

Why the Cameron-Clegg coalition will be a shock to both Tory and Liberal Democrat voters

May 14 2010

There has been intensive speculation about how Conservative and Liberal Democrat voters will react to the coalition government cemented in their name. [Pippa Norris](#) of Harvard University has the first stunning data, showing that in 2010 Tories predominantly put the far right parties as their second preference, and Liberal Democrat voters predominantly wanted Labour as their second choice.



Coalition politics is a familiar process in most European countries. There are no guarantees of the final results, because polling day can bring many unexpected outcomes, sometimes generating month-long negotiations or requiring grand coalitions of parties drawn from across the political spectrum in order to cobble together a government. Nevertheless during the election campaign, European parties often signal their willingness to collaborate with potential coalition partners, and they also make clear which parties are outside this process and they will not coalesce with. So voters have many clues about the eventual outcome when they come to cast their ballot.

In Britain, however, the parties refused to give very clear signals of coalition intent and the eventual outcome was agreed by the party leaders only during the five days of negotiations following the election, after it became apparent that the Conservatives were the largest party in a hung Parliament. The outcome makes sense in terms of [parliamentary arithmetic](#). But does it make sense ideologically? After all, for more than a decade now the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party have always been closer to each other. In the 2001 and 2005 elections, political scientists in the Comparative Manifesto Project estimated that the Liberal Democrat manifesto was more progressive and slightly to the left of the Labour party platform, especially on issues of taxation and proposed levels of social welfare spending.

Since then, of course, the Conservatives have moved closer to the centre of the British political spectrum under the leadership of David Cameron. Nevertheless in public perceptions they remained further to the right of both the Liberal Democrats and Labour, whose positions have recently been seen by the UK public as very [close together](#). And on certain issues, notably Europe, the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives remain miles apart.

So did the eventual coalition government, and the decision by Nick Clegg to join with the Conservatives rather than Labour, reflect the outcome that the British public wanted? During election night, Paddy Ashdown famously said that the people have spoken, but we still don't know what they have said. One problem was that the main exit polls, commissioned by all the major media organizations, failed to ask any questions beyond immediate voting intent.

So the coalition has generated a mountain of speculations offered by all sides, but with no systematic evidence. Commentators and politicians reading the tea-leaves have often claimed that the British public 'wanted' a hung parliament (and so a coalition of some kind). But, in fact, this cannot be deduced from the outcome. Each citizen cast a particular vote in their specific constituency, but the final outcome was the collective result of millions of independent decisions.

One way we can throw light on this question is to turn to the 2010 British Election Study (BES) which has just been released. The BES data provides some revealing clues about what the electorate actually wanted. And in particular the results tell us something important about the second choice of Liberal Democrat voters. If the decision about entering a coalition with either Labour or the Conservatives were in the hands of Liberal Democrat voters, what would they have wanted? The table below shows the results.

Second choices	Conservative voters	Labour voters	Liberal Democrat voters
Conservative 2nd	13	2	12
Labour 2nd	4	22	48

Liberal Democrat 2nd	21	43	15
UKIP 2nd	41	8	4
BNP 2nd	10	6	1
Greens 2nd	2	9	11
Scottish/ Welsh Nationalist	1	6	4
Others	10	6	6
	100	100	100

Source: British Election Study 2010 Campaign Panel, Undertaken by YouGov. Number of respondents: 1,355

Amongst Conservative voters, a fifth put the Liberal Democrats as their second choice, but fully a half put either UKIP or the BNP as their second choice, while another 10 per cent chose other small parties. Only one in five Conservative voters put the Liberal Democrats as their second choice.

Among people who voted Liberal Democrat, only one in eight opted for the Conservative party as their second choice preference, about the same number as chose the Greens as second choice. Instead, almost half the Liberal Democrat voters chose Labour as their second preference.

Amongst Labour voters more than four in ten chose the Liberal Democrats as their second choice, one in seven went for the far right parties, and about the same number chose the nationalists in Scotland and Wales or the Greens.

In other words, not only were the Labour and the Liberal Democrats parties far closer in their manifesto policies and ideological values, but Liberal Democrat and Labour voters also recognized this close affinity in their willingness to switch votes. The Conservative party were in a very different position, with parties on their right (UKIP and the BNP) getting one in two of their voters' second choices.

The new coalition governing British politics has clearly shaken up many old patterns at the Parliamentary and government levels, and it may do so also amongst voters. One strong possibility is that the decision of Cameron and Clegg will cause Liberal Democrat voters to move gradually closer towards the Conservatives in their electoral sympathies, and perhaps boost Tory voters' second choices for the Liberal Democrats also. An alternative possibility is that the Liberal Democratic party will eventually be punished by their supporters for entering this alliance. And some right-wing Tory voters might turn even more than they have already to far-right parties. These all remain fascinating questions, on which only time will tell.

An earlier version of this blog was posted Pippa's Weblog at http://pippanorris.typepad.com/pippa_norris_weblog/ on 13 May 2010.

Pippa Norris has also made available the first electronic files of the 2010 election results (in Excel and SPSS format) at <http://www.hks.harvard.edu/fs/pnorris/Data/Data.htm>