

Election analysis

John Curtice analyses the Liberal Democrat vote in the European elections in May 2019

The Liberal Democrat performance



DESPITE BEING BRITAIN'S most pro-European party, hitherto European elections have rarely been a happy hunting ground for the Liberal Democrats. In the eight elections held between 1979 and 2014, the party never even won as much as a fifth of the vote and twice slumped to well below a tenth. Not even the introduction in 1999 of proportional representation made much difference to the party's prospects. At 12 per cent, its share of the vote on average between then and 2014 was in fact a little less than it had been in those elections held under first-past-the-post (14 per cent).

But in this year's election – organised late in the day in the wake of the UK's failure to leave the European Union as scheduled on 29 March – the party flourished. It won 20 per cent of the vote, enough to secure second place in a nationwide

ballot for the first time since Labour displaced the former Liberal Party as the principal opposition to the Conservatives after the First World War. Above all, perhaps, it represented the party's best performance at any nationwide election since it entered into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010 – and thus it seemingly held out the promise that perhaps the party had finally put the adverse electoral consequences of its participation in government behind it.

But is that judgement correct? After all, it has long been noted that European Parliament elections tend to be regarded by voters as second-order affairs in which, *inter alia*, they are more inclined to vote for smaller parties, including not least those that take a strong stance on the future of the European Union.¹ Perhaps the success of the Liberal Democrats – together with the

Success in the 2019 European election

even more spectacular performance of the Brexit Party, which came first with 31 per cent of the vote – was simply a protest vote delivered by an electorate that was disenchanted with the ability of the Commons to resolve Brexit but which would not repeat such behaviour in a general election. After all, UKIP came first in the 2014 European Parliament election, only to find itself with just one MP to its name in the general election twelve months later. Perhaps, too, the distinctive stances on Brexit taken by the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats – in the case of the Liberal Democrats to hold a second referendum in the hope that it would result in a reversal of the Brexit decision, while the Brexit Party was campaigning to leave without a deal – had more resonance for voters in an election about Europe than they would in a general election.

However, in the UK at least this European election was like no other. It was taking place in the wake of intense four-year debate about both whether the UK should be part of the EU and the terms on which it should leave. Many voters had come to identify strongly as either a ‘Remainer’ or a ‘Leaver’, an identity that they might well want to express at any kind of election.² Moreover, voters had come to seem polarised in their views about Brexit between the two divergent alternatives of either holding a second referendum or else leaving without a deal, with the result that there was little enthusiasm for the kind of compromise deal that had been negotiated by the UK government or indeed an alternative, softer approach to Brexit that was being proposed by the Labour Party.³ While such considerations might

be of particular importance in a European election, they hardly seemed likely to be erased from voters’ minds in future electoral contests, at least for so long as the Brexit debate continues to rage.

This article endeavours to assess which of these two perspectives on the Liberal Democrat performance in the European election appears to be the more appropriate interpretation. It assesses the extent to which the party’s success was a reflection of the distinctive stance that the party took on Brexit, and, in so far as it did, the implications that this had for the character of the party’s support as compared with what it has enjoyed at previous elections. This, in turn, informs an assessment of the extent to which the party’s performance in the European election might have provided a foundation for an electoral recovery that might mean the party reverses the severe electoral damage that it has suffered since entering into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010.

The impact of Brexit

As at previous Euro-elections, the votes were counted at local authority level, as, indeed, was the EU referendum in June 2016. Table 1 takes advantage of these decisions to compare the Liberal Democrats’ performance in those local authority areas in England and Wales which voted most strongly for Remain with what the party achieved in those areas where Leave performed best.

It is immediately apparent that the party performed much better in those places in England and Wales which voted heavily to Remain in the

Left: Vince Cable welcomes Guy Verhofstadt, leader of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe in the European Parliament, to London during the 2019 Euro elections. Catherine Bearder, the sole Liberal Democrat MEP from the 2014 election, is next to Verhofstadt.

% Remain vote in 2016	Mean % vote 2019	Mean change in % vote	
		since 2014	since 2009
55% or more	31.7	+21.0	+14.9
50–55%	25.7	+16.8	+10.0
45–50%	22.3	+14.6	+7.6
Less than 45%	15.2	+10.3	+3.7

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EU than it did in those areas where Leave were strongest. The party's share of the vote in areas where more than 55 per cent voted Remain in 2016 was more than twice what it was in those places where less than 45 per cent backed remaining in the EU. Equally, as compared with the previous election in 2014, the party's vote increased by more than twice as much in the most pro-Remain places as it did in the most pro-Leave ones. Although the party's Euro-election performance had always been a little stronger in what in 2016 proved to be the most pro-Remain places in England and Wales, the party's performance now differed much more substantially between pro- and anti-Brexit parts of the UK.

The extent to which the party's performance rested on the support of those who had voted Remain is even more apparent when we examine the results of polling of individual voters. According to a poll conducted by Lord Ashcroft immediately after the European election, as many as 36 per cent of Remain voters backed the Liberal Democrats, compared with just 4 per cent of those who had voted Leave. These figures can be compared with the results of a similar post-election exercise that Lord Ashcroft undertook immediately after the 2017 general election, which found that on that occasion the party won 14 per cent of the vote among those who had voted Remain, and, again, just 4 per cent among those who supported Leave. This suggests that more or less all of the increase in support for the party registered in the European ballot boxes as compared with the 2017 election came from those who voted Remain. Moreover, when asked why they had voted the way that they did, no less than 58 per cent of those who voted Liberal Democrat gave as their first reason that the party had the best policy on Brexit. Far from representing some general protest vote, the Liberal Democrat performance in the European election was rooted entirely in the party's ability to persuade Remain voters of the merits of its stance on Brexit. As a result, the party acquired an electorate that was much more pro-European in its orientation than previously.

This pattern also meant that the party was now challenging the position that Labour had previously enjoyed as the party with most support among those who had voted Remain. No less than 51 per cent of Remain voters (according to Lord Ashcroft) had voted for Jeremy Corbyn's party in the 2017 election. However, as noted above, in contrast to the Liberal Democrats, Labour's first preference was a soft Brexit rather than another referendum, which was simply regarded as a possible fall-back mechanism, and support for Labour among Remain voters fell to just 19 per cent in the European election. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the Liberal Democrats were more successful in winning over those who had previously voted Labour than it had been those who had voted Conservative. Over one in five (22 per cent) of those who had voted Labour in 2017 switched

to the Liberal Democrats, compared with just one in eight of those who voted Conservative. Even so, once we bear in mind that in 2017 only half as many Remain voters backed the Conservatives as supported Labour, these figures imply that the Liberal Democrats were probably at least as successful in winning over the support of Remain-inclined Conservative supporters (whose party was backing the Brexit deal the government had negotiated) as it was their Labour-voting counterparts.

Scotland

That said, there was one clear limit to the party's ability to win the backing of Remain voters. Some of the highest levels of support for Remain in the EU referendum were registered in Scotland. However, at 13.9 per cent of the vote the party's performance north of the border was no better than that in the most pro-Leave parts of the UK. The SNP, in contrast, recorded their highest ever level of support in a European election, with nearly 38 per cent of the vote. According to a poll of Scottish voters conducted by Panelbase shortly before the European election, much of that nationalist vote came from those who had backed Remain, 49 per cent of who said they intended to vote for the SNP, compared with just 20 per cent of Leave voters. North of the border, Brexit had breathed new life into the debate about Scottish independence, while the SNP were also advocating a second EU referendum. This appears to have constrained the Liberal Democrats' ability to corral support from Remain-inclined voters in Scotland.

Social profile

The party's relative success among Remain voters in England and Wales had consequences for the social profile of the party's support. Those who have had a university education are far more likely than those with few if any educational qualifications to have voted to Remain in the EU.⁴ Thus, as one might anticipate, support for the party was both markedly higher and increased most in local council areas with most graduates. On average, the party secured 29.5 per cent of the vote in those places where more than 32 per cent were identified by the 2011 census as graduates, representing an increase of 20 points on its performance in 2014. In contrast, it won just 11.9 per cent of the vote, an increase of 8.1 points, in places where less than 22 per cent have a degree. Meanwhile, Lord Ashcroft's polling data shows that the party was much more popular – and its support increased more – among voters in 'AB' middle-class occupations typically occupied by graduates (27 per cent, up 14 points on 2017) than it was among those in the most working-class and least well-off 'DE' social group (11 per cent, up 5 points).

The extent to which the party's performance rested on the support of those who had voted Remain is even more apparent when we examine the results of polling of individual voters. According to a poll conducted by Lord Ashcroft immediately after the European election, as many as 36 per cent of Remain voters backed the Liberal Democrats, compared with just 4 per cent of those who had voted Leave.

Meeting of Liberal Democrat MPs and MEPs, June 2019

Top, from left: Alistair Carmichael MP, Dinesh Dhamija MEP, Caroline Voaden MEP, Martin Horwood MEP, Barbara Gibson MEP, Judith Bunting MEP, Jamie Stone MP, Tim Farron MP

Middle: Bill Newton Dunn MEP, Layla Moran MP, Tom Brake MP, Jo Swinson MP, Wera Hobhouse MP, Ed Davey MP, Sheila Ritchie MEP, Norman Lamb MP

Bottom: Shaffaq Mohammed MEP, Vince Cable MP, Jane Brophy MEP, Lucy Netsingha MEP, Christine Jardine MP, Luisa Porritt MEP, Irina von Wiese MEP

(Not present: Catherine Bearder MEP, Phil Bennion MEP, Chris Davies MEP, Anthony Hook MEP)



However, one feature that was surprisingly missing from the profile of the party's support, given its heavily pro-Remain character, was any evidence of it being more popular among younger voters. Such voters had been much more likely to have voted Remain. Yet Lord Ashcroft reports that, at 21 per cent, support for the party among those aged under 35 was no higher than it was among those aged 65 or over (also 21 per cent). In contrast, not only Labour but also the Greens performed much better among the under-35s (26 per cent and 19 per cent respectively) than among those aged 65 or more (8 per cent and 7 per cent). Equally, there is no consistent evidence of the party performing better in local council areas with a relatively young demographic profile. The implication would appear to be that the party was more successful at winning over older voters who voted Remain than it was younger voters, for many of whom Labour continued to be relatively attractive, just as it had been in 2017.⁵

Implications

The fact that the Liberal Democrats' performance in the European elections was so heavily rooted in support from had those who voted Remain, thereby giving the party's support a somewhat different character, raises two important questions. The first is whether such support is likely to be replicated in a general election. Does it potentially represent a foundation for a long-term revival in the party's fortunes and a reversal of the decline that the party has suffered

in the wake of its participation in government between 2010 and 2015? After all, the character of the party's performance in the European election was very different from what the Liberal Democrats achieved in local elections held just three weeks before the European contest. In those local elections the party's performance represented just a three-point improvement on what it had achieved in local elections twelve months previously, while the increase in support it registered over the longer term (that is, as compared with when the seats up for grabs had last been fought on the same day as the 2015 general election) was on average only four points higher in the most pro-Remain areas than it had been in those places that had voted most strongly to Leave – far less of a difference than we have seen was evident in the European election. Perhaps this is an indication that many of the Remain voters who turned to the Liberal Democrats in the Euro-election will not necessarily turn to the party when matters European are less central to the issues at stake.

Yet it seems that the party's performance in the European election was more than a one-day wonder lacking in implications for the party's future prospects. For, in contrast, to what happened around the local elections, the rise in the party's support in the European election has been accompanied by a marked increase in its standing in polls of Westminster vote intentions. In the month leading up to the local elections at the beginning of May, the party's average level of support for Westminster stood at just 9 per cent,

The Liberal Democrat performance in the 2019 European election

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only marginally better than the 7.6 per cent that the party won in the 2017 general election. There was still little sign of the party emerging from the electoral black hole into which it had fallen during the coalition years. But by the time the European election was over, that figure had doubled to 18 per cent, only a little below the share the party secured in the European election itself. Moreover, as in that election, the increase in expressed support for Westminster occurred entirely among those who voted Remain. Meanwhile, at the time of writing some three months after the European election, that 18 per cent figure has held firm, putting the party in its strongest position in the polls since the 2010 election.

But if the party’s performance in the European election has had what has proven to be more than a temporary impact on its prospects for Westminster, what are the potential implications of the fact that its support is so heavily embedded in Remain voters – and thus in places that predominantly voted Remain. In particular, might it have resulted in a change in the geography of the party’s support that might affect where it might be able to win seats under first-past-the-post? For although the level of support for Leave was on average somewhat lower in seats where the Liberal Democrats had performed most strongly in 2010, it was still the case that Leave voters outnumbered Remain voters in twenty-seven of the fifty-seven seats that the party won in 2010, including all of those the party won to the west of Bristol. Might securing such a predominantly pro-Remain vote make it more difficult for the party to recapture some of the seats the party has held previously?

It is certainly clear that simply replicating the party’s performance in the European election is unlikely to be sufficient for it to secure a major advance in the size of its parliamentary representation. According to estimates of the outcome of the European election in each parliamentary constituency constructed by Professor Chris Hanretty, on average the party won just 25 per cent of the vote in those Westminster seats that the party won in 2010, little more than half the 46 per cent that the party won on average in those seats in 2010. In truth, this is not the first time that the party has been unable to replicate in a European election the local strength that it enjoys in some constituencies in a Westminster contest.⁶ Even so, these figures are a reminder that in a general election the party will have to do more than appeal to Remain voters. It will also have to rekindle the local strength that it had in many a constituency that once had a Liberal Democrat MP, be that as a result of being seen as the party of the Celtic fringe, through developing a reputation for representing constituency interests, or securing a tactical squeeze on the third party locally (most often Labour). That task is, though, likely to be harder in those 2010 Liberal Democrat seats where a majority of voters backed Leave. At twenty-three

points, the difference between the party’s share of the vote in the European election and what it achieved in 2010 is rather greater in seats where Leave were ahead in 2016 than the eighteen-point gap observable in constituencies in which Remain were ahead.

Conclusion

After forty years of relative failure and disappointment in European elections, the 2019 contest – a ballot that was never meant to happen – witnessed the Liberal Democrats’ best ever performance in a European election. This achievement is attributable to a stance the party took in opposition to Brexit that enabled it to win the support of many a Remain voter who two years previously had voted Labour or Conservative – though in Scotland it was less successful at winning over voters from the equally pro-Remain SNP. In short, the party was the unintended beneficiary of the UK’s failure to leave the EU as scheduled at the end of March, an outcome that ensured that the debate about Brexit was the key concern for many voters.

Yet if the circumstances in which the European election was held were especially fortuitous for the Liberal Democrats, the party’s success has had wider electoral implications. It appears the support that it garnered from many Remain voters during the European campaign has triggered a revival in its prospects for a Westminster election – for the first time since the party entered into coalition with the Conservatives in 2010. This, perhaps, should not be surprising. After all, while Brexit may be about Britain’s relationship with the EU, it has also become the dominant political issue in British politics and thus one where people’s attitudes could be expected to be reflected in how they might vote in Westminster elections. Meanwhile, in the case of the Liberal Democrats, the Brexit debate may have also afforded the party an opportunity to reconnect with many a university-educated voter who became disenchanted with the party as a result of its about turn in government on tuition fees.

That said, the party will need to meet the challenge of turning votes into seats under Westminster’s first-past-the-post system. Winning over Remain voters alone may well be insufficient for it to meet that challenge. The party also needs to create and recreate areas of local strength in the way that it did up to and including 2010 – often in places that are a long way away from the metropolitan-minded world of many a Remain voter. Brexit has given the party a lifeline, but it remains to be seen how successfully it is seized.

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- 1 K. Reif and H. Schmitt, 'Nine Second-Order European Elections – AS conceptual Framework for the Analysis of European Elections', *European Journal of Political Research*, 8/1 (1980), pp. 3–44.
- 2 J. Curtice and I. Montagu, 'The EU Debate: Has Brexit Polarised Britain?', in J. Curtice, E. Clery, J. Perry, M. Phillips and N. Rahmin (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: the 36th report*, (Nat-Cen Social Research, 2019). Available at <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-36/the-eu-debate.aspx>.
- 3 J. Curtice, 'Searching in Vain? The Hunt for a Brexit Compromise' (2019). Posted at <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/searching-in-vain-the-hunt-for-a-brexit-compromise/>.
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- 5 J. Curtice and I. Simpson, 'The 2017 Election: New Divides in British Politics?', in D. Phillips, J. Curtice, M. Phillips and J. Perry (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: the 35th report* (NatCen Social Research, 2018). Available at <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-35/voting.aspx>.
- 6 J. Curtice, S. Fisher and M. Steed, 'Appendix: An Analysis of the Results', in D. Butler and M. Westlake, *British Politics and European Elections 2004* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 201.

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- 18 Simon, 'Liberalism and Industry' in S. Hodgson (ed.), *Ramsay Muir: An Autobiography and Some Essays* (London, 1943), pp. 181–2.
- 19 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5 addnl (495), diary 7 Feb. 1920.
- 20 E. D. Simon, *The Inheritance of Riches* (London, 1925), p. 12.
- 21 Flintshire Record Office, Glynne-Gladstone MSS 964, Henry Gladstone to Herbert Gladstone 3 Apr. 1919.
- 22 M. Bentley, 'The Liberal Response to Socialism, 1918–29' in K. D. Brown (ed.), *Essays in Anti-Labour History: Responses to the Rise of Labour in Britain* (London, 1974), p. 47. As Simon himself later wrote, 'the party leaders still lived in the old ideas of *laissez faire*; their only industrial policy was free trade'. Hodgson (ed.), *Muir*, p. 181.
- 23 In August 1915, Simon's 18-month-old son, Roger, had contracted peritoneal tuberculosis. Happily, he made a full recovery. The illness was attributed to infected milk. Simon determined to investigate the subject thoroughly, becoming chairman of a Milk Subcommittee of Manchester Council's Sanitary Committee. At a practical level, he purchased a farm, Leadon Court near Ledbury, where he introduced a tuberculin-free herd of cattle.
- 24 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5 addnl (495), diary 2 Oct. 1921.
- 25 *Ibid.*, diary 2 June 1920.
- 26 *Manchester Guardian*, 10 Nov. 1922.
- 27 Full result: Thomas Watts (Con) 11,678; E. D. Simon (Lib) 11,008.
- 28 Full result: E. D. Simon (Lib) 13,944; Thomas Watts (Con) 10,026.
- 29 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5 addnl (495), diary 1922–3.
- 30 Hansard, H.C. Deb. (series 5) vol. 169, col. 437.
- 31 T. Wilson (ed.), *The Political Diaries of C. P. Scott 1911–1928* (London, 1970), p. 458.
- 32 Stocks, *Simon*, p. 74.
- 33 Wilson (ed.), *Scott Diaries*, p. 472.
- 34 Stocks, *Simon*, p. 74.
- 35 Lloyd George to Viscount Inchcape 5 Nov. 1924, cited R. Douglas, *History of the Liberal Party 1895–1970* (London, 1970), p. 184.
- 36 Full result: T. Watts (Con) 13,633; E. D. Simon (Lib) 10,435; E. Whitely (Lab) 2,467; K. Burke (Ind) 236.
- 37 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5 addnl, diary 27 Feb. 1925.
- 38 R. Harrod, *The Life of John Maynard Keynes* (New York, 1951), p. 375.
- 39 Hodgson (ed.), *Ramsay Muir*, p. 183.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 D. Cregier, *Chiefs Without Indians* (Washington, 1982), p. 159.
- 42 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5, diary 1929–35.
- 43 *Ibid.*
- 44 University of Liverpool, Veitch MSS D40/15, Muir to G. Veitch 25 Oct. 1928.
- 45 Full result: E. D. Simon (Lib) 20,948; T. Watts (Con) 19,063; J. Robertson (Lab) 7,853.
- 46 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5, diary 18 June 1929. The party leader had stressed what he intended to extract from the new government, rather than the scope for Liberal–Labour cooperation.
- 47 *Ibid.*, M 11/11/5 (496), Simon to R. Hutchison July 1930 (not sent).
- 48 Hansard, H.C. Deb. (series 5) vol. 230, cols 89–90.
- 49 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5 (496), diary 27 July 1929. Emphasis added.
- 50 *Ibid.*, diary 6 Dec. 1929.
- 51 P. Williamson, *National Crisis and National Government: British Politics, the Economy and Empire, 1926–1932* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 110.
- 52 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5 (496), diary 21 July 1930.
- 53 *Ibid.*, Simon to R. Hutchison July 1930 (not sent).
- 54 Flintshire Record Office, Morris-Jones MSS 10, diary 21 July 1930.
- 55 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5 (496), diary 16 July 1930.
- 56 *Liberal Magazine*, Aug. 1930; E. D. Simon, 'Some questions about free trade', *Political Quarterly*, 1 (1930), pp. 479–95; P. Sloman, *The Liberal Party and the Economy, 1929–1964* (Oxford, 2015), p. 62.
- 57 R. Skidelsky, *Politicians and the Slump: The Labour Government of 1929–1931* (London, 1967), p. 256.
- 58 *The Nation*, cited Stocks, *Simon*, p. 93.
- 59 See, for example, *Manchester Guardian* 4, 13, 15 and 22 Aug. 1930.
- 60 Simon MSS, M 11/11/5 (496), diary 3 July 1931.
- 61 Stocks, *Simon*, p. 91.
- 62 Full result: M. Petherick (Con) 16,388; E. D. Simon (Lib) 14,006; A. L. Rowse (Lab) 10,098.
- 63 It was an entirely appropriate designation. Since 1931 Simon had regarded himself as divorced from party politics.
- 64 D. Rundle, 'Ernest Simon 1879–1960' in D. Brack and E. Randall (eds.), *Dictionary of Liberal Thought* (London, 2007), p. 371.
- 65 Stocks, *Simon*, p. 110.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 122.
- 67 Some will always wonder why Simon delayed his transfer of party allegiance for as long as he did. Many of his contemporaries, not obviously more sympathetic to Labour, made the transition as early as the 1920s. Reflective passages in Simon's diary provide some answers. To these we may speculatively add the influence of his mother, who was already active in Liberal politics before her son joined the Manchester City Council, and possibly a residual sense of loyalty to the party that had done much in the nineteenth century to secure the emancipation of British Jewry – though Simon, like his father before him, was a lifelong agnostic.
- 68 A. Briggs, *The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom*, vol. iv (Oxford, 1979), p. 454.
- 69 Stocks, *Simon*, p. 139.
- 70 *Ibid.*, p. 146.
- 71 *Ibid.*, p. 170.
- 72 M. Hart, 'The Liberals, the War and the Franchise', *English Historical Review*, 97 (1982), p. 821.
- 73 Memorandum by A. J. Sylvester 6 Aug. 1934, cited Cregier, *Chiefs*, p. 251.
- 74 R. Muir, 'The Liberal Summer School and the Problems of Industry', *Contemporary Review* (1927), p. 286, cited Cregier, *Chiefs*, p. 161.
- 75 E. D. Simon, 'The Liberal Summer School', *Contemporary Review* (1926), p. 303, cited Cregier, *Chiefs*, p. 163.