

Liberal Democrats Consultative Session

Election Review

May 2011



This paper has been drawn up by James Gurling, the Chair of the Campaigns and Communications Committee (CCC). The CCC has been asked by the Federal Executive to conduct reviews into the local elections and the referendum campaigns.

Comments on this paper should be emailed to: ccc@libdems.org.uk by Friday 23rd September.

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Introduction

Following the local elections and AV referendum results in May, the Federal Executive requested the Campaigns & Communications Committee to conduct two independent reviews – into the local elections and the referendum campaigns.

CCC has conducted a range of interviews for both, and has called upon Party Headquarters and the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors for analytical support for its review of local elections.

The review of the referendum campaign was opened by the Party President in June to Party members, who have been able to make submissions via a dedicated email address – ccc@libdems.org.uk – an address that is still available to those not able to attend the Consultative Session in person. Members are asked to state either their Constituency Party or Membership number.

The chair of CCC James Gurling presented initial conclusions from both reviews to Federal Executive during its July meeting. This consultative session will help form the final reports.

Initial findings: local elections

The 2011 local elections presented the Liberal Democrats with a 'perfect storm'. Turnout among Conservative and socially-conservative Labour voters was at General Election levels, driven out in consequence of the AV referendum. A huge Trade Union campaign in Labour-leaning areas targeted the Party Leader personally and viciously.

Squeezing the third-party vote proved more problematic than ever before as in many cases it preferred the protest vote over a tactical alternative. The consequence was that often Conservative candidates 'snuck in' where once they would not have.

Conservative voters satisfied with the Coalition were reluctant to vote tactically for their coalition partners in Lib Dem / Labour marginals, in no small part because of the vociferous rivalry between the two parties in the national referendum.

It is also clear that Liberal Democrat achievements in Government had not been successfully communicated – and there was often an unwillingness to do so on the doorstep even when it may well have helped considerably. The impact of the debate on tuition fees and NHS reform etc undoubtedly played a part.

In many instances canvass data was inaccurate being either insufficient in quantity or out of step with the eventual result. A recalibration of canvassing results in light of changed national circumstances may be required in future, as will a new emphasis on training.

However where we campaigned on local issues, with candidates selected early and regular literature drops, we tended to do well. Portsmouth City Council is a prime exemplifier of this approach.

Many dedicated community activists lost their seats through no fault of their own, and in the face of exemplary records of personal service. The challenge now is to ensure that the activist base which supported them is not lost, and that campaigning capacity is retained so that Party representatives may be returned to the service of their local communities.

Initial findings: AV referendum

Four broad themes why the AV referendum was lost have emerged:

Firstly, Labour wholly failed to deliver. Despite a clear manifesto pledge to back the Yes camp in an AV referendum, the Labour Leader was unable even to register his party as an official participant and a majority of his MPs backed the No campaign. This went unchallenged and unnoticed.

Nonetheless many Labour campaigners did their best, and the Yes Campaign included many experienced activists in its staffing. The divisions amongst the only Party which had proposed AV in its general election manifesto meant that the appetite to attack colleagues in the No Campaign was low.

Ed Miliband's only decisive intervention was to take the tactical opportunity to deliberately undermine Nick Clegg – placing local election point-scoring above unity in the Yes campaign.

The Conservatives' desire to win at all costs is also an obvious factor. In view of early polls that indicated a likely, albeit extremely narrow, victory for the Yes campaign, the Tory leadership clearly decided their party unity was a higher priority than coalition harmony. A huge fundraising operation from Tory donors was then kickstarted, allowing the No campaign to significantly outspend Yes.

The No camp sought attention-grabbing (but untrue) headlines which were reported by influential print media, but which crucially were unchallenged by broadcast media.

Thirdly there were strategic errors made before the campaign began. The decision to push for the referendum to be held on the same day as other elections was taken for the positive reasons of maximising turnout and minimising the cost to the public purse. But in hindsight that meant that Liberal Democrat activists in areas with elections were unable to give enough time to the Yes campaign, and were impacted by the tactics of the No Campaign.

The timing also prevented senior campaign staff from being seconded from the Liberal Democrats to Yes. It took away airtime from crucial town hall, Holyrood and Assembly battles; while allowing Labour supporters to 'kick the party twice'. It also brought out Conservatives in General Election quantities – and impacting the differential turnout. Holding the referendum at the earliest opportunity also failed to allow enough time to prepare the ground for reform.

This is not to detract from the fourth reason why AV failed – structural weaknesses within the Yes campaign itself. Fundamental to the success of the campaign was a successful communications strategy.

When core messaging, based on sound polling evidence, became outdated it was not refreshed. Whether and how to change a campaign's core message is a moot point, but the 'people vs. politicians' approach alienated politicians and activists and failed to resonate with broadcasters. The rebuttal and attack functions were not separate units and were but one aspect of an already hard pressed and extremely small communications team.

The ground campaign relied heavily on telephone canvassing but experienced problems setting up the system and a worrying unwillingness of activists to volunteer. Literature, when it came was late, poorly designed, and responsibility for quality became confused.

Other strategic weaknesses included insufficient fundraising to get the most out of the freepost opportunity, likewise a national advertising campaign that came too late and was not big enough, and placing insufficient emphasis on Scotland or Wales (despite the inbuilt advantage of differential turnout in those nations). Finally it is clear that non-political celebrities did not in the end make it a 'people's campaign' – but their impact was important to the overall communications campaign.

In extremely difficult political circumstances – none of which could have been predicted at the start of the process – the AV campaign did generate some positives. It established a genuine grassroots movement for electoral reform, with 150 to 180 groups around the UK set up to campaign for reform. Six million people voted to change the system, a good baseline for future reform. The Non proportional system was clearly rejected. Some new campaign techniques will be worth integrating, particularly online fundraising which was an unsung success story. It also provided Liberal Democrats with an opportunity to speak out clearly and strongly against those indulging in inappropriate campaigning.

Questions

a) Local elections

1. Was your candidate in place early enough? Did he or she campaign for long enough?
2. Were the methods of campaigning varied enough?
3. Did you produce enough literature? Was it of a good enough quality?
4. Do you feel there was enough emphasis on community politics?
5. Did we target correctly in your area? What lessons can we learn for the future?
6. Was support from Party Headquarters adequate? If not, how could it be improved?
7. How did you deal on the doorstep with the Liberal Democrats being in the coalition government?
8. Did you campaign purely on local issues or also on national issues? What worked best?
9. What more can be done to recruit extra activists and keep existing ones motivated?
10. Knowing what you know now, how will you fight the next set of elections differently?
11. How did holding the referendum on the same day affect
 - i. Turnout?
 - ii. Activist priorities?
 - iii. The result?

b) Scottish & Welsh elections

1. How did the Liberal Democrats being in coalition affect your election campaign?
2. Did you campaign purely on local issues or on national / UK-wide issues?
3. How will you fight elections differently in future?
4. What lessons should be learned elsewhere about campaigning while in coalition?
5. What conclusions should we learn about targeting – both communities and geographically?
6. What went wrong and what went right with your campaign?

c) AV referendum

1. Did you do any telephone canvassing? Did you enjoy it? If not why not? If so, how would you improve the process?
2. How would you have improved the literature?
3. How was your relationship with activists from other political parties?

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4. Did the Yes campaign marshal activists in your area effectively? If not how could it have been improved?
5. Did you find channels of communication with the Yes Campaign hierarchy open or closed?
6. With the benefit of hindsight, how would you have liked to have seen the Yes campaign in your area run?
7. And nationally, how could the Yes campaign have been improved?
8. Could the Liberal Democrats have fed into the Yes campaign better?
9. What did the Yes campaign do well?
10. How would you fight a future referendum campaign on electoral reform differently?