storms of coalition partnership.

Tactical voting and local campaigning

The second aspect of the nature of the Liberal Democrat vote that may have affected its electoral fortunes in coalition government is the importance of local campaigning (Cutts 2014; Johnson 2014; Russell and Fieldhouse 2005) and support from those who tactically vote Liberal Democrat to keep out their least preferred of the Conservatives and Labour (Fieldhouse, Shryane, and Pickles 2007). Figure 7.4 shows the self-reported reasons for voting Conservative, Labour, or Liberal Democrat in the 2010 British Election Study. Compared to the Conservatives and Labour, fewer voters supported the Liberal Democrats because they thought they had the best policies or the best leader, and a much higher proportion said they voted Liberal Democrat when they really preferred another party or for tactical reasons. This made them vulnerable to desertion as a result of being seen to have taken sides by joining the coalition.

The majority (56 per cent) of those who loaned their vote to the Liberal Democrats when they really preferred another party were Labour supporters. As suggested above, those who voted Liberal Democrat to keep out the Conservatives were unlikely to be happy with the Liberal Democrats going into coalition with the Conservatives and this is likely to have led to a 'tactical unwind' (Fisher and Curtice 2006), with Labour supporters seeing no reason to lend the Liberal Democrats their vote.

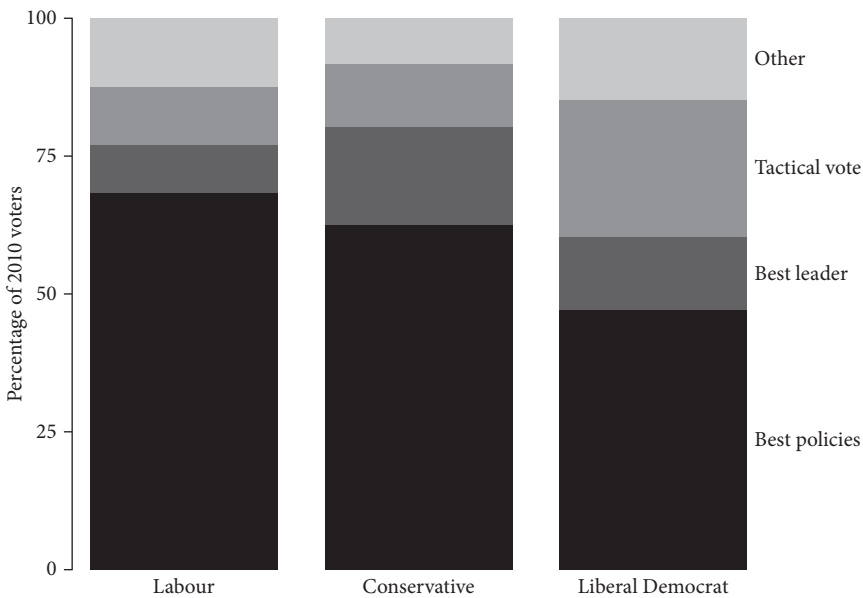

Figure 7.4 Stated reason for voting for party in 2010 by party voted for

However, this tactical unwind may have extended beyond Labour supporters (and other supporters of other progressive parties like the Green Party) who were angered by the Liberal Democrats going into coalition with the Conservatives. The main challenge faced by third parties in the UK is overcoming the 'credibility gap' they face because of the first-past-the-post electoral system (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). Historically, the Liberal Democrats have used local elections to demonstrate their electoral viability in particular areas (MacAllister, Fieldhouse, and Russell 2002; Cutts 2014; Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). Governing parties generally lose votes in British local elections (Prosser 2016c) and the Liberal Democrats were no different, and indeed they fared particularly badly, averaging 14.5 per cent of the projected national share of the vote at local elections between 2011 and 2014—just over half the 28 per cent they recorded in 2009.[2] Combined with their poor showing in the national polls, this is likely to have severely harmed perceptions of the local viability of Liberal Democrat candidates. As well as left-leaning tactical voters abandoning the Liberal Democrats out of anger at their participation in a Conservative-led government, the resulting collapse in the viability of Liberal Democrat candidates is likely to have led tactical voters to desert the Liberal Democrats more generally.

7.3 The effects of coalition participation

The central dilemma of coalition government is managing the trade-off between the compromises necessary for stable government while retaining a distinctive partisan profile (Martin and Vanberg 2008). Previous analysis of the coalition agreement suggests that the Liberal Democrats were successful at negotiating the compromise necessary for stable government, but less successful at maintaining a distinctive party profile. A comparison of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrat 2010 electoral manifestos and the coalition agreement shows that in some respects the Liberal Democrats got a good deal. About 75 per cent of Liberal Democrat manifesto pledges made it into coalition agreement, compared to about 60 per cent of Conservative pledges (Hazell and Yong 2012), and the overall policy position of the coalition agreement was closer to the Liberal Democrat manifesto than the Conservatives (Quinn, Bara, and Bartle 2011). However, not all manifesto promises are viewed with equal importance by voters (Mellon, Prosser, et al. 2018). Many of the Liberal Democrat 'wins' in the coalition agreement were on relatively unimportant or low-salience issues (Bale 2012) and several flagship Liberal Democrat policies—the proposed constitutional reforms like the AV referendum and a

[2] British local elections are held in a rotating combination of different councils and no official national results are reported. The 'projected national share of the vote' is the national vote estimated and reported by the BBC.

wholly or mainly elected House of Lords—ultimately proved disastrous (Hazell and Yong 2012). Overall, 'the Liberal Democrats' focus on "minor" policies blinded them to the far more important issue of how to manage the economy, a matter which they agreed with—or conceded to—the Conservatives' (Hazell and Yong 2012, p. 40).

Similarly, although the Liberal Democrats secured a greater proportion of ministerial and cabinet posts than their share of government MPs, these largely took the form of junior ministers spread across departments and all the 'great offices of state' were held by Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats' tactics in both the coalition agreement and their ministerial appointments was to try to sell the idea of coalition government to the British public and show that it could be just as effective and efficient as single-party government.

The experience of coalition in other countries suggests that, as coalitions continue, parties of government will seek to differentiate themselves in order to win votes (Martin and Vanberg 2008). This can be seen in the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition. Once the government was settled and the Liberal Democrats realized they were facing an enormous electoral backlash, they sought to claim credit for particular government policies and for blocking Conservative proposals (Cutts and Russell 2015). However the lack of key portfolios made it difficult to sell the contribution of the Liberal Democrats to the government (Russell 2010; McEnhill 2015; Cutts and Russell 2015).

Research from other countries suggests that junior partners are generally not given much credit for the government's achievements (Anderson 2000; Duch and Stevenson 2008; Fisher and Hobolt 2010), and the experience of Liberal Democrats proved to be no different. Many voters do not follow day-to-day policymaking and instead use heuristics to aid their political decision-making (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). In coalition government, the prime minister's party is seen to be in control of the agenda and so receives the credit and blame for the government's actions.

In order to examine attributions of responsibility for policy changes during the coalition government we use a set of questions about change and responsibility in six policy areas from the pre-election wave of the 2015 BES internet panel: the economy, cost of living, the National Health Service, schools, immigration, and crime.[3]

[3] For each policy area, respondents were asked either 'Do you think that each of the following are getting better, getting worse or staying about the same?' (the economy, NHS, and schools) or 'Do you think that each of the following are getting higher, getting lower or staying about the same?' (cost of living, immigration, and crime). Answers were giving on a five-point scale. Respondents were then asked 'Thinking about the changes you just described, who do you think these are the result of?' The answer options were not mutually exclusive, and here we make use of whether or not respondents thought the 'Conservatives in UK government' and/or the 'Liberal Democrats in UK Government' (coded as a binary variable, 1 = party responsible for change in policy area).The other answer options were 'the last Labour UK government', 'the Scottish government' (if the respondent was in Scotland, 'the Welsh government' (if the respondent was in Wales), and 'none of these'.

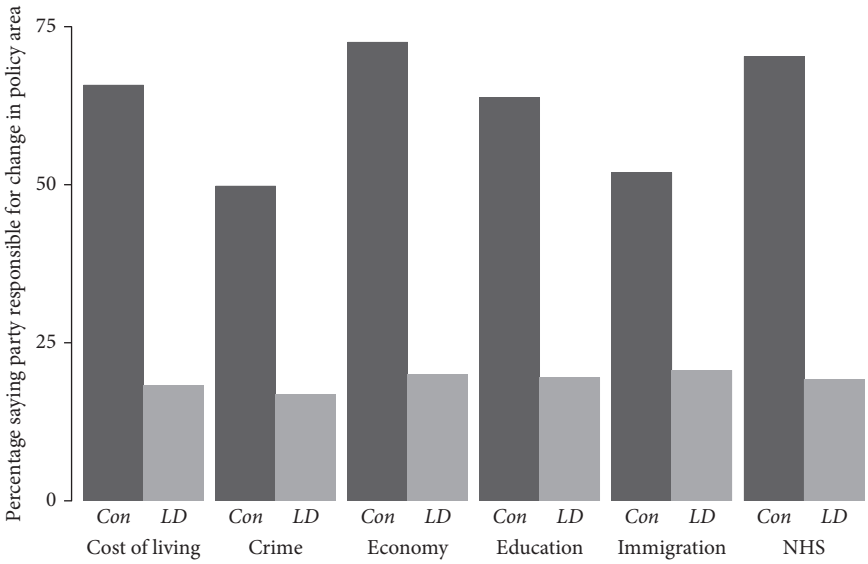

Figure 7.5 Attributions of responsibility to Conservatives and Liberal Democrats for change in six policy areas during 2010–15 coalition

Figure 7.5 shows that, as we would expect from the comparative literature, the Conservatives receive considerably greater attributions of responsibility than the Liberal Democrats. Between 50 per cent and 73 per cent of respondents said the Conservatives were responsible for changes in each policy area, while only 17 per cent to 21 per cent say the same thing about the Liberal Democrats.

Previous research has also suggested that partisan identifiers are more likely to give their own party credit for achievements in coalition (Meyer and Strobl 2016). If this was true in 2015 then, among Liberal Democrat identifiers at least, the party might get some credit for coalition. To test this we modelled whether each coalition partner was held responsible for a range of policy areas as a function of their pre-coalition (2010) party identification.[4] The results show a number of consistent patterns across the six policy areas. First, respondents were consistently less likely to attribute responsibility for policy changes to the Liberal Democrats. With the exception of two of the policy areas, even Liberal Democrat partisans were less likely to attribute policy success to the achievements of their own party rather than the Conservatives. Only for the NHS and education do Liberal

[4] We specify a series of logistic regression models, with separate models for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in each policy area. The dependent variable is a binary variable where 1 = the party responsible for change in policy area. The independent variables are perceived change in the policy area, the respondent's 2010 party identification (none, Conservative, Liberal Democrat, any other party), and self-reported levels of political attention (0: No attention–10: A great deal of attention). Full results are shown in Table A7.1 in the appendix.

Democrat partisans attribute responsibility for policy success to the Liberal Democrats at the same rate as Conservative partisans do to the Conservative Party.

Perhaps more importantly, the extent to which each partner was given credit for a policy area depended on whether the change in that area was regarded as good or bad. This is best illustrated using the example of the economy, although a very similar pattern is found across each policy area. Figure 7.6 shows the predicted probability of holding the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats responsible for changes to the economy by whether a respondent thought the economy had got better or worse. We plot separate graphs for non-party identifiers, Conservative identifiers, Liberal Democrat identifiers, and identifiers with any other party combined (measured at the same time as responsibility attributions). Conservative and Liberal Democrat partisans are much more likely to say their party is responsible for positive changes in the economy and not responsible for negative changes, while partisans from other parties are more likely to say the governing parties were responsible if they think the economy was getting worse but were not responsible for any improvements.

Two things are particularly interesting. First, the non-partisan respondents generally act somewhere in between partisan groups when attributing responsibility to the Conservatives, being less likely to attribute success to the Conservatives than Conservative partisans, but also less likely to attribute failure to the Conservatives than other partisans. However non-partisans act almost exactly the same as other partisans when attributing responsibility to the Liberal Democrats, only attributing responsibility to them for negative changes (but still at a much lower rate than for the Conservatives).

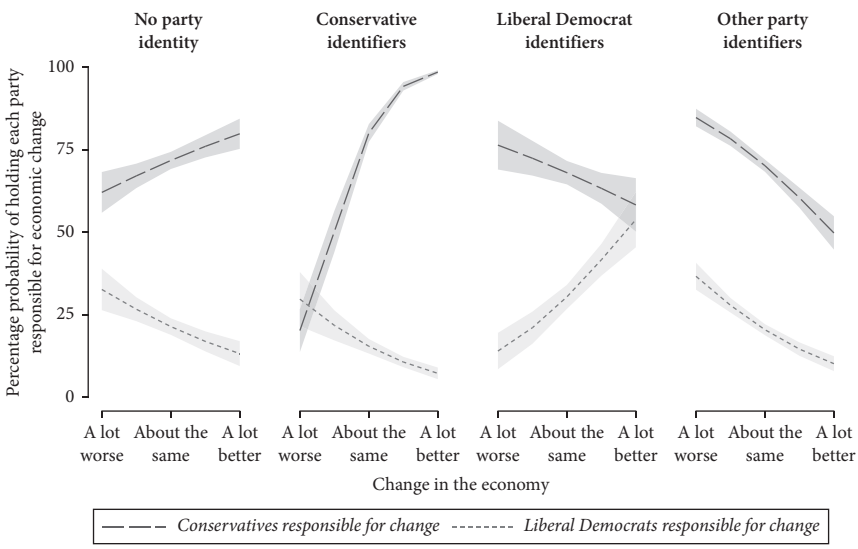

Figure 7.6 Attribution of responsibility for change in the economy

Second, Liberal Democrat partisans act like other partisans when attributing responsibility to the Conservatives, holding the Conservatives relatively more responsible when they thought the economy had got worse. Like Conservative identifiers, they are also relatively more likely to credit their own party if they thought the economy was getting better. Notwithstanding this, in absolute terms, Liberal Democrat partisans were equally likely to credit the Conservatives as their own party when they thought the economy had got a lot better.

There was little reciprocal generosity from Conservative partisans, who were less likely than non-partisans and partisans of other parties to attribute responsibility to the Liberal Democrats for any changes to the economy, except when they thought the economy had got a lot worse. An exception to this general pattern occurs for the NHS and education, where Conservatives give a tiny bit more credit to the Liberal Democrats than other- and non-partisans do.

These results make it clear that the Liberal Democrats suffered from the same problem faced by other junior coalition partners—they were not held responsible by most voters for the actions of government, and so were unlikely to be rewarded for any government successes.

7.4 Explaining the 2015 collapse

We have considered some of the reasons for the Liberal Democrat collapse in 2015, including the reliance on tactical votes coupled with the desertion of left-leaning voters; the lack of credit they received for achievements in government; the reduced viability resulting from their poor poll showing; and the low level of partisan identification. To evaluate how important a role each of these factors played, we model the 2015 votes of English respondents who voted Liberal Democrat in 2010 in the combined BES 2010–15 panel data.[5]

We restrict this model to 2010 Liberal Democrat voters because we are primarily interested in the desertion of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters, which contributed so heavily to their poor performance in 2015. The loyalty rates of 2010 Liberal Democrats was around one in four (as we saw in Figure 7.2), compared to the average retention rate between 1964 and 2010 for the Liberal Democrats of three in five and of around four in five for Labour and the Conservatives. Of course, retention is only half the story—the Liberal Democrats also failed to recruit new

[5] We estimate a multinomial logistic regression restricted to voters in England because the existence of nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales means those voters have a different choice set. We model vote choice in 2015 as a function of variables measured in wave 4 of the BES 2015 panel: feelings towards the political parties, the perceived relative chances of the Liberal Democrats winning the respondent's constituency compared to the Conservatives and Labour, perceptions of changes to the economy and whether the Liberal Democrats were responsible for those changes, and feelings towards Nick Clegg. The results of this model are shown in Table A7.2 in the appendix.

voters to replace those they had lost. However, trying to estimate who might have been recruited to the Liberal Democrats had circumstances been different would push the logic of our counterfactual approach beyond what it is capable of showing. We therefore focus here on why previous supporters abandoned the Liberal Democrats.

Using the model, we then estimate what proportion of 2010 Liberal Democrats would have voted Liberal Democrat in 2015 under a series of counterfactual conditions and compare them to the proportion that actually did in reality: 28 per cent. These are illustrated in Figure 7.7.

The first counterfactual examines the role of attribution of responsibility for changes to the economy. We estimate this counterfactual to test the extent to which the Liberal Democrats fell victim to the problem of attribution common to junior coalition partners. To do so, we model what the Liberal Democrat vote share would have been if *everyone* held the Liberal Democrats responsible for changes to the economy. This represents a ceiling for what the level of attribution of responsibility might be, but, as Figure 7.7 shows, this does next to nothing to the estimated Liberal Democrat retention rate. Indeed, if anything it *reduces* the Liberal Democrat vote slightly, though this difference is not statistically significant. The lack of change here is likely to be because in the counterfactual there are more people who think the economy got *worse* holding the Liberal Democrats responsible for this negative change. The Liberal Democrats may have faced difficulty getting credit for the achievements of the coalition government, but they also avoided some of the blame.

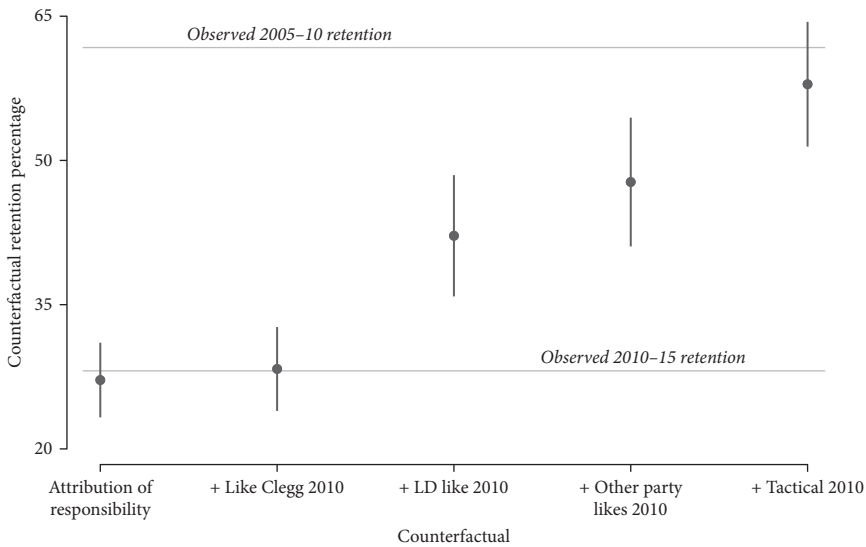

Figure 7.7 Estimates of the proportion of 2010 Liberal Democrat voters voting Liberal Democrat in 2015 under different counterfactual conditions

We estimate the other counterfactuals by substituting the values of the variables used in the model with the answers the same respondents gave to the same questions before the 2010 Election. Doing so enables us to answer the question of what would have happened in 2015 if respondents still had similar perceptions of the Liberal Democrats as they did before they entered the coalition with the Conservatives. First, we estimate the effect of feelings towards Nick Clegg. The Clegg counterfactual suggests that even if Nick Clegg had been as popular as he was at the height of 'Cleggmania', on its own this would have made no difference to Liberal Democrat losses.

Next, we estimate the effect of changing feelings about the Liberal Democrats as a party. The answer, unsurprisingly, is that the Liberal Democrats would have retained more of their voters, and would have kept around 42 per cent of those who voted Liberal Democrat in 2010, fourteen points more than they did in reality. Although this is a large change, it is important to note that even if people still liked the Liberal Democrats to the same degree as they did in 2010, the model estimates they *still* would have lost nearly six in ten of their previous voters (considerably higher than typical Liberal Democrat losses).

In part this is due to how voters felt about the other parties. It is not just the absolute levels of how voters feel about political parties that determines their vote but rather how much they like each party *relative* to the other parties. If feelings towards all the parties had stayed the same as their 2010 levels the Liberal Democrats would have kept 48 per cent of their vote, an additional 6 points higher than the effect of feelings towards the Liberal Democrats alone.

However, even if feelings towards all parties had stayed at the same levels as 2010 the Liberal Democrats still would have retained substantially fewer voters than their usual levels of retention. The final counterfactual points to one reason for this—as the perennial third party in British politics, the Liberal Democrats have long faced a 'credibility gap'—whereby people who might otherwise have voted Liberal Democrat voted for a different party because they thought they stood no chance of winning their constituency. With the collapse of the Liberal Democrats in the opinion polls and local elections, it would not be surprising if the credibility gap exacerbated the Liberal Democrats collapse. The counterfactual analysis supports this idea—if respondents' perceptions of the relative chances of the Liberal Democrats compared to Labour and the Conservatives were the same as their 2010 perceptions, the Liberal Democrats would have kept 58 per cent of their vote, which is statistically indistinguishable from their 2005–10 levels of retention (and in line with their historical retention rates).

These counterfactuals raise the question of why people's feelings about the Liberal Democrats changed between 2010 and 2015. We are also interested in the changes in feelings towards the Liberal Democrats among those who did not vote Liberal Democrat in 2010, as these formed the pool of potential recruits. To investigate these questions, we model the change in feelings about the Liberal Democrats

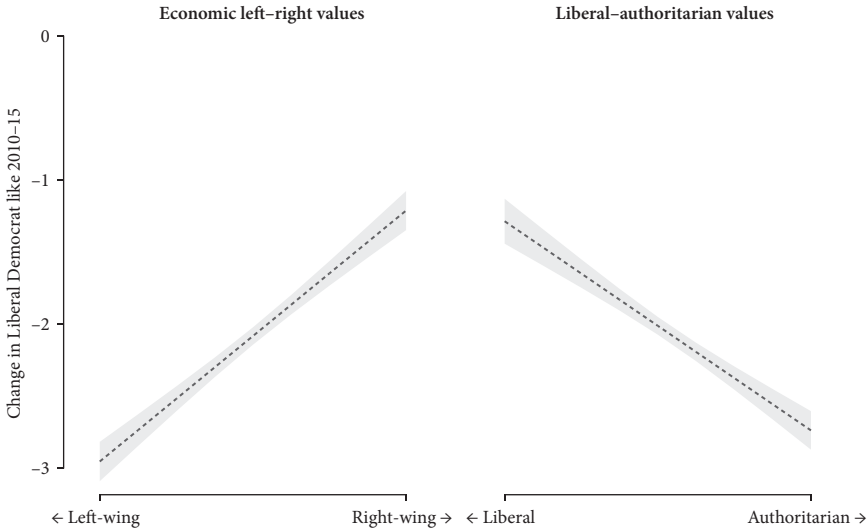

Figure 7.8 Change in feelings towards Liberal Democrats 2010–15 by economic left–right and liberal–authoritarian values

between 2010 and 2015 using a linear regression model, controlling for how they felt about the Liberal Democrats at the outset (see Table A7.3 in the appendix). We focus on a combination of 2010 and 2015 predictors: respondents' positions on the economic left–right and liberal–authoritarian values scales, and whether, and how strongly, they identified with the Liberal Democrats before the coalition.

Figure 7.8 shows strong effects for both left–right and liberal–authoritarian values. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the widespread perception that the Liberal Democrats were an anti-Conservative progressive party, the feeling scores of those on the left dropped by about twice as much as those on the right. Conversely however, the relationship with liberal–authoritarian values runs in the opposite direction—with more authoritarian voters becoming more hostile to the Liberal Democrats than liberal voters. In other words, following coalition, the Liberal Democrats became more unpopular among more left-wing voters while maintaining popularity among their traditional core support: voters with liberal social values.

Figure 7.9 shows that changes in feelings towards the Liberal Democrats depended strongly on prior partisanship, reported before the 2010 Election. Conditional on their political values, the largest decrease in liking the Liberal Democrats was among those voters who did not identify with the party or only identified weakly (who also tended to start from a lower level to begin with). By contrast, very strong Liberal Democrat identifiers, on average, liked the party as much in 2015 as they had in 2010. This suggests that, had they had a stronger partisan core, the Liberal Democrats would have experienced a much less dramatic collapse in their vote.

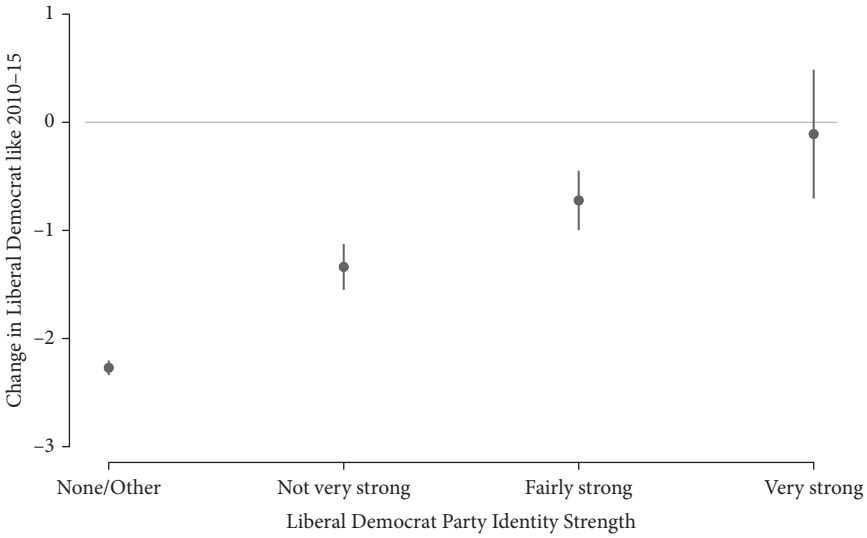

Figure 7.9 Change in feelings towards Liberal Democrats 2010–15 by strength of Liberal Democrat identity in 2010

Among 2010 Liberal Democrats, we also find that changes in feelings about the Liberal Democrats depend on why they voted Liberal Democrat in the first place. Those who voted for the Liberal Democrats because they thought they had the best policies were the most stable in their feelings about the party (though even these dropped by nearly two points), while those who voted Liberal Democrat because they liked Nick Clegg, and particularly those who voted tactically for the party, experienced the largest drops in support.

7.5 2015–17: The recovery that never happened

After their electoral disaster in 2015, Nick Clegg resigned as leader and was replaced with Tim Farron. However, a new leader seemed to do little to repair the damage that had been done by the coalition, and the Liberal Democrats continued to flounder in the polls. Following the EU referendum in 2016 (which we discuss in Chapter 9), the Liberal Democrats set out an unambiguously pro-European position and called for a second referendum on the terms of Brexit. Glimmers of a possible recovery appeared in late 2016 when the Liberal Democrats won the Richmond Park by-election, and they began to nudge ever so slightly upwards in the polls.

These first shoots of a recovery came to a crashing halt with the announcement that there would be an early election in 2017. The Liberal Democrats found themselves outside the media spotlight during the campaign and many wavering

Labour voters—perhaps seeing no other viable option—began to flood back to Labour (Mellon et al. 2018a). The most media attention the Liberal Democrats received during the campaign was not of the sort they wanted, as Farron, an Evangelical Christian, faced repeated questions about whether he thought gay sex was a sin.

The 2017 Election results were a mixed bag for the Liberal Democrats. In terms of votes, the 2017 Election saw the further erosion of Liberal Democrat support with a decrease in their share by half a percentage point. In terms of seats, the result was more positive, as they finished the election with a net gain of four seats. However this result hides considerable turnover in Liberal Democrat MPs. Half of the 2015 Liberal Democrat seats were lost—including the seat of former leader Nick Clegg—as was their recently won by-election seat of Richmond Park. These losses were offset by regaining seven seats they had lost in 2015 and one they had lost in 2010.

The churn in Liberal Democrat seats is the first clue that there was more switching to and from the Liberal Democrats beneath the surface than their similar votes shares in 2015 and 2017 would suggest. What the stability in overall vote share conceals is that on some measures, the Liberal Democrats experienced a partial recovery between 2015 and 2017, but this was offset by further losses. We can see this in Figure 7.10, which shows the outflow of Liberal Democrat 2015 voters and the origins of their 2017 voters. The key difference between this figure and the equivalent plot for 2010–15 (Figure 7.2) is that although the Liberal Democrats lost many voters (their 2015–17 loyalty rate was only 50 per cent), these were offset

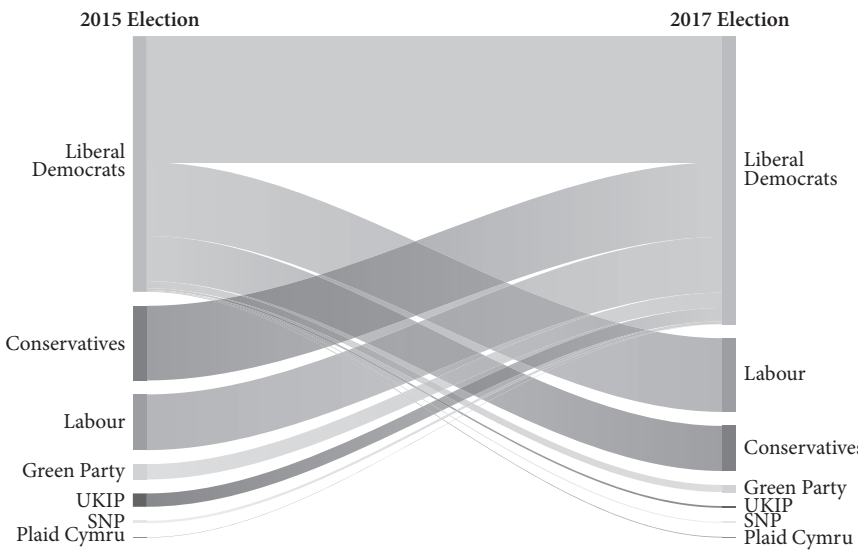

Figure 7.10 2015 and 2017 vote choice of 2015 and 2017 Liberal Democrats voters

by similar gains from other parties. Relatively speaking, in 2017 the Liberal Democrats continued to lose votes to Labour more heavily than to the Conservatives, with 29 per cent of their 2015 voters defecting to Labour and 18 per cent to the Conservatives. By contrast, in 2017 they recruited more voters from the Conservatives (26 per cent of their 2017 vote previously voted Conservative) than from Labour (19 per cent).

While Figure 7.10 demonstrates that the Liberal Democrats electoral performance stabilized in 2017 it does not suggest any hint of return to the pre-coalition situation. Our data also indicate (not shown in Figure 7.10) that there was little sign of the Liberal Democrats recovering a substantial proportion of those supporters who deserted after the coalition. Only 19 per cent of their 2010 supporters voted for them again in 2017, making up around half (52 per cent) of their 2017 support. These included 32 per cent who had stayed with them in 2015 and a further 20 per cent who returned in 2017 having not voted Liberal Democrat in 2015. However, these returners represented only 10 per cent of all those who had deserted the Liberal Democrats in 2015. In other words, the damage done by the 2010 coalition shock to Liberal Democrat support persisted in 2017.

When we examined the 2015 collapse of the Liberal Democrats, our counterfactuals suggested that two factors were particularly important in explaining the collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote in 2015: how people felt about the party and how well people expected the Liberal Democrats to do in their constituency. We examine how each of these factors changed in 2017 in turn.

First, we examine how feelings towards the Liberal Democrats changed between 2015 and 2017 using the same model we used to examine changes between 2010 and 2015 (see Table A7.3 in the appendix). Figure 7.11 shows the predicted level of change in feelings towards the Liberal Democrats by economic left–right and liberal–authoritarian values. For left–right values, there is a gentle slope indicating that economically left-wing people increased their liking of the Liberal Democrats slightly more than right-wing people. The most important aspect of this relationship, though, is its relative flatness—people across the economic dimension were likely to feel more positively about the Liberal Democrats in 2017 than they did in 2015. By contrast, there is a much steeper relationship between feelings towards the Liberal Democrat and liberal–authoritarian values, as liberals became more favourably disposed towards the Liberal Democrats in the two years after the 2015 Election while social conservatives stayed more or less where they were.

We also know authoritarians became much more negative about the Liberal Democrats from 2010 to 2015 (as shown earlier in Figure 7.8). Together these changes mean that Liberal Democrat support was much more closely aligned with political values than it had been before they entered the coalition (Figure 7.12). In 2010, on the economic left–right dimension, feelings towards the Liberal Democrats were relatively even across the left and centre of the scale before dropping off on the right-hand side of the scale. Following the coalition with the Conservatives,

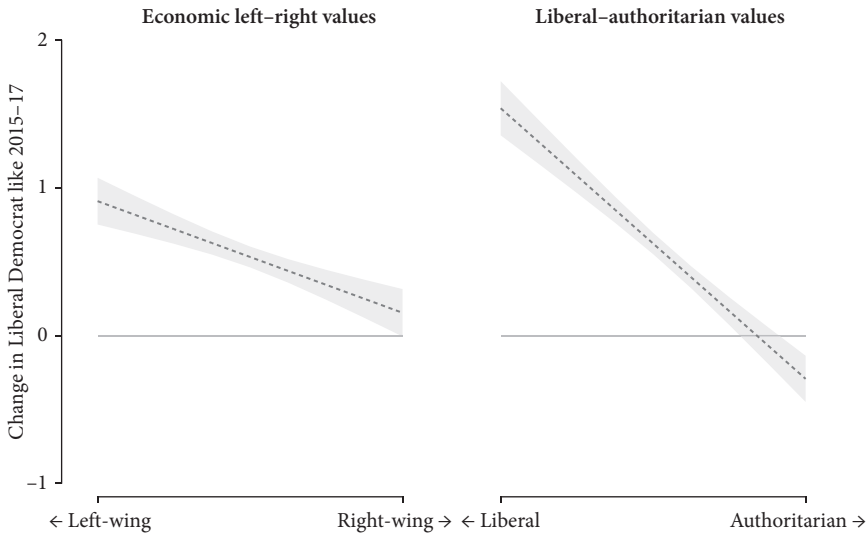

Figure 7.11 Change in feelings towards Liberal Democrats 2015–17 by economic left–right and liberal–authoritarian values

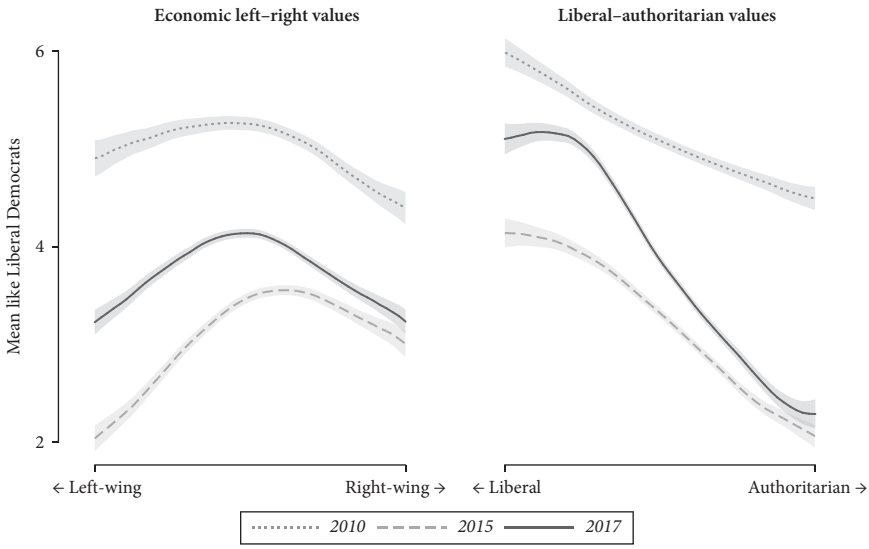

Figure 7.12 Relationship between economic left–right and liberal–authoritarian values and feelings towards the Liberal Democrats in 2010, 2015, and 2017

in 2015 there was a much greater drop in pro-Liberal Democrat feelings on the left-hand side of the scale than on the right (as shown earlier in Figure 7.8). In 2017 there was an uneven recovery (Figure 7.11) as feelings towards the Liberal Democrats recovered on the left, leaving a peak in the centre of the distribution and falling away towards both extremes. This uneven recovery resulted in a

pattern similar to that seen in 2010 but at a considerably lower level of favourability. On the liberal–authoritarian dimension, the Liberal Democrats have always been more popular on the liberal end of the scale, but with a larger fall among social conservatives in 2015 (Figure 7.8) and a stronger recovery among social liberals in 2017 (Figure 7.11), feelings towards the Liberal Democrats were much more closely aligned with liberal–authoritarian values than they had been previously. This suggests the Liberal Democrat party post-coalition was much more reliant on a traditional liberal support base rather than on the anti-Conservative centre-left voters that had driven its support before 2010. Undoubtedly this uneven recovery was partly driven by attitudes towards Brexit which, as we show in Chapter 9, are strongly related to liberal–authoritarian values.

Earlier we showed that a lack of Liberal Democrat Party identification made the party more vulnerable to decline in 2015. But how did their soft base affect their recovery in 2017? We can investigate this by looking at how feelings changed among pre-coalition Liberal Democrat identifiers (Figure 7.13). This shows a mirror image of the 2010–15 relationship (Figure 7.9), with the least change among none and other party identifiers and increasing positive changes as Liberal Democrat identity gets stronger. This suggests that their weak partisan base may also have contributed to the failure to recover in 2017.

Even though the Liberal Democrat recovery was lopsided, overall, they were more popular in 2017 than 2015, with mean likes scores increasing from 3.4 to 3.8. How then, can we explain why their vote share actually went *down* in 2017? The answer is largely due to the fact that, in most seats, the Liberal Democrats were not seen as viable and were therefore perceived as a wasted vote. When we examine

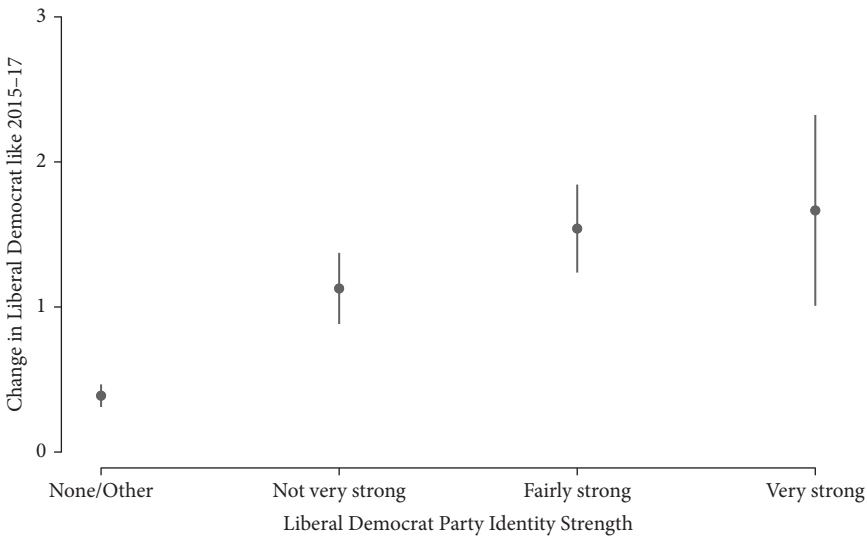

Figure 7.13 Change in feelings towards Liberal Democrats 2015–17 by strength of Liberal Democrat identity in 2010

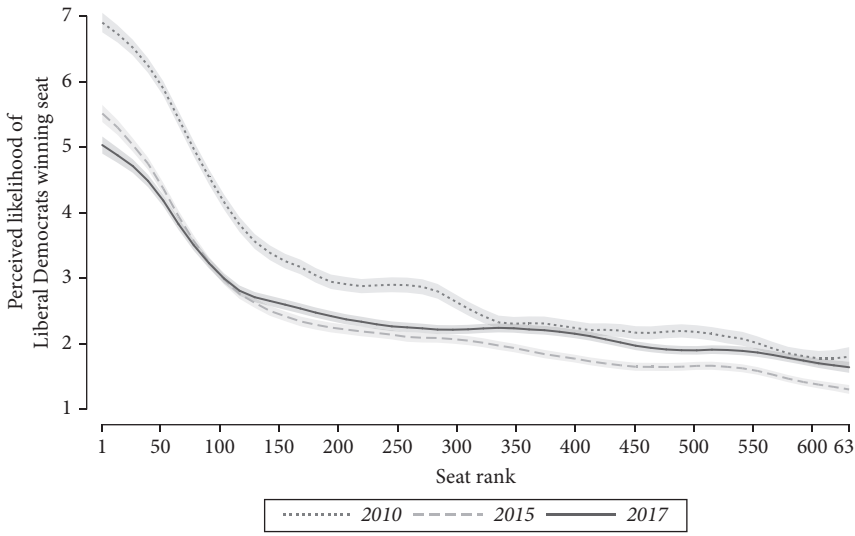

Figure 7.14 Perceived likelihood of Liberal Democrats winning a respondent's constituency in 2010, 2015, and 2017 by rank of Liberal Democrat vote share at previous election

expectations of how well they would do in respondents' constituencies in 2010, 2015, and 2017, we can see that the Liberal Democrats' 'expectation gap' problem got worse between elections. Figure 7.14 plots the perceived likelihood of the Liberal Democrats winning a respondent's constituency against the rank ordering of Liberal Democrat vote share in that seat at the previous election. Between 2010 and 2015 there was a sharp drop in how well voters thought the Liberal Democrats would do in their constituencies across the board. Between 2015 and 2017 we see a curious pattern. In places where the Liberal Democrats had no chance of winning, expectations recovered slightly (we might think of this improvement as going from 'no chance' to 'next to no chance'). In the seats where the Liberal Democrats had the best chance of winning (based on previous performance), their perceived likelihood of winning actually fell even further.

As we discussed earlier, overcoming the expectations gap has been a perennial problem for the Liberal Democrats. Participation in coalition not only destroyed their good standing with many of their potential supporters, it also damaged their credibility as a viable electoral force. Some of the electorate seemed at least partially willing to forgive the Liberal Democrats by 2017, and they had been gaining steady ground in local and parliamentary by-elections, but perhaps the election came too early for them.

We can put all of these factors together by running a model of Liberal Democrat vote choice in 2017 (see Table A7.4 in the appendix) and estimating a series of counterfactuals, as we did earlier, by substituting 2010 values of variables into the

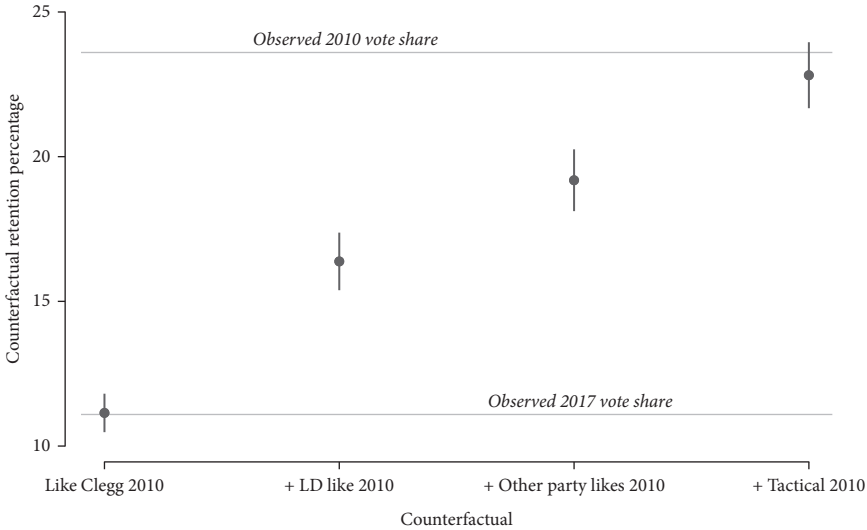

Figure 7.15 Estimated proportion voting Liberal Democrat in 2017 under different counterfactual conditions

model. Because of the different context of the 2017 Election, unlike the earlier model, here we include both defections and recruitment to see the overall effect of the change in attitudes towards the Liberal Democrats. These counterfactuals are shown in Figure 7.15, and show clearly that we cannot explain the failure of the Liberal Democrats to perform better by any single factor. Instead, it was the combination of feelings towards the Liberal Democrats, feelings towards other parties, and perceptions of Liberal Democrat viability.

The counterfactuals estimate that, on their own, feelings towards the Liberal Democrat leader would have made no difference to Liberal Democrat performance. If feelings towards the Liberal Democrats had recovered to 2010 levels, the Liberal Democrats would have gained an additional 5.2 percentage points of the vote. Combined with feelings towards other parties, this would have increased by an additional 2.8 points, and with perceptions of viability adding a further 3.6 points. Taken together, this would have meant a doubling of the Liberal Democrat vote share, putting them roughly back on par with their 2010 performance.

7.6 Conclusion

After five years of coalition government, the 2015 Election saw the dramatic collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote—seeming to confirm Disraeli's adage that Britain 'does not love coalitions'. However, a more nuanced examination of what happened between 2010 and 2015 suggests that the collapse of the Liberal Democrats was

due to the nature of this *specific* coalition, and not because Britain in general is somehow unsuited to coalition government.

Our analysis shows that the Liberal Democrats faced a problem common to junior coalition partners in other countries—the difficulty of claiming credit for government success. Voters were much more likely to hold the Conservatives responsible for both positive and negative changes in multiple policy areas.

Going into coalition government was particularly damaging to the Liberal Democrats because of the nature of their support base—characterized by low levels of partisanship, a centre-left and socially liberal bias in political values, and a heavy reliance on tactical support. This made the Liberal Democrats unsuited to withstand the electoral costs of coalition participation, especially coalition with the Conservatives.

Perhaps the most noticeable symptom of this was an uneven drop in support, with economically left-wing voters turning against the party in 2015. Added to this, low levels of partisanship meant that many Liberal Democrat voters viewed the compromises and trade-offs inherent in coalition government unfiltered by a favourable 'partisan screen'. Perhaps even more problematically for the Liberal Democrats, a large proportion of their voters saw their participation in coalition through the lens of Labour partisanship—something unlikely to result in a favourable view of the Liberal Democrats in coalition with the Conservatives, regardless of their achievements in government.

The nature of the pre-coalition Liberal Democrat support base also acted as a brake on their recovery after 2015. Strong Liberal Democrat partisans were relatively quick to forgive the Liberal Democrats, with their feelings towards them returning to pre-coalition levels by the time of the 2017 Election. However there were very few of these voters, and non-partisan and tactical supporters were much less forgiving. The nature of politics in the aftermath of the EU referendum—which we will discuss in detail in Chapter 9—also contributed to the uneven nature of the Liberal Democrat recovery. Feelings towards the Liberal Democrats recovered substantially among social liberals, who saw eye to eye with the Liberal Democrats on Brexit. More socially conservative voters, many of whom had given the Liberal Democrats tactical support in the past (an aspect of the Liberal Democrat vote that has perhaps been poorly understood), were much less forgiving.

Absolution was not the only challenge faced by the Liberal Democrats in 2015 and 2017. The collapse of support for the Liberal Democrats in the polls and their losses in local elections over the 2010–15 Parliament created a vicious cycle for the Liberal Democrats, first in 2015 and continuing into 2017. As their support plummeted, the Liberal Democrats looked a less good bet for tactical voters hoping to block a rival party from winning seats. We showed that perceptions of the likelihood of the Liberal Democrats winning local constituencies had a significant impact on whether 2010 Liberal Democrats chose to vote for the Liberal Democrats again in 2015, regardless of changes in voters' feelings towards them. The same

was true in 2017. Although there were glimmers of a recovery in late 2016, they were not enough to overcome perceptions that the Liberal Democrats were unlikely to win in most seats.

Looking at the bigger picture, the electoral fortunes of the Liberal Democrats are closely tied with the rise—and sudden collapse—of party system fragmentation in British elections. The rising vote share for 'other' parties since 1970 was in large part due to increasing support for the Liberal Democrats. The collapse of the Liberal Democrats had two seemingly contradictory effects on party system fragmentation. In 2015, former Liberal Democrat voters helped to prop up support for Labour and the Conservatives, but also boosted the shares of the other small parties—UKIP, the Greens, and the SNP.

In 2017, when these other small parties faced challenges of their own, the absence of a viable third party option in the Liberal Democrats meant that many voters had nowhere to turn but to the Conservatives or Labour. It was not immediately obvious, but the collapse of the Liberal Democrats was the first step in the sudden contraction of the British party system that took place in 2017.