

COULD THE LIB DEM MARGINAL MELTDOWN MEAN THE TORIES GAIN FROM A.V.?

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A referendum on the Alternative Vote is currently planned for 5 May 2011. The pollsters have turned their attention to the likely ramifications should the public decide to adopt such a system for general elections. There has been a widespread assumption that the Conservatives have nothing to gain from electoral reform, and the work that has been done so far – such as the YouGov poll for the *Spectator* earlier this month – has indeed suggested that the Tories would be the biggest net losers when comparing A.V. with First Past The Post (FPTP).

As ever, though, national polls can only tell us so much – it would be in the marginal seats that A.V. would make a decisive difference. Would voters in these seats behave differently under the two systems? And would the effect be different depending which parties were in contention? A newly commissioned 6,000-sample poll helps to shed some light on the debate.

1,500 people were interviewed in each of four clusters of target seats: the 50 most marginal Labour-held seats with the Conservatives in second place; the 50 most marginal Conservative-held seats with Labour in second place; the 25 most marginal Liberal Democrat-held seats where the Conservatives are second; and the 25 most marginal Conservative seats where the Lib Dems are second.

The findings are striking. Under a FPTP election, Labour would gain 28 of the seats in which it is currently in second place to the Conservatives. Although the Conservative vote in these seats was only fractionally down since the general election, a 4-point drop in the Liberal Democrat share exclusively benefited Labour. In the 25 Liberal Democrat-held seats, though, the collapse in the Lib Dem vote was much more dramatic: the party was down 15 points from its general election position. In this scenario, the Conservatives would win all of these seats plus a further five – more than compensating for its losses on the Labour battleground.

Under A.V. the swings were less dramatic but the effect was no less interesting. In Con-Lab marginals, while Labour voters were much more likely to give their second preference to the Lib Dems than to the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats were more likely to give their second preferences to the Tories than Labour – albeit by a smaller margin. Labour would gain 16 Conservative seats under this system. In the Liberal Democrat-Conservative battleground, although the Lib Dems were the significant net beneficiaries of second and third preferences, they were so far behind on first preferences that the effect of the transfers was to narrow the Tory lead, not

eliminate it. In this scenario the Conservatives would gain 19 of Lib Dem seats in which they are in second place – leaving them three seats up on the deal, compared to only two under FPTP. This gives the rather counterintuitive result that in an election now, the Conservatives could do as well, and possibly better, under A.V. than under FPTP.

There will be further complicating factors, of course. We don't yet know for sure the impact of the reduction in the number of constituencies – the Conservatives should be the net beneficiaries, but the parties will fight over every boundary line; until the new map is drawn we won't know how many seats will change hands for a given swing. It is also possible that, under A.V., swings could start to vary between seats even more than was the case on 6 May, if voters start to set even more store by the merits of individual candidates when allocating their preferences. And fairly small shifts in headline voting intention (particularly an increase in support for the Liberal Democrats) could change the result under A.V. significantly, given their advantage in second and third preferences.

We took the opportunity to gauge the opinion of the marginals more widely. Not surprisingly, the coalition's performance was more highly rated in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat battleground than where Labour are strong contenders, though a clear majority thought the new government was doing well overall – indeed nearly a quarter admitted to thinking it was doing better than they expected. However, only one in ten of those who did not vote Conservative or Liberal Democrat on 6 May said they were now more likely to vote for either party because of the way they have conducted themselves since the election.

Voters in these seats were evenly divided as to whether the coalition represents “the beginning of a new type of politics”, though small majorities thought so on the Conservative-Liberal Democrat battleground. Just under half thought the way David Cameron and the Conservatives had behaved since the election “shows that the Conservative Party really has changed for the better”.

Significantly, even in the Liberal Democrat-held seats, less than a quarter of voters thought the Lib Dems were having a significant impact on the coalition government's agenda. Most thought the government's agenda is very similar or the same as what they would see if the Conservatives were governing alone.

Nearly half of voters thought a Labour government would be cutting public spending by less than the coalition is currently doing. At the same time, though, they saw most of the controversial Budget measures – including the VAT rise, and freezes in public sector pay and Child Benefit – as “necessary and unavoidable” rather than “avoidable and unnecessary” (though by widely varying margins, and with the exception of cuts to the school building programme). Accordingly, a majority in all seats – reaching two thirds in the Conservative-Liberal Democrat battleground – agreed that “it is right to

start cutting back on public spending now because the longer we put off dealing with the deficit the greater the cost of sorting it out". However, only a third thought the effects of the tax rises and spending cuts were "being spread fairly" – most felt that "ordinary hard working people are bearing the brunt".

How these strands of opinion develop, and particularly how former Liberal Democrat voters perceive their party's role in the coalition, will determine the outcome of the next election – however the votes are counted.

Full details of the poll are as follows:

1. Voting intention and swing

CON-LAB CLUSTER	General election	July 2010, FPTP	July 2010, A.V.
Conservative	39.6%	39.3%	50.8%
Labour	35.7%	39.7%	49.2%
Liberal Democrat	17.5%	13.7%	
Other	7.2%	7.3%	
<i>Net Con lead</i>	3.9%	-0.4%	1.6%
<i>Swing since GE</i>		2.2% Con to Lab	1.2% Con to Lab
<i>Effect</i>		Labour gain 28 seats	Labour gain 16 seats

LAB-CON CLUSTER	General election	July 2010, FPTP	July 2010, A.V.
Conservative	34.2%	34.8%	46.6%
Labour	39.2%	41.5%	53.3%
Liberal Democrat	18.0%	13.9%	
Other	8.6%	9.8%	
<i>Net Con lead</i>	-5.0%	-6.7%	-6.7%
<i>Swing since GE</i>		0.9% Con to Lab	0.9% Con to Lab
<i>Effect</i>		No change	No change

CON-LIB DEM CLUSTER	General election	July 2010, FPTP	July 2010, A.V.
Conservative	44.1%	44.6%	54.8%
Labour	11.6%	21.5%	
Liberal Democrat	38.0%	26.0%	45.2%
Other	6.3%	7.9%	
<i>Net Con lead</i>	6.1%	18.6%	9.6%
<i>Swing since GE</i>		6.25% LD to Con	1.75% LD to Con
<i>Effect</i>		No change	No change

LIB DEM-CON CLUSTER	General election	July 2010, FPTP	July 2010, A.V.
Conservative	38.3%	41.6%	51.6%
Labour	9.1%	20.0%	
Liberal Democrat	45.3%	30.4%	48.4%
Other	7.4%	8.0%	
<i>Net Con lead</i>	7.0%	11.2%	3.2%
<i>Swing since GE</i>		9.1% LD to Con	5.1% LD to Con
<i>Effect</i>		Con gain 30 seats*	Con gain 19 seats

* The Conservatives would gain all 25 of the most marginal Lib Dem-Con seats, plus a further five.

2. The effect of the coalition government on party perceptions

Has the way that David Cameron and the Conservatives have conducted themselves since the election made you more likely to vote Conservative in the future or less likely to vote Conservative in the future, or made no real difference?

ALL NON-CONSERVATIVE VOTERS AT GE	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
More likely	9%	9%	14%	12%	10%
Less likely	36%	35%	29%	28%	33%
No difference	52%	55%	54%	58%	54%
Net 'more likely'	-27%	-26%	-15%	-16%	-23%

Has the way that Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats have conducted themselves since the election made you more likely to vote Liberal Democrat in the future or less likely to vote Liberal Democrat in the future, or made no real difference?

ALL NON-LIB DEM VOTERS AT GE	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
More likely	10%	9%	11%	10%	10%
Less likely	27%	28%	22%	24%	26%
No difference	62%	62%	64%	65%	62%
Net 'more likely'	-17%	-19%	-11%	-14%	-16%

3. The performance of the coalition government

Please say how well or badly you think the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government is doing so far.

	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
Very well	8%	7%	12%	11%	9%
Quite well	50%	48%	57%	57%	52%
All 'WELL'	59%	55%	69%	68%	61%
Quite badly	20%	21%	14%	16%	19%
Very badly	10%	13%	7%	7%	10%
All 'BADLY'	30%	34%	21%	23%	29%
Net 'well'	29%	21%	48%	45%	32%

Is the coalition government so far doing better than you had expected, or worse than you expected, or about the same as you had expected?

	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
Better	21%	19%	26%	23%	22%
Worse	13%	15%	10%	10%	13%
About the same	62%	61%	60%	63%	62%
<i>Net 'better'</i>	8%	4%	16%	13%	9%

4. Liberal Democrat influence in the coalition government

Thinking about what the coalition government has done so far and what you have heard about its future plans, which of the following is closest to your view?

	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
The Liberal Democrats have had virtually no influence and the government's agenda is more or less the same as if the Conservatives were in government on their own	23%	28%	18%	19%	23%
The Liberal Democrats have had some influence but the government's agenda is mostly what we'd have had if the Conservatives were in government on their own	51%	48%	53%	54%	51%
The Liberal Democrats have had a significant influence and the government's agenda is very different from what would have happened if the Conservatives were in government on their own	22%	19%	24%	23%	21%

5. Budget measures

If we had a Labour government instead of the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition, do you think that they would be cutting public spending more or less than the coalition government is proposing – or by about the same amount?

	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
More	10%	11%	11%	11%	11%
Less	49%	45%	51%	46%	48%
About the same	36%	38%	32%	36%	36%
<i>Net 'more'</i>	-39%	-34%	-40%	-35%	-37%

From what you know, do you think that the following measures announced by the coalition are unavoidable and necessary or avoidable and unnecessary?

ALL CONSTITUENCIES	Unavoidable & necessary	Avoidable & unnecessary	Net 'unavoidable & unnecessary'
An increase in the rate of VAT from 17.5% to 20%, taking effect in January	56%	42%	14%
A major review of public spending with the aim of reducing what most government departments spend by 25% or more	69%	26%	43%
A pay freeze for the next 2 years for everyone employed in the public sector earning more than £21,000	63%	32%	31%
A freeze in the value of Child Benefit for the next five years	50%	44%	6%
An increase in capital gains tax from 18% to 28%	57%	33%	24%
A review to make sure everyone receiving incapacity benefit is really eligible to do so	79%	18%	61%
The scrapping of a £700 million schools building programme	38%	55%	-17%

I am going to read out some pairs of statements. Please say in each case which statement you agree with more, even if neither statement represents exactly what you think.

	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
'It is right to start cutting back on public spending now because the longer we put off dealing with the deficit the greater the cost of sorting it out'	56%	55%	68%	64%	59%
'It is a mistake to start cutting back on public spending now because the economy has not recovered enough yet and cuts could push us back into recession'	41%	43%	30%	34%	39%
<i>Net first statement</i>	15%	12%	38%	30%	20%

	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
'The effects of the tax rises and spending cuts to deal with the deficit are being spread fairly'	31%	30%	37%	34%	32%
'Ordinary hardworking people are unfairly bearing the brunt of the tax rises and spending cuts to deal with the deficit'	65%	66%	58%	63%	64%
<i>Net first statement</i>	-34%	-36%	-21%	-29%	-32%

6. Change

I am going to read out some pairs of statements. Please say in each case which statement you agree with more, even if neither statement represents exactly what you think.

	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
'The coalition of Lib Dems & Conservatives represents the beginning of a new type of politics'	46%	45%	53%	54%	48%
'It's a coalition of convenience that doesn't really represent anything new or different'	51%	50%	43%	43%	48%
<i>Net first statement</i>	-5%	-5%	10%	11%	0%

	Con/Lab	Lab/Con	Con/LD	LD/Con	All seats
'The way that David Cameron & the Conservatives have behaved since the election shows that the Conservative Party really has changed for the better'	41%	39%	50%	48%	43%
'Nothing has happened since the election to suggest that the Conservative Party has really changed for the better'.	53%	56%	44%	48%	52%
<i>Net first statement</i>	-12%	-17%	6%	0%	-9%

Full data tables are available here: [All seats](#)
[Con-Lab seats](#)
[Lab-Con seats](#)
[Con-Lib Dem seats](#)
[Lib Dem-Con seats](#)

Methodology

6,003 adults aged 18+ were interviewed by telephone between July 9th & 13th 2010. Interviews were conducted across 4 clusters of constituencies:

- the 50 most marginal Labour-held seats where the Conservatives are second
- the 50 most marginal Conservative-held seats where Labour are second
- the 25 most marginal Liberal Democrat-held seats where the Conservatives are second
- the 25 most marginal Conservative-held seats where the Liberal Democrats are second

1,500 interviews were conducted in each of these clusters and each sample has been weighted to be demographically representative of all adults in those clusters.

The research was conducted by Populus, which is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules.