

The UK's political climate remains volatile. But the Liberal Democrats' immediate prospects look grim, whatever happens

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/03/31/liberal-democrat-prospects-council-election/?pfstyle=w p>

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A clutch of recent polls suggest that UK voters remain quite volatile in their views, with some giving Labour an overall lead over both the coalition parties combined, and others suggesting that the Liberal Democrats could revive and the Tories can match Labour's rankings. Despite this volatility, [Patrick Dunleavy](#) warns that on present form Nick Clegg could risk testing his party to destruction.

The death of a political party happens very rarely. Across Western Europe, it is hard to find more than a handful of cases in the post-war period, usually associated with acute crises in the political system, such as the decline and final fragmentation of the Italian Christian Democrats in the party-corruption scandals of the 1980s.

So Nick Clegg's apparent project to test the Liberal Democrats' endurance to its limits raises some interesting prospects for UK political scientists. After the Barnsley by-election catastrophe for his party, [Chris Gilson and I](#) predicted on this blog that it would not be long before Labour could begin to outrun both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats combined. And a recent poll for [YouGov](#) shown in our Table below is the first since the general election to show this happy result for Labour. Replicated in an immediate general election, and making plausible assumptions about some tactical voting between the coalition parties' supporters, and this would produce a Parliament with a Labour majority of 120 and a rump of just 10 Liberal Democrat MPs.

Two recent opinion polls and what they would mean in an immediate general election

	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrats	Other parties
YouGov 30 March poll	35%	45%	9%	11%
LSE projection of MPs	233	383	10	6
ICM Research 24 March poll	37%	36%	16%	11%
LSE projection of MPs	302	300	21	9

Notes: Seat projections assume small amounts of coalition party supporters back the other party, and Labour voters are more averse to supporting the Liberal Democrats than in 2010. Seat projections are for Great Britain only.

But politics is not that simple, and our second poll from [ICM Research](#), taken just a few days earlier, after the budget, shows a strong rebounding of the coalition's support, putting the Tories on a par with Labour and showing the Liberal Democrat vote share fully 7 per cent higher. As our Table shows, with the same plausible assumptions about coalition supporters helping the other party, carried to a general election this survey would produce a major party tie in the Commons, and yield a larger total of 21 Liberal Democrat MPs who could still hold the balance of power. Nick Clegg and David Cameron would no doubt feel justified in arguing that the ICM result demonstrates better what the political conditions are likely to be in the run up to the general election.

So is it a case of paying your money and just picking the poll you favour? The truth is that probably both these two surveys are not terribly helpful. Politics remains in flux, with Labour not yet in a commanding overall lead, and with the Liberal Democrats perhaps still able to call on some reserves of party loyalty that are not yet depleted. But either way, the outcomes are not great for Clegg and his fellow MPs. Perhaps they will be cut down from 57 to 21, or perhaps to just 10 – but neither of these outcomes is likely to guarantee the party much of a long-term future.

Looking at surveys of voting intentions in the local government elections can help put the national polls in a more immediate perspective. A YouGov poll of 29 March has been well analysed by Anthony Wells at [UK Polling Report](#), who suggests that it shows Liberal Democrat support slumping from 24 per cent when these council seats were last contested in 2007, to just 13 per cent now. The Tories by contrast are down only from 38 to 34 per cent, while Labour is up from its 2007 low point of 22 per cent to a robust 38 per cent. This is a scenario for a Liberal Democrat collapse in the upcoming local elections on 5 May, and a Labour sweep in most areas outside the Tory strongholds.

Come May 6th then and Nick Clegg will most probably have to deal with hundreds of disgruntled Liberal Democrat ex-councillors, who will have had a very vivid foretaste of what the death of a major political party looks like. It will be interesting to see what difference this makes to the internal dynamics of the coalition government. When will the first grassroots push come for Clegg, Cable and Alexander to leave the party they may seem currently to be leading to destruction, so that the core activists could reunite and rebuild a centre-left identity once again – perhaps around someone familiar as leader, like Charles Kennedy?