

David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley, *The Liberal Democrats: From Hope to Despair to Where?* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023, 303 pp. £85 (hardback), £25 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-5261-2781-5.

As the Conservative government's fortunes have waned in the course of the 2019 Parliament, four by-election gains and a series of strong local election results have given the Liberal Democrats renewed political relevance. As David Cutts, Andrew Russell and Joshua Townsley point out in the introduction to this timely new book, however, 'the party is severely under-researched in both British and comparative contexts' (p. 2). In particular, the Liberal Democrats' troubled experience in the 2010-15 coalition and struggle to rebuild after their 2015 election defeat have attracted much political commentary but relatively little serious academic analysis. Like Andrew Russell's previous book *Neither Left Nor Right? The Liberal Democrats and the Electorate* (Manchester University Press, 2005), which was co-authored with Ed Fieldhouse, this study uses quantitative data and anonymous interviews to analyse the party's electoral support and political strategy. Russell and Fieldhouse covered the party's history from its 1988 founding to the early 2000s; Cutts, Russell and Townsley carry the story through to the present, and seek to explain why the coalition hit the Liberal Democrats so hard and why they have found it so difficult to recover.

The outstanding strength of this book lies in its use of data, especially (but not only) from the British Election Study. The authors show that the Liberal Democrats' electoral gains between 1997 and 2010 were heavily reliant on attracting 'soft', tactical, and often left-leaning support, much of which was alienated by the decision to go into government with the Conservatives. Efforts to hold or regain seats in the 2015, 2017, and 2019 campaigns were hampered by weak leadership ratings and the perception that the party was not a credible option in the vast majority of seats. Cutts et al. also use the BES's constituency election agent survey to show that local parties found it harder to recruit campaign workers in 2015 than in 2010. The party was still relatively well-organised in seats with Liberal Democrat MPs, and its local government base also held up better here (at least in Conservative-facing areas), but this did not prevent incumbents from being swamped by the Tory tide in 2015 (chapter 5). Data from the British Constituency Database underlines the party's collapse in both the 'Celtic fringe' and northern England, and its growing reliance on relatively affluent southern seats with a high proportion of Remain voters and university graduates (chapter 8).

Interviews carried out with Liberal Democrat staff and activists also provide new insights into campaign techniques and practices. For instance, it seems clear that a restructuring of the Campaigns Department after the 2010 election destabilized the party's ground operation at a critical time, with damaging effects in key seats such as Bath (pp. 133-6). The party also struggled to match heavy Conservative spending, particularly on nationally-produced direct mail, which circumvented local expenditure restrictions and helped to erode the Liberal Democrats' 'campaign advantage' (pp. 58-63, 136-42). On the other hand, a field experiment carried out during the 2017 local elections suggests that leaflets and canvassing can still have a significant effect on voter turnout, and the authors' assessment of the party's digital operation is also relatively positive (Chapter 9). Cutts et al. conclude that the Liberal Democrats' poor results in 2017 and 2019 largely reflected the weakness of the party's 'air war' and the huge amount of ground which the party had to make up in many target seats. The authors' access to insiders from the 2019 campaign – and the party's private MRP polling from June and September 2019 – allows them to provide a particularly valuable analysis of Jo Swinson's bold but flawed 'Stop Brexit' strategy (pp. 248-53).

The book's central thesis – that the Liberal Democrats 'got the coalition wrong' (p. 6), 'weakened the party's brand' and so caused 'reputational damage that undermined their electoral credibility' (p. 7) – is clear and broadly convincing. As such, *The Liberal Democrats* is likely to become an important reference point for future scholars. Even so, there is more to be said about the party's internal life –

its culture, membership, structures, traditions, and policy debates – and the conjuncture of factors that allowed Nick Clegg to lead the party in a centre-right direction. The absence of archival sources (which are still largely closed) means that the discussion of policy and strategy is sometimes quite vague, and there is little discussion of the party's parliamentary activities or internal power dynamics. Partly for this reason, the argument that 'agency matters' (pp. 6, 258) feels somewhat under-developed: we know more about what the party did than why it did it. Under Ed Davey's leadership, the Liberal Democrats' national message has if anything become more tactical and electoralist than before. It remains to be seen whether the 2024 election result will provide the basis for a durable political renaissance.