

What future for the Liberal Democrats?

Lord Ashcroft, KCMG
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Introduction

Lord Ashcroft, KCMG

Since the 2010 general election the polls have brought only bad news for the Liberal Democrats. Having achieved government office for the first time since Sir Archibald Sinclair was appointed Secretary of State for Air in 1940 – himself the first Liberal to serve in government since 1922 – the party's decision to enter a coalition with the Conservatives apparently cost it, by some measures, at least half its support. Polls I conducted earlier this year found that Chris Huhne is potentially in trouble in marginal Eastleigh, and even Nick Clegg, who won his Sheffield Hallam seat with a huge majority in May, has a real fight on his hands.

Many assume that a large proportion of those who voted Liberal Democrat are so cross with the party for putting the Tories into office that they will now vote Labour at future elections. This is certainly what many in the Labour Party expect, as I found in my previous study, *What Future For Labour?* (September 2010). On this basis, the Liberal Democrats' long-term future as a significant independent party has been called into question.

I suspected that the picture might prove to be rather more complicated than this. Before May 2010, the Liberal Democrats were held back by two public perceptions: first, that they would never get into government and were therefore a wasted vote; second, that although they seemed terribly nice people their policies probably didn't really add up (not least because they never expected to have to implement them). The Lib Dems' presence in government, including five seats around the Cabinet table, offers at least the opportunity to overcome what have been, for perhaps the last twenty general elections, the two biggest problems with the party's brand. And perhaps those who are not pleased to see the Conservatives in government – and annoyed with the Lib Dems for helping to put them there – would feel that the third party at least represented a welcome restraining influence on the Tories.

At the same time, it is at least possible for the Liberal Democrats to capitalise on their two biggest strengths. The first of these is simply that it is not Labour or the Conservatives. The fact of the coalition need not have eroded this advantage completely, since this perception has been based as much on the party's behaviour or personality – the fact that it seems more reasonable and less inclined to indulge in partisan sniping – as on policy. The second major strength, the visibility of its frenetic local activity and the view that its MPs, councillors and candidates are particularly committed to their areas, need not change at all.

The coalition, then, offers the Liberal Democrats opportunities as well as threats. So should the party discount the early polls and look to retain and even increase its parliamentary strength at the next election, rather than just minimise the damage?

To shed light on these questions I commissioned a poll and eight focus groups of people who voted Liberal Democrat in seats the party won in 2010, and a further poll of voters who seriously considered voting for the party this year but decided not to. (Why would I, having devoted considerable energy in recent years to helping the Conservative Party get its strategy in order, want to do such a thing? Because, as I said in *Minority Verdict*, my account of the 2010 election, I am fascinated by the relationship between parties and voters, and intrigued by the new political landscape. The fate of the Liberal Democrats – a party that finds itself in government after decades in opposition – is central to our understanding of contemporary British politics).

The key to the Liberal Democrats' predicament lies in the motivations of their voters. For a good proportion of them, but no more than that, the main factor was the desire to see the party in government. Indeed, more of them voted in anticipation of an outright Lib Dem victory than the hope that they would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament (a salutary reminder that the wider electorate does not always share the certainties of the political class). Another large bloc voted for the party primarily on the basis of local issues or candidates. But our poll found a quarter of Lib Dem "supporters" voting for overtly negative reasons – either to stop their least favourite party from winning in their constituency, or as a generalised protest against both the bigger parties.

Like a brand new car that loses a chunk of its value the moment it is driven off the forecourt, this hitherto untarnished party was bound to lose part of its ragbag coalition as soon as it entered government. This is not just because whichever main party it sided with would upset the voters who preferred the other one. It is because a proportion of people voted Lib Dem precisely because they did not expect the party to sully itself with office; it represented the purity of perpetual opposition. The research found that those who were not

really voting for the Liberal Democrats but against someone else were the most disgruntled about the decision to enter a Conservative-led coalition, and took a more negative view of the party across the board than Lib Dem voters as a whole.

Of course, the fact that the coalition decision cost the Liberal Democrats support does not necessarily mean it was wrong – propping up a defeated Labour Party would have been even more unpopular, and turning down the chance of government after so many years would have meant that millions really did waste their votes, and cemented the already prevalent perception that they were not a serious party. Even many Lib Dem voters who do not much like the current government concede that the party was right to join it.

A sizeable slice of Liberal Democrat voters find themselves pleasantly surprised that the coalition is going so well, at least in the sense that the parties appear to be working together so harmoniously. Yet this harmony troubles them. The benevolent interpretation is that behind the scenes, the Lib Dems are vigorously arguing their corner, winning what concessions they can and presenting a united and professional front when consensus is reached. But the alternative explanation seems more likely to many of their voters: that the Lib Dems do not carry any clout, either because they are being ignored, or because they are just rolling over. Though some still-supportive voters think the Lib Dems are tempering the Tories in general, specific examples elude them.

Accordingly, nearly half of Lib Dem voters said their view of the party had changed for the worse since the general election, and only just over half of them currently expect to vote for the party next time, in May 2015 (though many in the groups stressed that they had by no means made up their minds). On the other side of the equation, nearly a third of those who seriously considered the Lib Dems in 2010 but decided not to now say that their opinion of the party has changed for the better. Clearly this has not yet been enough to replace the voters the party has lost. The research does give some clues, though, about what will – and what will not – help to rebuild the party's support.

For many of those who considered but rejected the Lib Dems, the party's brand remains positive, and has in some respects been enhanced by its presence in the coalition: large majorities agree that the party has shown it is "prepared to take real responsibility, not just oppose from the sidelines", and that it is making "an important contribution to the government of Britain". Though fewer now see the party as representing "a new, fresh approach to politics", the Lib Dems still "behave more reasonably than most politicians" and spend less time attacking. Clearly, the future for the Liberal Democrats is to build on these perceptions and create a reputation as a grown-up party. It will never be able to please everyone, so it should choose to address the voters who want it to be a serious force. This will be a long-term strategy, and it may not be possible for the Lib Dems to return to pre-coalition levels of support in time for the next general election.

Yet some of the more disappointed among former Lib Dem voters say they might look again at the party if it showed, in public, a bit more fighting spirit. In fact this would be unlikely to work: people who hold both that the Lib Dems do not have enough influence on policy and that they should have stayed out of government altogether are probably impossible to please. But the temptation for the Liberal Democrats will be to try and have it both ways: to be both a responsible party of government capable of dealing with harsh realities and uncomfortable truths, and a party of opposition-in-office, always ready to disavow the difficult and the unpopular. The mayhem within the parliamentary party over tuition fees show that many Lib Dem MPs are prey to this temptation. Pandering to the party's oppositionist tendency may win back a few of the voters who don't like what has happened since May – but at the expense of many more who think the Liberal Democrats are finally getting somewhere.

Key points

- A higher proportion of those who voted Liberal Democrat did so thinking the party might win the election outright (21%) than in the hope that they would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament (10%). Local candidates, and the perception that the Lib Dems do a good job locally, was more important than either of these two motivations, and was often the overriding factor. Those who said they were motivated for a desire for change often added in focus groups that they had had enough of Labour but were nervous about, or were sure they did not want, a Conservative government.
- For those who seriously considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to, the single biggest offputting factor was the perception that the party could not win and represented a wasted vote.
- Those who considered voting Liberal Democrat but decided not to were more likely to think the party did the right thing by entering a coalition with the Conservatives (55%) than those who did vote Lib Dem (49%). Nearly a third of Lib Dem voters think the party should have stayed in opposition instead, and a fifth think the Lib Dems should have formed a coalition with Labour. From the groups, it was clear that even many Lib Dem voters who do not particularly like the coalition with the Conservatives think the party had little real choice but to join it.
- Those who voted Liberal Democrat mainly as a protest against the two main parties, or to stop another party from winning, were consistently more negative about the Lib Dems and their performance in government than those who had voted for a positive reason – local issues and candidates, or the hope that they would win outright or hold the balance of power in a hung parliament.
- Asked to describe the Liberal Democrats' core principles, many in the groups had no idea but the characteristic most often named (which was mentioned in all focus group venues) was a commitment to "fairness", with some also mentioning "honesty".
- Liberal Democrat voters and those who considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to are roughly equally likely to think the party is making "an important contribution to the government of Britain" (62% and 64%). More than two thirds of "considerers" think the Lib Dems "have shown they are prepared to take real responsibility, not just oppose from the sidelines". They are equally divided (51%/49%) on whether "although they are in government they don't have any real power, so a vote for the Liberal Democrats is still a wasted vote".
- People who considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to were more likely to think the party had a significant influence over the policies and direction of the government (46%) than those who actually voted Lib Dem (38%). In most policy areas, more people thought the party had made no difference than had made policies better or worse. However, majorities of both groups reject the proposition that the Lib Dems "don't really have any principles, they are just going along with what the Conservatives want in return for some jobs in the government". In the groups, several said they thought the Lib Dems had a general "tempering" influence on the Conservatives or had "softened the blow" of spending cuts, though very few could think of examples.
- Lib Dem voters felt the two coalition partners were seemed to be getting along very well at a senior level (particularly David Cameron and Nick Clegg, who seemed very similar). However, for those who were uncomfortable with many of the coalition's policies, this public unity made it difficult to know whether the Lib Dems were arguing vociferously in private to get the best deal possible, or (as they suspected) had no real influence – either because they were not being listened to or were offering no resistance.
- Some were sympathetic to the senior Lib Dems' argument that economic circumstances made their commitment to scrap university tuition fees impossible to implement, but most were less forgiving – particularly those who had voted for the party largely on the strength of that policy. Though there was a good deal of condemnation of the party for having broken its promise, at least as much criticism

stemmed from its having made such a “naïve” promise in the first place, particularly since it was clear before the election what state the economy was in.

- Two thirds of Liberal Democrat voters said that on balance they supported the coalition’s plans to curb spending and reduce the deficit, though a high proportion were also worried about the pace and depths of the cuts. Support was twice as high among those who thought the party was right to join a coalition with the Conservatives as among those who thought the Lib Dems should have stayed in opposition or formed a coalition with Labour. In the groups several made the point that cuts would have been necessary whoever had won the election. They were particularly supportive of the coalition’s welfare reform proposals, including changes to housing benefit.
- 44% of those who voted Liberal Democrat said their view of the party had changed for the worse since the election, while only 14% said it had changed for the better (though among those who thought the party was right to join a coalition with the Conservatives, 82% said their view had improved or stayed the same). Those who voted Lib Dem as a protest, to stop the party they disliked, or in the hope of getting an outright Lib Dem victory, were the most likely to say their view of the party had changed for the worse.
- Among those who considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to, 30% said their view of the party had changed for the better, compared to 38% who said it had changed for the worse. A quarter said they were more likely to consider voting Lib Dem than they had been before (including 41% of those who thought the Lib Dems were right to join the coalition with the Conservatives), but 39% said they were less likely to do so.
- Most focus group participants also said their view of the Liberal Democrats had deteriorated in some way since they voted for the party in May 2010. This was usually because they thought the Lib Dems were failing to have as much influence in government as they had hoped, or because they had “blended in” and lost their identity – often because they had lost their purity as a party of opposition. Those who were critical of the party often emphasised that they were willing to give it more time to show what it could do. Some noted that they were still happy with their MP even if less so with the party nationally. For those who said their view of the Lib Dems had improved, the fact that the party had accepted the responsibility of a role in government was the most important factor.
- Among those who voted Lib Dem in 2010, 28% would like to see another Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition. The next most popular outcome was a Labour government (27%), followed by a Labour-Liberal Democrat coalition (24%) and a Conservative government (10%). A majority of those who had voted Lib Dem for a positive reason (local factors or to see them in government) wanted to see another coalition involving the Lib Dems after the next election; this was not the case for those who had voted Lib Dem in protest or to stop another party winning.
- 54% of those who voted Lib Dem in 2010 said they were likely to do so again in 2015. 22% expected to vote Labour, 5% Conservative and 8% for another party. The potential Lib Dem vote was highest in seats where the Conservatives came second (61% of 2010 Lib Dem voters), among those who thought the Lib Dems were right to join the coalition with the Conservatives (75%), and those who voted primarily for local reasons (65%). It was lowest among those who thought the Lib Dems should have formed a coalition with Labour or stayed in opposition (35%), voted in protest against the bigger parties (46%), and to stop the party they most dislike from winning (31%).
- In the groups, those who were most favourable towards the current coalition were predictably the most likely to say they would vote Liberal Democrat again. However, several made the point that it was not possible to vote for a coalition, and there was accordingly wide expectation that the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats would come to some kind of arrangement before the election. Several stressed that they would this time want to know Nick Clegg’s intentions in advance in the event of another hung parliament.
- Despite the high level of disappointment with the Liberal Democrats among their voters, Hornsey & Wood Green was the only venue in which most focus group participants already felt strongly that they would probably now vote for another party (usually Labour or, for the protest voters, Green). Elsewhere, any stressed that they would not decide for some time and did not rule out going back to the Lib Dems.

1. Why vote Liberal Democrat in 2010? And why not?

1.1 The poll found that Liberal Democrat voters had been motivated by two main factors: local candidates or issues (accounting for 43% of Lib Dem votes in seats that the party won), and a desire for change. Those who cited change were divided between a positive wish to see the Lib Dems in government (31%), and a more negative vote against the two bigger parties (14%).

1.2 This was reflected in the focus groups. More often than not, voters who wanted change had had enough of Labour but were nervous about (or were certain they did not want) a Conservative government. Some saw the Liberal Democrats primarily as a vehicle for left-wing protest votes against the Labour government.

“The Conservatives had had a go, Labour had had a go, neither were getting us anywhere. I looked at what the Lib Dems had to say and thought it was time for a change.” (Eastleigh)

“I thought the economy was spiralling out of control and I didn’t trust the government because they wanted to keep spending. But I’ve never been Conservative – it would be one extreme to the other. The Lib Dems were in between.” (Eastleigh)

“Labour made a cock-up, and I didn’t have much faith in the Conservatives.” (Torbay)

“I thought they were the liberal conscience of a Labour party that had lost its way. Part of it was a protest against Labour.” (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“I wanted to punish Labour and thought a period in the wilderness, opposition, would do them good.” (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“I was sick of the Conservatives and Labour. It was the soft option, I suppose.” (Redcar)

1.3 However, these “change” voters had rarely gone as far as to calculate the likely influence of the Liberal Democrats in a hung parliament. Many concluded from the coverage of the campaign following the first televised debate that the Liberal Democrats had a good chance of winning the election outright. These people also often said they had been impressed with Nick Clegg, who had not previously come to their attention. The poll found that Lib Dem voters were twice as likely to have thought the party might win the election outright (21%) as to have hoped it might hold the balance of power in a hung parliament (10%).

“I didn’t feel like the vote would be wasted as it was at previous elections. Nick Clegg kept going on about change and honesty, which you don’t usually hear. I thought they had a chance of winning a majority vote.” (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“I thought everyone would follow. I didn’t think it would be a hung parliament. I thought everyone would vote Lib Dem after the debates. It really sounded like he cared”. (Redcar)

“I liked Nick Clegg. I watched the debates and liked everything he stood for.” (Redcar)

“They were starting to become a bit more of a force to be heard – it was an opportunity to do something different.” (Redcar)

1.4 Local factors had also been important in all focus group venues. In Torbay in particular, several said their vote had been primarily or even exclusively determined by the record of their local candidate. (A lady in Torbay captured an important part of her area’s sense of itself, and a key element of the backdrop to any political contest there, when she said in passing: “I’m not local, I’ve only lived here nine years”.) Some of the voters who were most effusive about their local Lib Dem MP were also the most supportive of the coalition.

“All the time they send those Focus letters out. They looked at local issues all the time and people’s daily lives. There was something about a footpath being overgrown. It seems very small, but...”. (Eastleigh)

“He made the difference for me – that’s why I changed from the Conservatives. I was always Conservative but it was Adrian Sanders purely – he has done such a lot for Torbay I thought he deserved support”. (Torbay)

“We lost a lot of jobs at Corus and Ian Swales had lots of ideas. He was more optimistic. He wanted to change things and make Redcar a more touristy place. He talked about building a pier.” (Redcar)

- 1.5 Only a few said in the groups they had voted Liberal Democrat because of their policies. Some cited tuition fees (particularly parents of children at university, or about to go). The environment and electoral reform were also occasionally mentioned. In the Lib Dem voters' poll, only just over a third (34%) said unprompted that policies had been the party's biggest attraction.

"They were very strong on green politics. To me they seemed the most green party. I voted Green in the local election because there was a good chance of them winning in my ward but in the GE I voted Liberal Democrat. Also because Lynne Featherstone seemed a good constituency MP. And I don't agree with first-past-the-post, so that was something else." (Hornsey & Wood Green)

"The tax bands – if you were on a lower income you wouldn't have to pay as much tax." (Redcar)

"I was disillusioned with Gordon Brown. Also I've got a daughter at university, and the Lib Dems had come up with a nice little promise. It was the first time I'd gone off Labour." (Redcar)

- 1.6 Participants' only real reservation about voting Liberal Democrat had been that it might prove a waste. However, several said that although this concern had held them back from supporting the party in the past, this election seemed different.

- 1.7 The groups were asked how they would sum up the Liberal Democrats' core principles. This sometimes occasioned a long pause in the discussion, and several participants cheerfully said they had no idea. Some themes did emerge, however. The most prominent, mentioned in all venues, was a perceived commitment to "fairness", including fairer taxes.

"Moderate left. The freedom of the individual but looking for fairness in society, not just getting into power. Fairness for the individual, not state control". (Eastleigh)

"Fair taxation, more of a level playing field". (Torbay)

"Adrian Sanders says it's to be fair, and help the vulnerable and needy". (Torbay)

"Being fair to everybody, not standing up for one group". (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 1.8 "Honesty" was another attribute mentioned in several different groups. This was sometimes linked to the Liberal Democrats' policy from the early 1990s of putting "a penny on income tax" to help fund public services. For some, a major attraction was the fact that they had not had a chance to become corrupted by office.

"Like Labour but realistic. They don't promise the world". (Eastleigh)

"They hadn't had a chance to become dishonest". (Torbay)

"Being honest on taxes – an extra penny on income tax". (Torbay)

"More fair and open and honest about what they say and what they want to do". (Torbay)

- 1.9 Beyond an attachment to fairness and honesty, most people could not identify the Liberal Democrats with any particular ideological perspective when it came to policy, though a few said they had always seen them as being closer to Labour than to the Conservatives. For some, the absence of doctrine made them "the midway party...the not-going-to-offend-anybody party" (or "woolly jumpers and Greenpeace"). More often, though, it amounted to an advantage – it meant the party was free to be pragmatic and realistic, and appeal beyond traditional tribal boundaries.

"Unhampered by dogma. They don't have that baggage". (Hornsey & Wood Green)

"I didn't feel they tried to categorise themselves in one section so much." (Eastleigh)

2. The Liberal Democrats and the coalition

- 2.1 Though the focus groups were divided on the merits of the current coalition, most say they would not have voted differently had they known in advance had they known that the Liberal Democrats would do a deal with the Conservatives. The exception to this was Hornsey & Wood Green, where most participants were decidedly left-leaning and were cross with the Liberal Democrats, and perhaps even more, with themselves, for helping to bring about a Conservative-led government (“I felt like I’d voted Tory, and I’d rather be shot!”) Elsewhere, people regarded the coalition agreement with rather more equanimity – though some were irritated that they had voted Liberal Democrat specifically to beat the Tories (“I’m really annoyed because I got a letter saying I’ve got to vote for them to stop the Conservatives, but now they’re with them.”)
- 2.2 This was reflected in the poll of Lib Dem voters. 62% said they would still have voted Liberal Democrat had they known in advance about the coalition deal, while 21% said they would have voted Labour instead (24% in seats where Labour came second, 19% in seats where the Conservatives came second). Those who voted Lib Dem primarily for local reasons were the most likely to say they would have done so had they known about the coalition (75%); those who voted to stop the party they most disliked (41%) or as a protest against both the bigger parties (52%) were most likely to say they would have voted differently. Nearly a fifth (19%) of voters who considered the Lib Dems but did not vote for them said they would have been more likely to support the party had they known about the coalition in advance. However, 38% said it would have made them less likely to vote Lib Dem and 44% said it would have made no difference.
- 2.3 Just under half (49%) of Liberal Democrat voters said the party was right to have joined a coalition with the Conservatives (compared to 55% of those who considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to). Those who disagreed were more likely to think the party should have stayed in opposition (30%) than that it should have formed a coalition with Labour (21%). However, the majority of those who had voted Lib Dem in the hope that the party would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament (59%) supported the coalition deal with the Conservatives.
- 2.4 In the focus groups, even Lib Dem voters who did not like the new government did not necessarily think the Liberal Democrats had done the wrong thing by joining it: the country would not have tolerated Labour’s continuation in office after such a result; it gave the Liberal Democrats the chance to show what they could do in government; and it offered at least some safeguard against Tory excesses.
- “I was quite pleased. It gives us a chance to see what the Lib Dems can do given a position of power, albeit shared power, and how their people behave in power.” (Torbay)
- “They should be working together. It says a lot for both parties that they are working together”. (Torbay)
- “I was absolutely mortified. It made me feel like I’d voted Conservative. But logically, the Lib Dems didn’t do as well, they lost seats. It was a way of getting in the front door and showing the nation that they can rein in David Cameron, which I think they have. So maybe next time they will make up their share”. (Eastleigh)
- “The alternative was never on the cards. To form a coalition with Labour would have been a kick in the teeth to most people who voted Conservative”. (Eastleigh)
- “A lot of people voted Lib Dem because they wanted Labour out”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)
- “I thought if they went into coalition with anyone they would make a positive difference. I’m glad they have any kind of input”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)
- “They did the right thing. It’s a way of having some influence. If they’d gone with Labour, people wouldn’t have had that. It would have divided the country completely”. (Redcar)
- “I would rather have them in there sharing power than not at all”. (Redcar)
- 2.5 Those who disagreed were more likely to argue that the Liberal Democrats should have stayed independent, voting on a case-by-case basis, than to say the party should have tried to form a coalition with Labour. Those who felt this usually argued that the Liberal Democrats’ presence in government

had had no discernible impact on policy. (As in the poll, few thought a coalition with Labour would have been the right option even if it had been a real possibility.) People who thought the Lib Dems had made the wrong decision nevertheless often thought they had done it for the right reasons – they had hoped to have a significant positive influence in government, even if that had not turned out to be the case.

“It takes away the whole point of having different parties. They are compromising their beliefs”. (Eastleigh)

“It would have been better if they’d done neither. They have just joined it, they haven’t argued any of their points”. (Eastleigh)

“They couldn’t realistically have done anything different”. (Torbay)

“I wasn’t surprised, but what annoyed me most was that they had intelligent policies and were not dogmatic, so I thought ‘how could you possibly go into coalition with the Tories?’ I couldn’t believe they would just abandon their principles and policies”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 2.6 Overall, the balance of opinion in the groups towards the coalition’s performance so far, and David Cameron’s performance as Prime Minister, was cautiously positive. Several of those who took this view gave some credit to the Liberal Democrats.

“I think, remarkably, it has gone really well. Nick Clegg has reined him in, almost”. (Eastleigh)

“Better than the Conservatives on their own”. (Eastleigh)

“[DC] is taking further the Tony Blair approach – finger on the pulse, addressing the public at large”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“Whoever got the job it was going to be a tough job with the mess they inherited. They do seem to have some sort of plan they are working to, which Labour never did”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“He’s quite nice. He represents us well”. (Redcar)

- 2.7 Asked to rate ten politicians for their performance, both Lib Dem voters and those who had considered the party but not voted for it awarded the highest marks to David Cameron. Among Lib Dem voters, second place went to Vince Cable followed by William Hague and Nick Clegg, with Ian Duncan Smith fifth. For “considerers” the top five places were the same, but with Mr Hague second and Mr Cable third. These people also gave George Osborne a higher ranking than did Lib Dem voters. For both groups, Ed Miliband was ranked tenth out of ten, one place behind Alan Johnson.

- 2.8 The main criticisms of those who had an unfavourable view of the coalition was that it was no different from what they would expect of a Conservative majority government, and that it represented only part of society.

“They’re doing exactly what the Tories want”. (Torbay)

“I don’t think he represents the whole country. Part of the country. If you live past Watford but before Scotland, you don’t exist. We are the poor relation”. (Redcar)

“For the elite and rich people. How many millionaires are there in the Cabinet? They don’t know what it is to struggle in life”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 2.9 Most participants in the groups thought the two parties in government seemed to be getting along very well, with no obvious public splits at a senior level, though several felt the Liberal Democrat grassroots, and possibly a number of backbench MPs, were unhappy. This particularly applied to David Cameron and Nick Clegg, who seemed (to the more hostile participants) to be practically interchangeable.

“I suspect David Cameron and Nick Clegg are getting on quite well. It’s hard to distinguish between them. But I suspect there is quite a lot of dissent on the backbenches”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“I saw the similarity between Clegg and Cameron very quickly. They are obviously very happy bedfellows”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“Cameron and Clegg are a mirror image”. (Redcar)

“Clegg is always next to Cameron. It’s like, ‘I’ve got some good ideas but I don’t think I’ll tell you because I’ll get told off’”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 2.10 Very few thought this was because the two parties agreed on large areas of policy. There were two more plausible explanations: one was that any disagreements are taking place behind closed doors, with the parties then presenting a united front on whatever compromise is reached; the other was that the Liberal Democrats were simply rolling over and allowing the Conservatives to have their own way, even if they privately disagreed with proposed coalition policies. Some noted that the relative size of the parties meant the Tories had the lion's share of power, and that the Liberal Democrats inevitably had to accept some things they did not like in order to have any say at all.

"There are no reports of falling out or toys out of pram". (Torbay)

"They're getting on quite well. The Lib Dem ministers are quite happy with things". (Torbay)

"I think they are doing fine. They want to stay in the Cabinet and they want to be heard. They've got to tow the line to a certain extent or he will change the Cabinet". (Eastleigh)

"If they're just toeing the line, they're doing it very well because there don't seem to be many fractures". (Torbay)

"We don't see it all. Even if they completely disagree, it will sway to the Conservatives anyway". (Eastleigh)

"The Lib Dems were maybe more willing to give up their ideology. Their policies were so different. How could you change your mind so completely?" (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 2.11 Some believed that the Liberal Democrats were having a "tempering" effect on the Conservatives within the coalition, and that their presence in government, and the fact that the Tories rely on them for a majority, must give them some say. Very few, however, were able to think of anything specific or significant that the government was doing, or not doing, because of the Liberal Democrats.

"They must be included in the decision-making process because I don't believe they would just sit there and be sleeping partners". (Eastleigh)

"I think they have tempered [the Conservatives] a fair amount. It is a strong coalition and there is no sign of that changing. It's not something the Conservatives wanted". (Eastleigh)

"The concessions going to the Lib Dems are very small and minor". (Torbay)

- 2.12 Only a minority of Lib Dem voters thought the Lib Dems had "a great deal of influence" (5%) or "quite a substantial influence" (33%) over the policies and direction of the coalition government; most thought the party had "not very much influence" (47%) or "no real influence at all" (15%). Those who considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to were in fact more likely to think the Lib Dems had significant influence than those who voted for the party. Those who had voted Lib Dem in protest, or to stop another party, or in the hope of getting a majority Lib Dem government were less likely to think the party now had significant influence than those who voted on local issues, or hoped the party would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament. Asked about specific issues, both sets of voters were more inclined to think that the Lib Dems had made no difference at all to the coalition's policy than to think they had made it either better or worse.

- 2.13 In the groups, too, the balance of opinion was that the Lib Dems seemed to lack significant influence over the government's policies and direction. However, several made the point that the coalition's public unity made it impossible to know for sure how much authority the Liberal Democrats really had. Many wanted the Liberal Democrats to exert real influence, and suspected they did not – but conceded it was possible that the party was being effective in private, quietly preventing coalition policies from being, as they would see it, even worse. If this were indeed the case, these sceptical voters would want to see some evidence before giving the Liberal Democrats any credit.

"They don't seem to have made a difference. It seems like power is with the Conservatives. Everything you hear is Conservative". (Hornsey & Wood Green)

"You never see. They try to flannel it over. You only see the things they agree over". (Redcar)

"We don't know what goes on behind the scenes. They have made such major changes, they've got to have agreed or they wouldn't be in government". (Redcar)

"It's a massive front. I think a lot is going on that we will never know". (Redcar)

“There is a stand-off. As much as the Lib Dems are probably doing things behind the scenes to dampen down Conservative policies, to us as the public it looks like they’re not really doing anything”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“They could be fighting a good cause for us. If that’s the case, make it known”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“They should be making more publicity about what they have actually done. I would rather they argued and I knew they were fighting their point”. (Eastleigh)

“It doesn’t seem as though they are having rows in private. If they are happening, they are losing badly”. (Torbay)

- 2.14 In his speech at the Liberal Democrat conference in September 2010, Nick Clegg claimed that the Liberal Democrats had been responsible for a number of policies that would not otherwise be implemented. These included an increase in Capital Gains Tax, a Freedom Bill to roll back intrusive legislation, a higher personal tax allowance and a referendum on the voting system. With the occasional exception of the higher tax allowance, most participants did not think this amounted to a very substantial list of achievements, particularly when compared to the pledges they had dropped. For a small minority, electoral reform had been part of the reason for voting Lib Dem in the first place, but for most it seemed a marginal concern given the more pressing problems facing the country.

“They are significant but not compared to things like tuition fees, tens of thousands of people losing their jobs, welfare reform...” (Torbay)

“They said they would fight for VAT not to go up”. (Torbay)

“It feels like fiddling round the edges”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“Is that all? It’s not much compared to their original manifesto and the things they would hammer home if they got a majority”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 2.15 University tuition fees were often cited by those who argued the Liberal Democrats had little or no influence. Some were sympathetic to the argument that although the party’s policy had been made in good faith, economic conditions now made it impossible to deliver, and a few suggested that the Lib Dems may have kept the rise in fees to a lower level than might otherwise have been the case. Most, though, took a much less forgiving view. Participants were as likely to be contemptuous of the party for being so naïve as to make an undeliverable pledge in the first place as they were to be angry about the broken promise.

“They didn’t have access to everything until they got into power. They didn’t realise what a mess it was”. (Redcar)

“I would like to know what the negotiation was. If the Conservatives were going to say £12k but they got it down to £9k, that’s not so bad.” (Torbay)

“It’s a bit of a disaster for the Lib Dems in general. It makes them look as though they were really naïve and unrealistic beforehand”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“It makes you think, how thought through were the other policies? Was it just pie in the sky and wait until we get in? How can you trust them?” (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“What’s changed? They knew the mess we were in. That is how they sold themselves”. (Redcar)

“There is no excusing a 180 degree turn. They knew the country was in the sh*t before the election. For any policy they said they would introduce they can use this line of least resistance. You either have a principle or you don’t. ‘This is a pledge unless we can think of an excuse to get out of it afterwards’”. (Eastleigh)

“It makes me feel like a mug to have thought they were opposed to it”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 2.16 In the poll, Lib Dem voters were more likely to say the party had made the government’s policy on tuition fees worse (49%) than better (11%), or even that it had made no difference (41%).

- 2.17 Around two thirds of Lib Dem voters and considerers said that, on balance, they supported the coalition government’s plans to cut spending and reduce the budget deficit. However, there was a good deal of nuance within this picture. 87% of Lib Dem voters who thought the party was right to enter a coalition with the Conservatives supported the cuts, compared to 45% of those who thought it should have formed a coalition with Labour or stayed in opposition.

- 2.18 In the groups the balance of opinion was that cuts were necessary to bring down the deficit, and would probably have happened whoever had won the election. Several participants said they particularly supported moves to bring down welfare bills. Only a few left-leaning voters felt strongly that the cuts were unnecessary; these people usually argued that the Conservatives were using the deficit as cover for ideological cuts to public services.

“If someone came to you with a debt problem, you wouldn’t tell them to spend more”. (Eastleigh)

“It would have been necessary with whichever government, because there’s naff all money left”. (Torbay)

“The problem is that the country is paying for people claiming but not working. He is stopping that and I’m please he is”. (Redcar)

“If we’d carried on like that for another five years we would be bankrupt”. (Redcar)

“Some of it seems to be ideologically driven. It’s a Tory-driven agenda to shrink the government. They could increase government revenue by increasing taxes. They say there is no alternative, but there is always an alternative”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“George Osborne is exaggerating the scale of the cuts and comparing us to Greece, which is laughable. It’s ideological cover. It’s because they’re Tories and they like slashing and burning services”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 2.19 Several focus group participants felt that the Liberal Democrats had to some extent “softened the blow” of the public spending cuts. Though nobody could cite a specific example, several felt that without the Lib Dems the cuts would have had a greater impact on poorer people. Even so, even some who thought cuts were necessary wondered if they were going too far or too fast, or whether they were being conducted in the most sensible way.

“Personally I think they’re necessary. But the timescale is debatable and my concern is what contingency is in place with job cuts and if we go back into recession”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“I work for the council. They have cut five girls on under £20,000 but are keeping people on 50, 60, 80. They say it’s too expensive to let them go”. (Redcar)

“Is seems very bang bang bang bang bang, one after the other”. (Redcar)

“People are scared, it is extreme. But it would be more extreme if it was just a Conservative government”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 2.20 The polls found voters similarly torn between the need to deal with the deficit and concern at the effect of spending cuts. 71% of Lib Dem voters and 70% of considerers agreed that the coalition had inherited a massive deficit and “need to take these steps now to prevent things from getting even worse”. This included a majority among Lib Dem voters who thought the party should have formed a coalition with Labour or stayed in opposition. 82% of Lib Dem voters and 84% of considerers agreed that “we owe it to the next generation to deal with Britain’s debt crisis now”, but at the same time 81% of Lib Dem voters and 70% of considerers agreed that although the coalition was right to start making cuts “they should do it more gradually to reduce the risk of harming the economy”. 28% of Lib Dem voters and 29% of considerers thought the Lib Dems had had a positive influence on government policy when it came to spending cuts; around half thought they had made no difference.

- 2.21 Participants did not have a consistent view as to whether having an MP whose party was in government represented an advantage for the constituency (since the Member would have more influence and better contacts with Ministers) or a disadvantage (since the Member would be constrained from speaking out against things like cuts in the local area). This was the case even where the MP was a Minister: though people in Eastleigh “would like to think being in the Cabinet made [Chris Huhne] more effective”, he would be bound to support government decisions so “it probably does change how much he can fight”. In Hornsey & Wood Green, a few still felt Lynne Featherstone was visible but several felt she had been “muzzled” or “dropped off the radar”: “She used to be on it if it was just a traffic light out of phase. Now she doesn’t even delegate to a minion. She used to mend holes in the road under her banner”. In all venues, though, groups said they would expect the MP to stand up for the constituency against the government when necessary, even if this put them in a difficult position. Some predicted that local MPs would go out of their way to pick fights with the government on carefully selected issues to burnish their reputation as local champions.

3. The 2015 election

- 3.1 44% of Liberal Democrat voters said their view of the party had changed for the worse since the general election. 41% said it had not changed one way or the other, and only 14% said their view had changed for the better. However, more than four fifths of Lib Dem voters who thought the party was right to join a coalition with the Conservatives said their view of the party had improved (25%) or stayed the same (57%). Two thirds of those who thought the party should have stayed in opposition, and nearly three quarters who thought the Lib Dems should have formed a coalition with Labour, said their view had changed for the worse.
- 3.2 Despite this, 62% of Lib Dem voters thought the party was “making an important positive contribution to the government of Britain” (including 87% of those who thought the party was right to join a coalition with the Conservatives) and 63% thought that “overall, the government is different and better than would be the case without the Liberal Democrats”. A small majority of those who thought the party should have formed a coalition with Labour also thought this. Majorities (albeit narrow) rejected the charges that “although they are in government they don’t have any real power, so a vote for the Liberal Democrats is still a wasted vote” and that the party “have shown they don’t really have any principles, they are just going along with what the Conservatives want in return for some jobs in the government”. Those who voted Lib Dem primarily for local reasons, or with the hope that they would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament, were least likely to say they now saw the party as a wasted vote.
- 3.3 People who had considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to were more than twice as likely as Lib Dem voters to say their view of the party had changed for the better since the election (30%). This rose to around half among those who considered the Lib Dems but ended up voting Conservative, and those who thought the party was right to join a coalition with the Conservatives. 38% of Lib Dem considerers said their view of the party had changed for the worse, rising to nearly three quarters among those who thought the party should have formed a coalition with Labour or stayed in opposition.
- 3.4 A separate question showed generally positive attitudes to the Lib Dems among voters who had considered but rejected the party in 2010. Two thirds agreed that by entering a coalition with the Conservatives the Lib Dems “have shown they are prepared to take real responsibility, not just oppose from the sidelines”, that “Nick Clegg is doing a good job as Liberal Democrat leader” and that the Lib Dems “are showing that they can make an important contribution to the government of Britain”. Clear majorities also agreed that the Lib Dems “behave more reasonably than most politicians” and “have clear, decent principles that they try to put into practice”. Those who ended up voting Conservative and those who thought the Lib Dems were right to join the coalition were the most likely to give positive responses. Overall a small majority of considerers disagreed that the Lib Dems “have shown they don’t really have any principles” (by 45% to 55%), but again there were wide variations: only 21% of those who voted Conservative thought this, compared to 75% of those who voted Labour.
- 3.5 As in the polls, most focus group participants said their opinion of the Liberal Democrats had if anything deteriorated since they voted for the party at the general election. There were two broad reasons: that the Lib Dems did not have as much influence in government that their voters had hoped, either because they were trying and failing to have an impact or because they were simply going along with Tory plans; or because they had “blended in” and lost their distinctive identity. Part of this latter view was regret that the Lib Dems had in some way lost their purity as a party of opposition – their eagerness to be part of the government was as much part of the criticism as what they had done once in office. All three parties were now tarnished with a record in government.

“I thought they would be more vocal in the coalition”. (Torbay)

“It’s almost like Lib Dem MPs are taking the Tory whip”. (Torbay)

“They’re the back end of a pantomime horse”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“I think they joined the coalition with the right intentions but once they got in their didn’t have a voice”. (Eastleigh)

“It changed my view of the Lib Dems in terms of how keen they were to go in for some kind of power. I probably wouldn’t vote for them again knowing what I know now. It was a marriage of convenience and convenient for the Tories; the Lib Dems will get dragged under. They say there are things they have done but they are just there for the ride”. (Eastleigh)

“Now all three are the same”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 3.6 For those in the groups who said their view of the Lib Dems had improved since the election, accepting the responsibility of a role in government was the most important factor. Rather than being a party of perpetual opposition they were engaging with reality and having the chance to show what they could do.

“One of the reasons I might not have voted for them before was that they were so small, but now I don’t think that. They have stepped up”. (Eastleigh)

“They consider reality now... it has made them wake up and see what a big job government is”. (Torbay)

- 3.7 In the groups, participants were asked to write down why they had decided to vote Liberal Democrat at the election, and any reservations they had about doing so, and later to write what they thought about the party now (see Appendix 1). The second set of comments were more often critical than positive, but several emphasised that their view was mixed and that they were willing to give the party more time to show what it could do. Some noted that they were still happy with their MP even if less so with the party nationally, and some even emphasised that they would probably vote Lib Dem again despite being disappointed on particular issues like tuition fees.

- 3.8 Accordingly, there was no clear correlation in the groups between a lower opinion of the Lib Dems and a firm intention to vote for another party next time. Hornsey & Wood Green was the only venue in which most participants already felt strongly that they would not vote Lib Dem again. Elsewhere, in groups where the balance of opinion towards the party had deteriorated most said they were undecided (but by no means ruled out the Lib Dems), and in some the majority said they would continue to vote Lib Dem even though most had recorded very critical comments.

- 3.9 Those whose view of the current coalition was favourable were, predictably, the most likely to say they would probably vote Lib Dem again, but several raised the point that it was not possible to vote for a coalition. That being the case, there was a wide expectation that the Conservatives and Lib Dems would come to some kind of agreement about how to conduct the next election campaign. Indeed, several participants on both sides of the political divide made the point that they would need some clarity about the Lib Dems’ intentions, or at least preference, in the event of another hung parliament. Most thought it implausible that Nick Clegg could join a Labour-led government having worked so closely with David Cameron, but some left-leaning voters would not vote for the party if another Conservative-Lib Dem coalition was in prospect (just as some others would not vote Lib Dem if they knew it would result in a Labour-led government).

“You need to know the outcome of where your vote is going to go. Last time it was politicians deciding the outcome of your vote”. (Eastleigh)

- 3.10 Even some who had a very negative view of the coalition and were disappointed with the Lib Dems over their part in it held out the prospect of voting for them again. The understandable desire to present a united front meant the party had so far been unable to show in detail how it had been a positive influence – but there was still time to be clear about how it defended its values and, when it had changed its stance, why that had been necessary.

“Squabbling has been nipped in the bud. I think they are very careful what they speak to the media about. It goes through certain channels, because they want to make the coalition a success”. (Torbay)

“They need to make it more clear what they don’t agree with, and in what way they have had to compromise”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

“There is still time for them to prove themselves. Six months is not a lot of time.” (Redcar)

“They need to explain... like tuition fees – they should say, this is the reason we have changed our values”. (Redcar)

“There would have to be some visible evidence of disagreement with Tory policy. It would show some fighting spirit... If they are making a significant difference they should shout about it, as that would get them a certain amount of respect”. (Hornsey & Wood Green)

- 3.11 None of the focus group participants had a very positive view of the Labour Party, and most said Ed Miliband had made very little impression so far. This was the case in the traditionally Labour seats – Hornsey & Wood Green and Redcar – as much as in Torbay and Eastleigh. Nevertheless, in the poll 69% of Lib Dem voters said they could see themselves voting Labour at some point in the future, compared to 43% who could see themselves voting Conservative. Three quarters said they had “always thought of Labour, not the Conservatives, as being closer in viewpoint to the Liberal Democrats”, and that Labour’s values and motives are good, “they just became tired and out of touch by being in government too long”. However, only 51% thought that “with a new generation of politicians now running the party, Labour have really started to get their act together”, and 90% agreed that the party “will need to change a lot before people will be ready to vote for them again”.
- 3.12 A quarter of those who had considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to said that the party’s decision to join a coalition with the Conservatives and its performance in government made them more likely to consider voting Lib Dem than they were before (including 39% of those who ended up voting Conservative, and 41% of those who thought the Lib Dems were right to join the coalition). However, 39% said they were less likely, including 73% of those who voted Labour and 50% of those who voted for another party.
- 3.13 Asked what would be their preferred outcome at the next election, 28% of those who voted Lib Dem in 2010 said they would like to see another Conservative-Lib Dem coalition. 24% wanted a Lib Dem coalition with Labour. 27% said they would rather have a Labour government (including 52% of those who thought the Lib Dems should have formed a coalition with Labour in 2010), and 10% a Conservative government. Only 52% of Liberal Democrat voters, then, would like to see the party as part of another coalition government after the next election.
- 3.14 Overall, 54% of those who voted Lib Dem in 2010 said they were most likely to end up doing so again in 2015. 22% said they would probably vote Labour, 5% Conservative and 8% for another party. Those who voted Lib Dem because of local issues or candidates were the most likely to say they would do so again (65%). Lib Dem voters in seats where the Conservatives were second were more likely to say they would vote Lib Dem again (61%) than those in seats where Labour were second (47%). Among those who would vote Lib Dem again, 43% said another Conservative-Lib Dem coalition would be their preferred outcome; 28% would prefer a coalition with Labour.

Appendix 1: Focus group written exercises

Focus group participants were asked to write down in the 'Before...' column how they felt about the Liberal Democrats before the election, why they decided to vote for the party, and any reservations they may have had about doing so. In the 'After...' column they recorded their view of the party now, whether it had changed for the better, the worse, or not at all.

EASTLEIGH WOMEN

BEFORE...	AFTER...
Low key – didn't really expect them to get anywhere. Knew I didn't want to vote Labour but felt the Conservatives may hit the middle class too hard, so the Lib Dems may be less hard on us.	Surprised at the high profile they've achieved. They are influencing policy but I'm not sure to what extent. They hold an 'ace' card if they really feel the coalition is making a mistake. Voters will no longer regard them as a wasted vote.
Restore the economy sensibly. Pro-school education policy. Looking after families/working class. Pro-environmental policies.	I believe that the Lib Dems are making a contribution and having an impact on how this country is run. Accepting they have stood down on some policies (university tuition fees) they've previously felt strongly about is part and parcel of "the coalition". But they're still making an impact in others like the environment and perhaps curtailing the extent/nature of some cuts the Conservatives would have pushed for.
Never voted Lib Dem before but felt strongly it was time for someone new to have a go at running the country. Chris Huhne (local MP) has always represented us well, e.g. fighting for local jobs. I liked the Lib Dem manifesto. Nick Clegg came across very well in the TV debates.	Nick Clegg is a good Deputy Prime Minister. I was initially mortified when the Lib Dems decided to form a coalition with the Conservatives. However, tough times call for tough measures. The country is in a mess and I do feel they have some influence in trying to sort out the problems.
A change from the other parties. Good values, aims/goals. I have voted Labour previously but felt that in the changing economic climate there needed to be a change, and the Lib Dems could provide that.	They have merged with the Conservatives well. They have a 'calming' influence on policies/cuts etc. however, I feel they may have lost their 'voice' slightly. Cuts have to happen and I feel the Lib Dems are the ones that need to make sure it's from the right places.
They work locally in the community on issues that affect our daily lives. They are very much more people-focused and approachable than the other two parties. Fresh blood.	They have lost their identity. I see them as having compromised too much on their own policies. I see them as weaker now because of the compromise.
I thought they were always classed as the third party so were overlooked somewhat. After reading their proposals and meeting my local Lib Dem MP I was swayed towards their party more and more.	They seem to be holding their own although I think they have had to compromise on some of their earlier beliefs and declarations. Overall I think they are doing a fair job and only time will tell whether the country benefits from the coalition or not.
To be honest the main reason I voted Lib Dem was that Labour had been in power too long and thought a fresh and younger David Cameron and Nick Clegg would bring new ideas and sort the country out. I also think that Labour has got the country in such a mess and the Lib Dems had some very good points to sort the country out. My vote was swayed because I believe Nick Clegg was very passionate in his views.	I believe that the Lib Dems have got into power by discarding a lot of their views and I still believe we should only have one party running the country (Conservatives) even if it's not the party I voted for.
To be honest I voted for them because I liked Nick Clegg and believed he would make a difference and wanted to give them a try.	My views haven't really changed because I believe it's hard to know how much influence the Lib Dems have had on certain issues. I do believe that prior to voting they were always the smallest party, but now I think they are as equally well respected as the other two parties.

What future for the Liberal Democrats?

EASTLEIGH MEN

BEFORE...	AFTER...
I thought the Libs could make a difference at last. I'd lost total confidence in the Conservatives, Labour were just a joke – I never agreed with them. I was hoping that sharing power could arrive.	I think they contribute, and don't allow the Conservatives all their own way. Not looking for immediate results. Time will tell. Not looking to get a better deal just personally, but the country as a whole. It could not be worse than what we had. I feel things will absolutely get better.
They were promising a better standard of living. Getting the country back on its feet. Help the NHS. Securing a better future.	They seem to be controlled by the Conservatives. I still have respect for the local MP. They need to stand up for themselves and have a bigger voice. Yes I would vote for them again.
It was purely tactical. I did not want Labour to carry on and have never wanted the Conservatives in power. I had no idea as to the policies of the Liberals.	I just think that they're smothered by the Conservatives and have to battle to make any impact. I don't think the policies will change, but they're just not being heard.
I liked the idea of more police. I thought the country needed a change. Tuition fees not increased, possibly less. Away with nuclear.	Unfortunately I do not feel that we know what effect they are having, good or bad, as it's clear the Conservatives are the dominant party. Also I feel time will tell how many of the Lib Dem policies will come into effect after the initial bombshell of the deficit subsidies.
The main thing is local government – park for children. They seemed the most genuine. Debt.	Local still good. Weak in power. They do not shout about what they have done.
I was ready for a change of party in power but the Conservatives were not convincing enough. Positive team for the Lib Dems (Vince Cable especially) but also Chris Huhne as local Eastleigh MP. Wasn't sure about voting Lib Dem as I assumed the Conservatives would walk in and I didn't want a wasted vote, but I stuck to my guns.	My view is unchanged. I think they are doing a good job in difficult conditions (both in coalition and under the current economic climate). The cuts are big but necessary, the public sector had become and still is out of control. The Conservatives may have made even deeper cuts. I am concerned that the Lib Dems and Conservatives will take the blame for the effect of the cuts but we won't see the benefits for 5 years +, by which time Labour may be back in.
Stability in the economy before tax rises. No rises in student fees. No to nuclear spend (power stations). All very positive views and outcomes. I thought they were a middle outlook.	Rubbish – weak. Seems very Tory in views. Blames the past too much. Not standing by their actions or options and seem like a nodding dog in many ways.

TORBAY WOMEN

BEFORE...	AFTER...
Change.	Too early to tell as I am a first time voter for them.
I have always voted Lib Dem. I think Adrian Sanders is a good MP.	I don't think my view of the Lib Dems has changed.
I voted for the man, Adrian Sanders, not a political party. I was worried that voting for the Lib Dems might allow the Labour party to win.	I'm pleased to see a positive input into the coalition, stronger than I expected.
I have always supported the Liberal party for ages. Adrian Sanders has done a lot in Torbay. I'm not happy with the Conservative Party or Labour.	Liberals and Conservatives have to work together and agree on things in general.
Because they sent me a letter implying it would stop the Conservatives getting in. Adrian Sanders in the past had helped me personally. I have a friend who works on the street with children, and have seen positive action.	Mixed. Realistic. Acceptance.
I voted for Adrian Sanders who I think is a brilliant local politician and likely to win.	Liberal Democrats have become stronger since the election as they are part of the government and not in opposition.
I was going to vote UKIP but the guy fell out of a plane – therefore voted for Adrian Sanders.	Still feel that they have very little power.
Let someone else try. Can't be any worse. Promise of fair politics, taxation, more honesty. No reservations. If everyone who thought Lib Dem voted it then they would get into power.	Am glad that they are at least a party in power. Their potential to win an election hopefully will increase now. I am glad they can temper Tory policies.

TORBAY MEN

BEFORE...	AFTER...
Honest, hard-working, keen to do the best for the constituency. Wanted to keep the MP Adrian Sanders. Did not think the Lib Dems had a cat in hell's chance of getting in.	Tied by the Conservatives. Very quiet and low profile. Difficult to see if they still stick to their principles and are honest and hardworking. Seem to be very Conservative. Disappointed with performance.
Local man – had a few dealings with him. Education issues. A party for change.	I feel they will not get back to strong opposition. They are party to massive cuts.
Were clear in what they were going to do if they got in. Health service, pensions, environment.	Party too quiet. Not outspoken on policies. Lost its drive with the public.
I voted Lib Dem for the last 10 years. They interested me because of their policy on council tax. Also our MP is very hard-working for Torbay. I did vote Conservative before that.	I would like to see the Lib Dems move away from Tory policies and push more of their own manifesto on the government.
Fair policies. Labour messed up. Not much faith in Conservatives. Local MP always seems to have local issues at heart and help people.	Now followers. Don't speak up as much. Don't seem to be a large part of the coalition.
Not afraid to voice opinions. Protecting vulnerable people. Protecting education. Standing up for low income earners.	Sold out to the Tory party. Did not keep policy promises for the sake of ministerial position and office. They need to be more vocal in coalition.
They had their own ideas. They stand against the Tories. When they say something they keep their promises.	Am happy with what they've done. They will have experience (change their old views). Reality.

HORNSEY & WOOD GREEN WOMEN

BEFORE...	AFTER...
Fresh new ideas. Attractive to those who were undecided. Tuition fees.	Disappointed on key areas such as tuition fees. Cuts – too much, too fast. Policies are very hard to distinguish from Tory policies.
More opportunity for young people when they leave school. Help with businesses. Lower retirement age. Sorting out tax.	Dishonest. Seem to be coerced into doing some things by the Conservatives. Not able to be up-front with the public.
Young (leader). Moderate/liberal. Open to new/different ideas. But inexperienced.	Stereotypically ineffective/irrelevant. Toothless. Redundant. Unable or unwilling to stand up for principles.
Change (as 1997). Good leader (performance in TV debates). Momentum. Schools policy. Electoral reform. Lynne Featherstone. Clear on policy manifesto. BUT – wasted vote? Finances. Potential hung parliament.	Influenced referendum on electoral reform. Increased personal allowance for lowest earners. BUT – politically naïve. Easily persuaded. Moved from manifesto/stated policies.
Always voted Lib Dem. Tuition fees – generally the best party for students. Electoral reform. Not happy with Labour and didn't want the cuts of the Conservatives. Lynne Featherstone good.	Would still vote Lib Dem. But very angry about tuition fees and I worry about the future of the party and who will vote for them in future.
Green. Dynamic. Potentially mould-breaking. Honest. Concerned that they might cosy up to the Conservatives. Different. Integrity.	Traitorous. Lacking integrity. Naïve (because they will be steamrolled by the Conservatives). Power-grabbing at all costs. Ineffectual. Severely compromised. Divided.
New party out of the two leading ones. Sensible. Balanced.	Not very able to put their say on decisions. Betraying some of the main principles they pledged.

HORNSEY & WOOD GREEN MEN

BEFORE...	AFTER...
Possibility of change. Electoral reform. Anti-war. Free fees. Monetary reform. Health – raise tax for NHS. Left wing.	Splitters. Massive disappointment. Damaged.
I was tired of the same old parties and I liked Nick Clegg. Time for change.	I think we should give them more time. I would still vote Lib Dem.
Change. New(ish) ideas/concepts. Honest pledge. Actually had a real chance of winning majority vote. Not a wasted vote.	Backtracking on certain policies. Lost the trust of voters. PR stunt. Proven thus far to be like the other two major parties.
Policies on education. Social values. Promise to the public sector. Anybody but the Conservatives. Traditionally Labour. Conscience of Labour.	Became passive. Policies have been ‘dumbed down’. No spine to fight Tory cuts. Limited ‘left wing’ policies.
The liberal conscience of a Labour party that had lost its way. A real third party, not just a clone of the other two. More honest. Anti-war, anti-banks.	Tuition fee traitors. Clegg and Cameron are clones. Never vote for Lib Dems ever again. Looking forward to them getting their arses kicked in Scotland next year. Carpetbaggers.
Alternative – realistic. Lynne Featherstone profile. Disillusioned with big two. Common sense approach. Nick Clegg in TV debates. Vince Cable.	Disappointed/let down. Student fees. Trident. Clegg like a puppet. Lynne Featherstone disappeared. Power hungry. But – personal tax allowance and CGT.
Great community work. Knew the voters. Policies on education/employment.	Fresh ideas seem forgotten. Clegg had people’s attention – popularity waning – Cameron’s shadow, muzzled by PM and Tories on policies.
Best of a bad bunch. Untested. Reasonable. TV exchange – charisma. Seemed more progressive than other parties. Best I could do than not vote or completely waste my vote.	In the shadow of coalition decisions. Silenced. Back end of the pantomime horse. Dishonest with policy. In bed with the Tories.

REDCAR WOMEN

BEFORE...	AFTER...
Thought I would give them a chance, they seemed to be for people like myself. Things looked good for schools and services, OAPs, students.	Cheated, betrayed. Behind the scenes. Not a big enough voice. Need to be seen on TV and in the papers more.
Felt as though they were sincere. Thought they may stick to their values, e.g. education, health. Younger and ready to move the country forward.	Restricted. Need to come clean with new values, explanation of altered ones. Would still support them.
Their promises. Targeting issues relevant to me. Good ideas.	Indifferent. They should be stronger/have more say. A shadow of the Conservatives.
Bringing tourists back to Redcar, building a pier. Having a down to earth and normal MP as opposed to someone much more important in the public eye. Time for something to change.	Still waiting for that pier, but feel hopeful that it may happen. Still waiting for major changes but six months is not a lot to start changing things relevant to me. However, it’s long enough to let people know what their plans are to change what and when.
Liked Nick Clegg, thought he was genuine. Equality for all. Hated Labour – debt.	Still impressed with the Lib Dems. Still feel they are doing the right things for the country in very difficult circumstances.
Promise of change. I didn’t think Gordon Brown was doing a good job. Benefit cuts.	Nick Clegg needs to speak up a bit more. Haven’t done as much as what they said they were going to do.
Social care. Education. NHS. Lower immigration. Withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan.	Cuts are harsh but most of them necessary. Unsure of impact on immigration at the moment. Haven’t heard anything on Afghanistan.
The country needed change and I felt the Lib Dems could do that.	I feel that the Lib Dems have been swallowed up by the Tories.

REDCAR MEN

BEFORE...	AFTER...
Voted to stop the Conservatives getting power as Labour was too weak to win. Student loans attracted me and immigration. Some cut-backs I liked. Did not think Gordon Brown could do it alone. Scrapping of ID cards.	Not enough time to cement the coalition properly. Did not like reverse of student fees policy. Agree with ID card scrapping.
Seemingly honest. Conviction. Manifesto. Some heavyweights – Vince Cable. Electable? Unable to be solely elected. Sympathy vote. Lack of political office/decision making history.	Making compromises. Diluting the Tories’ harsher game plan of cuts. Making people work together for a common goal. Achieving a sense of purpose and direction over the medium to long term.
Tax bands. NHS.	Tuition fee rise. They haven’t had time to implement their strategy fully and the economic state will not help. However the cuts are necessary.
Independent. Good morality factor. Not involved in left and right backbiting. Good local issues. Fresh approach. But – didn’t really stand a chance of winning. A bit woolly. Lack of experience.	Flexible. A common sense approach in making coalition compromises. New ideas. But – in danger of selling out on big issues. Not being clear on where they actually stand on government policy – ‘toeing the line’.
A change. Strong links to education. Not a great deal of publicity, always the third party. Came across well in the debate on TV. Not Cameron, old Tory. Change from Labour.	Have been seen to have agreed with the majority of the plans that were put forward by the Conservatives. Still think Nick Clegg comes across as a fresh option, in response to the old Labour Blair/Brown government and the traditional Tory Eton boys.
Whether they would keep their promises.	I think they are trying to keep them.

Appendix 2: Full poll results

LIB DEM VOTERS:

Poll of 2,000 people who voted Liberal Democrat in seats which the Liberal Democrats won at the 2010 election; 18-29 November 2010

LIB DEM CONSIDERERS:

Poll of 1,000 people who considered voting Liberal Democrat at the 2010 election but decided not to; 25-28 November 2010

1. **[LIB DEM VOTERS] Thinking back to the general election in May 2010, please can you say briefly in your own words why you decided to vote for the Liberal Democrats? [Unprompted]**

I agree with all/some of their policies/manifesto	34%
Good/hard working local Liberal Democrat MP	29%
Had no faith in/dislike Labour and their policies/Gordon Brown	18%
Time for a change	14%
Don't trust/have no faith in either of the other parties or their policies/best of a bad bunch	13%
Had no faith in/dislike the Conservative Party and their policies	12%
Have always voted Liberal Democrat	11%
Tactical anti-Conservative vote	10%
Tactical anti-Labour vote	4%
Labour had no chance of being elected	3%
Liked Nick Clegg/came across well in TV debates	3%
Strong Lib Dem support where I live	3%

- Having no faith in Labour and Gordon Brown was cited by more Lib Dem voters in seats where Labour came second (24%) than in seats where the Conservatives came second (14%).

2. **[LIB DEM VOTERS] I am going to read out some reasons that other people have given for voting Liberal Democrat at the last general election. Please can you say which one of these was the most important factor in your own decision? If you agree with more than one of them, please choose the factor that was most important.**

1	I particularly liked the Liberal Democrat candidate in my area, or thought the Liberal Democrats did a good job locally	43%
2	I thought they offered a real change and might win the election outright and form a Liberal Democrat government	21%
3	I wanted to vote against both the bigger parties and voting Liberal Democrat was the best way to do that	14%
4	The party I wanted to win nationally had no chance of winning in my constituency so I voted for the Liberal Democrats to stop the party I most dislike from winning	11%
5	I thought they offered a real change and hoped that voting Liberal Democrat would help bring about a hung parliament in which they would hold the balance of power	10%

- In constituencies where the Conservatives came second to the Liberal Democrats, 48% said local factors were the most important in their decision to vote Lib Dem. In seats where Labour came second, only 37% said this. In these seats, 24% voted Liberal Democrat mainly in the hope that they would win the election outright, compared to 17% in seats where the Conservatives came second.
- In seats where Labour came second, people were more likely to say they voted Lib Dem as a protest against both the main parties (17%) than in seats where the Conservatives came second.

What future for the Liberal Democrats?

3. [LIB DEM CONSIDERERS] You say you seriously considered voting for the Liberal Democrats, but decided not to. Please can you tell me in your own words why you eventually decided not to vote for the Liberal Democrats?

It was a wasted vote / they couldn't win	27%
Disagreed with certain policies / weak policies	20%
Decided to stick with Labour	10%
Decided to go with the Conservatives / liked David Cameron better	9%
Didn't like the local Lib Dem candidate / preferred another party's candidate	8%
Lib Dems seemed weak / unconvincing / untrustworthy	7%
Voted tactically instead	6%
Didn't like / trust Nick Clegg	5%
Thought voting Lib Dem may put the Tories in power	4%
Fear of hung parliament / coalition	2%
Thought voting Lib Dem may keep Labour in power	2%

4. [LIB DEM VOTERS] Had you known on election day that the Liberal Democrats would end up forming a coalition government with the Conservatives, would this have made any difference to your vote?

No, I would have voted Liberal Democrat anyway	62%
I would have voted Labour instead	21%
I would have voted for one of the smaller parties instead	7%
I would not have voted at all	6%
I would have voted Conservative instead	2%

- In seats where Labour came second, 24% of Lib Dem voters said they would have voted Labour instead, compared to 19% in seats where the Conservatives came second.
- 75% of those for whom local issues were the main reason for voting Liberal Democrat said they would have voted the same way had they known in advance about the coalition.

5. [LIB DEM CONSIDERERS] Had you known on the day of the election that the Liberal Democrats would enter a coalition with the Conservatives, would that have made you:

It would have made no difference	44%
Less likely to vote Liberal Democrat	38%
More likely to vote Liberal Democrat	19%

- 26% of those who considered voting Liberal Democrat but ultimately voted Conservative said they would have been more likely to vote Lib Dem had they known about the coalition in advance. 70% of those who ended up voting Labour, 45% of those who voted for another party and 48% of those who did not vote said they would have been less likely to consider the Lib Dems if they had known about the coalition in advance.

6. [LIB DEM VOTERS AND CONSIDERERS] Some people think the Liberal Democrats did the right thing by joining a coalition with the Conservatives, but others disagree. Which of the following is closest to your own view?

<i>Excluding don't knows</i>	Lib Dem voters	Lib Dem considerers
The Liberal Democrats were right to join a coalition with the Conservatives	49%	55%
The Liberal Democrats should have stayed in opposition, rather than forming a coalition with either the Conservatives or Labour	30%	21%
The Liberal Democrats should have formed a coalition with Labour instead	21%	24%

- Those who voted Lib Dem in the hope that they would win the election outright were more likely than average to say they should have stayed in opposition (34%) or formed a coalition with Labour (24%), and less likely to say they were right to form a coalition with the Conservatives (38%).
- 59% of those who voted Lib Dem in the hope that they would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament said the party was right to form a coalition with the Conservatives.
- Only 37% of 18-24 year-old Lib Dem voters said the party was right to form a coalition with the Conservatives.
- Only 55% of people who considered voting Lib Dem but ultimately voted Labour said the Lib Dems should have formed a coalition with Labour. 14% of these voters said the Lib Dems did the right thing by joining with the Conservatives.

7. [LIB DEM CONSIDERERS] Here are some reasons that people have given for supporting the Liberal Democrats. Please say in each case whether you think the statement is true, or not true, of the Liberal Democrats today.

	True	Not true
By entering a coalition government with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats have shown they are prepared to take real responsibility, not just oppose from the sidelines	68%	32%
The Liberal Democrats have sensible policies on the most important issues	66%	34%
Nick Clegg is doing a good job as Liberal Democrat leader	66%	34%
The Liberal Democrats are showing that they can make an important positive contribution to the government of Britain	64%	36%
The Liberal Democrats behave more reasonably than most politicians, and spend less time attacking each other	61%	39%
The Liberal Democrats have clear, decent principles that they try to put into practice	58%	42%
The Liberal Democrats represent a new, fresh approach to politics	50%	50%
The Liberal Democrats do a good job locally in my area	48%	52%
Voting Liberal Democrat is the best way to stop my least preferred party winning in my local constituency	25%	75%

- 91% of those who considered the Lib Dems but ended up voting Conservative said the Lib Dems had “shown they are prepared to take real responsibility”. 38% of those who voted Labour, 61% of those who voted for another party and 66% of those who did not vote also agreed with this statement. 88% of Conservative voters and a third of Labour voters agreed that the Lib Dems are making “an important positive contribution”.
- A majority of all parties’ voters agreed that the Lib Dems “behave more reasonably than most politicians”.
- 88% of those who voted Conservative thought Nick Clegg was “doing a good job as Liberal Democrat leader”, compared to 36% of those who voted Labour.
- Women who considered voting Lib Dems but decided not to thought the party represented “a new, fresh approach to politics” by a 6-point margin (53% - 47%); men disagreed by an 8-point margin (46% - 54%). A majority of those who voted Conservative agreed with this statement (57%) but nearly two thirds of those who voted Labour (64%) disagreed.

What future for the Liberal Democrats?

8. [LIB DEM CONSIDERERS] Here are some reasons that people have given for not supporting the Liberal Democrats. Please say in each case whether you think the statement is true, or not true, of the Liberal Democrats today.

	True	Not true
Some of their specific policies are wrong and would be damaging to Britain	57%	43%
Although they are in government they don't have any real power, so a vote for the Liberal Democrats is still really a wasted vote	51%	49%
Their policies in general probably don't really add up	46%	54%
The Liberal Democrats have shown they don't really have any principles, they are just going along with what the Conservatives want in return for some jobs in the government	45%	55%
There are no charismatic figures among the Liberal Democrat leadership	36%	64%

- 75% of Lib Dem considerers who ended up voting Labour said the Lib Dems “don't really have any principles”, compared to only 21% of those who voted Conservative.
- Only 31% of those who voted Conservative agreed that the Lib Dems “don't have any real power” and are therefore a wasted vote, compared to 77% of those who voted Labour.
- A majority of all parties' voters disagreed that there are “no charismatic figures” among the Lib Dem leadership.
- Those who voted Conservative (60%) were slightly more likely than those who voted Labour (56%) to say some of the Lib Dems' policies “are wrong and would be damaging to Britain” – but Labour voters were more likely to say that the Lib Dems' “policies in general probably don't really add up”.

9. [LIB DEM VOTERS] I am going to read out some things that people have said about the Liberal Democrats. Please can you say whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree with each one?

	Agree	Disagree
The Liberal Democrats are showing that they can make an important positive contribution to the government of Britain	62%	38%
Overall, the government is different and better than would be the case without the Liberal Democrats	63%	37%
Although they are in government they don't have any real power, so a vote for the Liberal Democrats is still really a wasted vote	43%	57%
The Liberal Democrats have shown they don't really have any principles, they are just going along with what the Conservatives want in return for some jobs in the government	49%	51%

- 87% of Lib Dem voters who thought the party did the right thing by joining a coalition with the Conservatives agreed that the Lib Dems were making “an important contribution to the government of Britain”, compared to 40% of those who thought they should have joined a coalition with Labour and 35% of those who thought they should have remained in opposition.
- More than half (56%) of Lib Dem voters who thought the party should have formed a coalition with Labour nevertheless thought the government was “different and better than would be the case without the Liberal Democrats”. 49% of those who thought the party should have remained in opposition also thought this, as did three quarters of those who thought they did the right thing by joining the Conservatives. 73% of those who voted Lib Dem hoping that the party would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament thought the government was “different and better” for the presence of the Lib Dems.
- 23% of Lib Dem voters who thought the party did the right thing by joining a coalition with the Conservatives thought the Lib Dems “don't really have any principles, they are just going along with what the Conservatives want in return for some jobs in the government”. This compares to 71% of those who thought the party should have formed a coalition with Labour and 74% of those who thought the Lib Dems should have remained in opposition.
- Those who voted Lib Dem for local reasons or to get a hung parliament were least likely to see the party as a wasted vote (34% and 36%). Those who had voted Lib Dem to stop their least preferred party from winning (63%), as a protest against the bigger parties (50%) or in the hope of getting a majority Lib Dem government (50%) were more likely to say they saw the party as a wasted vote.

What future for the Liberal Democrats?

10. [LIB DEM VOTERS AND CONSIDERERS] Please can you rate the following people for their performance on a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 means “terrible” and 10 means “excellent”.

	<i>Mean score</i>	Lib Dem voters
1	David Cameron, the Prime Minister	5.63
2	Vince Cable, the Business Secretary	5.28
3	William Hague, the Foreign Secretary	5.13
4	Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister	5.05
5	Iain Duncan Smith, the Work & Pensions Secretary	4.85
6	Theresa May, the Home Secretary	4.70
7	Chris Huhne, the Energy & Climate Change Secretary	4.68
8	George Osborne, the Chancellor	4.63
9	Alan Johnson, the Shadow Chancellor	4.55
10	Ed Miliband, the Labour leader	4.54

	<i>Mean score</i>	Lib Dem considerers
1	David Cameron, the Prime Minister	6.38
2	William Hague, the Foreign Secretary	6.03
3	Vince Cable, the Business Secretary	5.77
4	Nick Clegg, the Deputy Prime Minister	5.76
5	Iain Duncan Smith, the Work & Pensions Secretary	5.66
6	George Osborne, the Chancellor	5.44
7	Theresa May, the Home Secretary	5.38
8	Chris Huhne, the Energy & Climate Change Secretary	5.01
9	Alan Johnson, the Shadow Chancellor	4.89
10	Ed Miliband, the Labour leader	4.65

11. [LIB DEM VOTERS AND CONSIDERERS] Thinking about the coalition government between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, from what you have seen or heard, how much influence do you think Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats have when it comes to deciding the policies and direction of the coalition government?

	<i>Excluding don't knows</i>	Lib Dem voters	Lib Dem considerers
A great deal of influence		5%	3%
Quite a substantial influence		33%	43%
Not very much influence		47%	44%
No real influence at all		15%	10%

- Those who considered voting Lib Dem but decided not to were more likely to think the Lib Dems had a substantial or great deal of influence (46%) than those who actually voted Lib Dem (38%).
- Nearly two thirds of Lib Dem voters who thought the party was right to join a coalition with the Conservatives thought the Lib Dems had a substantial or great deal of influence. Among those who thought the Lib Dems should have formed a coalition with Labour or stayed in opposition, more than 83% thought the party had little or no influence.
- Those who had voted Lib Dem in the hope that they would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament or because of local candidates or issues were considerably more likely to think the party had significant influence than those who had voted in protest, to support another party, or in the hope of getting a majority Lib Dem government.

12. [LIB DEM VOTERS AND CONSIDERERS] In each of the following areas, do you think the Liberal Democrats have made the coalition government’s policies better or worse, or have they made no difference?

Excluding don't knows	Lib Dem voters			Lib Dem considerers		
	Better	No difference	Worse	Better	No difference	Worse
Spending cuts	28%	46%	26%	29%	50%	21%
Changes to housing benefit	26%	50%	24%	26%	56%	18%
University tuition fees	11%	41%	49%	13%	49%	38%
Defence	17%	57%	26%	12%	61%	27%
The Trident nuclear missile system	18%	65%	17%	13%	67%	20%
Tax levels	25%	53%	21%	25%	54%	21%
Crime and sentencing	17%	67%	16%	11%	76%	13%
Europe	22%	65%	13%	16%	69%	15%
Welfare reform	37%	45%	19%	33%	50%	17%
The environment	32%	62%	21%	29%	64%	7%

- Lib Dem voters were more likely to say the party had made the government’s policy on tuition fees worse than to say it had made no difference. They were more than four times as likely to say the party had made the government’s policy worse than to say they had made it better.

13. [LIB DEM VOTERS AND CONSIDERERS] The coalition government is committed to a range of public spending cuts to reduce Britain’s budget deficit, which has been running at more than £160 billion a year. Thinking about the government’s planned cuts, please say if you agree or disagree with each of the following statements.

	Lib Dem voters		Lib Dem considerers	
	Agree	Disagree	Agree	Disagree
The Conservative-Lib Dem cuts are too drastic and too deep	59%	38%	51%	46%
These are tough cuts and David Cameron and Nick Clegg would prefer an easier path, but the Conservative-Lib Dem coalition inherited a massive deficit and debt and they need to take these steps now to prevent things from getting even worse	71%	27%	70%	26%
The coalition government is right to start making cuts now so as to start dealing with the deficit, but they should do it more gradually to reduce the risk of harming the economy	81%	17%	70%	27%
We owe it to the next generation to deal with Britain’s debt crisis now so that they are not unfairly burdened in years to come by the costs of past borrowing	82%	14%	84%	13%

- Lib Dem voters who think the party should have formed a coalition with Labour or stayed in opposition were less likely than average to agree that the government needs to “take steps now to prevent things from getting even worse”, but majorities still do so (52% and 57% respectively).
- 82% of Lib Dem considerers who voted Labour and 77% of those who voted for another party other than the Conservatives said the coalition should deal with the deficit “more gradually to reduce the risk of harming the economy”.

14. [LIB DEM VOTERS AND CONSIDERERS] On balance, do you support or oppose the coalition government’s plans to cut spending and reduce the budget deficit?

	Lib Dem voters	Lib Dem considerers
On balance I support the plans	65%	68%
On balance I oppose the plans	31%	26%

- Among Lib Dem voters, support for spending cuts was slightly higher in seats where the Conservatives came second (67%) than in seats where Labour came second (63%). 87% of those who think the Lib Dems were right to join a coalition with the Conservatives support the cuts, compared to 45% of those who think the party should have formed a coalition with Labour or stayed in opposition.
- 94% of those who considered the Lib Dems but voted Conservative said they supported the cuts, compared to 35% of those who voted Labour and 64% of those who voted for another party. Lib Dem considerers who thought the party should have stayed in opposition opposed the cuts by just 50% to 41%.

15. [LIB DEM VOTERS AND CONSIDERERS] Since the general election, would you say your view of the Liberal Democrats overall has changed for the better, or the worse, or has it not changed at all?

	Lib Dem voters	Lib Dem considerers
My view of the Liberal Democrats has changed for the better	14%	30%
My view of the Liberal Democrats has changed for the worse	44%	38%
My view of the Liberal Democrats has not changed one way or the other	41%	32%

- 25% of Lib Dem voters who thought the party was right to join a coalition with the Conservatives said their view of the Lib Dems had changed for the better but 57% said it had stayed the same. 72% of those who thought the party should have formed a coalition with Labour, and 67% of those who thought it should have remained in opposition, said their view had changed for the worse.
- 48% of Lib Dem considerers who ended up voting Conservative and 49% of considerers who thought the party did the right thing by joining a coalition with the Conservatives said their view of the Lib Dems had changed for the better since the election. 73% of those who ended up voting Labour, 74% of those who thought they should have formed a coalition with Labour, and 73% of those who thought they should have remained in opposition said their opinion of the Lib Dems had changed for the worse.

16. [LIB DEM VOTERS] Some people say they could never see themselves voting Conservative under any circumstances, while others say they could see themselves doing so some time in the future. Which of these is closest to your own view?

I could see myself voting Conservative some time in the future	43%
I could never see myself voting Conservative	55%

- The proportions of Lib Dem voters saying they could or could not see themselves voting Conservative in the future were exactly the same in seats where Labour were in second place as in seats where the Conservatives were in second place.
- Lib Dem voters in Lib Dem seats in London and the South East (58%) and Wales and the South West (57%) to say they could never see themselves voting Conservative than those in the North (50%) or the Midlands (53%).
- Those who voted Lib Dem primarily because the candidate or local issues were evenly divided over whether they could see themselves voting Conservative in the future (48%) or not (49%).

17. [LIB DEM VOTERS] Some people say they could never see themselves voting Labour under any circumstances, while others say they could see themselves doing so some time in the future. Which of these is closest to your own view?

I could see myself voting Labour at some time in the future	69%
I could never see myself voting Labour	30%

- 93% of Lib Dem voters who think the party should have formed a coalition with Labour, and 74% of those who think it should have stayed in opposition, said they could see themselves voting Labour some time in the future, compared to 55% of those who think the Lib Dem did the right thing by entering a coalition with the Conservatives.

18. [LIB DEM VOTERS] I am going to read out some things that people have said about the Labour Party. Please say in each case whether you strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or strongly disagree.

	Agree	Disagree
Labour seriously lost their way on a number of important policy areas over the last few years that they were in government and they will need to change a lot before people will be ready to vote for them again	90%	10%
Before this election and the formation of the coalition government, I always thought of Labour, not the Conservatives, as being closer in viewpoint to the Liberal Democrats	77%	23%
Labour's heart is in the right place and their values and motives are good, they just became tired and out of touch by being in government so long	74%	26%
With Gordon Brown gone as leader and a new generation of Labour politicians now running the party, Labour have really started to get their act together	51%	49%

- 69% of Lib Dem voters who thought the party should have formed a coalition with Labour, and 59% of those who think it should have stayed in opposition, agreed Labour had "started to get its act together" – compared to 38% of those who thought the Lib Dems were right to join a coalition with the Conservatives.
- Nearly two thirds (65%) of those who thought the Lib Dems were right to form a coalition with the Conservatives nevertheless said they had always thought of Labour as being "closer in viewpoint to the Liberal Democrats" – though this compares to 93% of those who thought the Lib Dems should have joined a coalition with Labour and 83% of those who thought the party should have stayed in opposition.

19. [LIB DEM CONSIDERERS] Thinking about the Liberal Democrats' decision to join a coalition government with the Conservatives, and their performance in government, do you think you will now be more or less likely to consider voting Liberal Democrat at future general elections?

I will now be more likely to consider voting Liberal Democrat than I was before	25%
I will now be less likely to consider voting Liberal Democrat than I was before	39%
I will be no more or less likely to consider voting Liberal Democrat than I was before	37%

- Lib Dem considerers who ended up voting Conservative were the most likely to say they were now more likely to consider voting Lib Dem (39%). 73% of those who voted Labour and 50% of those who voted for another party said they were now less likely to consider voting Lib Dem.
- 41% of those who said the Lib Dems were right to join a coalition with the Conservatives said they were now more likely to consider voting Lib Dem; 50% of them said they were no more or less likely to do so.

20. [LIB DEM VOTERS] The next general election is expected to be in May 2015. Though it is still very early to judge, given what you know about the coalition government’s performance so far, and what you expect it to do in the future, and what the other parties are saying or doing, which of the following would you most like to see as the outcome of the next election?

A coalition between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats	28%
A Labour government	27%
A coalition between Labour and the Liberal Democrats	24%
A Conservative government	10%

- 51% of Lib Dem voters would like to see Labour in government after the next election, compared to 38% who would like to see the Conservatives in government.
- 37% of Lib Dem voters would rather see a Labour or Conservative government next time than a coalition involving the Lib Dems.
- 52% of Lib Dem voters who thought the party should have formed a coalition with Labour, and 41% of those who thought the Lib Dems should have stayed in opposition, said they would like to see a Labour government next time. Of those who thought the Lib Dems did the right thing by joining a coalition with the Conservatives, 49% said they would like the current coalition to continue, with 15% preferring a majority Conservative government.
- A clear majority of those who voted Lib Dem for a positive reason (local factors, a Lib Dem government or the hope that they would hold the balance of power in a hung parliament) wanted to see the Lib Dems in coalition, whether with Labour or the Conservatives. This was not the case for those who had voted in protest against the bigger parties or to stop their least favourite party winning.

21. [LIB DEM VOTERS] Taking everything into account, including the performance of the coalition, the other parties, and your MP and the candidates in your local area, which party do you think you are most likely to end up voting for at the next election?

Liberal Democrat	54%
Labour	22%
Conservative	5%
Another party	8%

- Those who had voted Lib Dem because of local issues or candidates were the most likely to say they would do so again (65%).
- In seats where the Conservatives are in second place, 61% of Lib Dem voters said they would vote Lib Dem again. In seats where Labour are second, the proportion is 47% (with 27% saying they would vote Labour).
- 75% of Lib Dem voters who thought the party was right to join a coalition with the Conservatives said they would vote Lib Dem again. This compares to 35% of those who thought the Lib Dems should have formed a coalition with Labour or stayed in opposition.
- 43% of those who said they would vote Lib Dem said a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition would be their preferred outcome. 28% would prefer a Labour-Lib Dem coalition.
- 37% of those who said they would vote Conservative said their preferred outcome would be a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition. 49% said a majority Conservative government would be their preferred outcome.

Appendix 3: Methodology

Qualitative

- Eight focus groups were conducted in Liberal Democrat-held constituencies between 4 and 18 November 2010. All participants had voted Liberal Democrat at the 2010 general election.
- Two pairs of groups were held where the Conservatives were in second place at the 2010 election (Eastleigh, Torbay), and two pairs where Labour were second (Hornsey & Wood Green, Redcar).
- Separate groups were held of men and women.

Quantitative

- An online poll of 1,000 people who seriously considered voting Liberal Democrat but ultimately decided not to do so was conducted between 25-28 November 2010.
- A telephone poll of 2,000 people who voted Liberal Democrat in Liberal Democrat-held constituencies was conducted between 18-29 November 2010. The sample was divided evenly between constituencies where the Conservatives came second and those where Labour came second.

Full data tables are available at lordashcroft.com.