Appendix 1. Interview Schedule

Preamble: Permission to record
Copyright waiver

Section 1 – Introduction:

- What position do you hold within the party?
- What are your main responsibilities?
- When did you become active in the party?

Section 2 – Issues and ideology:

- What do you believe are the main issues that the Liberal Democrats should be focussing on in the run up to the next election and beyond?
- Are there any specific local issues?
- On these issues where do you think the party stands in relation to the other parties? *(Prompt: what about on a left-right scale)* Thinking about the Labour and Conservative parties, which, if either, do you think the Liberal Democrats are closer to?
- What makes the Liberal Democrats distinct from the other major parties?

Section 3 – Relationship with other parties:

- In the mid 1990s, the party abandoned their official policy stance of equidistance between the Conservative & Labour parties, did this official change have any impact upon the outcome of this constituency in 1997?
- How do you feel about closer collaboration with Labour?
- Strategically, does it matter which of the other main parties are in power?
- Are the dynamics of local politics in this constituency different from national politics?

Section 4 – Electoral Support/Strategy (local and national):

- Who do you see as being the natural heartland of Liberal Democrat support (locally and nationally)? (prompt socially, attitudinally, regionally etc)
- Thinking about the seats where the Liberal Democrats do well, what is it that makes them different/winnable.
- How can the Liberal Democrats build on this electoral base? (Prompt: Is there room in the centre? Move to the left or right?)
- What do you think should be the electoral strategy of the party at the next general election? (which voters/seats should it target, what are expectations)

- What role does success in local elections play in establishing a platform for winning Westminster seats?
- What are the main barriers to achieving a breakthrough nationally? What about locally? (Prompt: Popular policies and leader but this is not reflected in electoral support? The electoral system? Credibility gap (not being in office for a long time, seen as having little chance of winning, etc)).
- What political and social developments are likely to affect the party's fortunes? Is the party equipped to deal with these developments?

Section 5 – Party Organisation and Control:

- How important is a strong grassroots to the success of the party nationally? and locally? (Check: How strong is the grassroots in this locality?)
- Thinking about the paradox of a strong grass roots and a powerful leadership, who do you think controls the party? (Prompt: Who has the bigger influence on the party the grassroots or the leadership?)
- Is there a conflict of interest between a strong grassroots and leadership control?
- Do you think the balance between national and local is changing? If so, in what ways?
- Are the Liberal Democrats a "top-down" or "bottom-up" political party?

Finally, is there anything you would like to add?

University of Manchester

The Liberal Democrats: strategy, structure & third party politics in contemporary Britain.
ESRC Grant Number R000238204.

With the help of an award from the Economic and Social Research Council, the University of Manchester is conducting a major research survey of the Liberal Democrats. The researchers for this project are Dr. Andrew Russell, lecturer in the Department of Government; Dr. Ed Fieldhouse - Deputy Director of the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Social Research and Mr. Iain MacAllister (Research Associate). The project's findings will be published in academic journals and in a book on the Liberal Democrats authored by the investigators.

The survey will necessitate a series of qualitative interviews with local activists, party workers, and key party personnel. Typed transcripts of these interviews will normally be deposited with the Data Archive at the University of Essex unless otherwise agreed. Any material derived from interviews will be anonymised before transcription and deposition. Material will not be deposited before 1/7/01.

The purpose of this agreement is to ensure that your contribution to the above research project and any subsequent usage is in strict accordance with your wishes. If material is later to be deposited it will be preserved as a permanent research resource primarily for use in research and publication, under a set of terms and conditions agreed by the investigator.

Please tick either:

☐ I give my permission for the interview which I am about to give/have given for the above project to be used for research purposes only (including research publications and reports) without preservation of anonymity.

OR

☐ I give my permission for the interview which I am about to give/have given for the above project to be used for research purposes only (including research publications and reports) with strict preservation of anonymity.

I hereby assign the copyright in my contribution to Drs Russell and Fieldhouse

Signed ..... Date .....

Address .....

Summary of Research Results

1. Context

Following the 1997 General Election, despite a falling share of the vote, the fortunes of the Liberal Democrats appeared to be rising. Closer relations with New Labour, shared power in Scotland and Wales, and a historically high number of MPs in the Commons put them in a position of greater influence than for many years. Despite this, the party remained under-researched. This research project aimed to fill this gap, providing an analysis of the strategy, structure and electoral politics of the party.

2. Design/Methodology

The design of the research was a complementary mixture of quantitative and qualitative techniques. Survey and ecological data were analysed to examine the basis of the party's support. This preliminary analysis informed the qualitative phase. In depth interviews with party elites explored the party's organisational structure and electoral strategy, and case studies of local parties provided an insight into how the party operates under different conditions. The qualitative data was then used to inform and improve quantitative analysis, including statistical modelling, of Liberal Democrat voting.

3. Party organisation

The Liberal Democrats have a formal federal structure, but in reality the party is characterised by a duality between a powerful leadership elite and a strong grassroots. This reflects an ideological pre-disposition to community politics and federalism. Our research shows that this can create conflict within the party, and a persistent tension between the centre of the party and the grassroots. In particular, the party at large can be rather sceptical of what they see as the centralising tendencies of the elite. New institutional arrangements in Scotland and Wales have created another level of potential conflict, new resources and new responsibilities creating new tensions. For the most part, however, these conflicts are resolved and the party turns this apparent problem to its advantage: forging links with local communities helps to persuade electors that the party is a credible option at the local level and in specific seats.

4. The party & the electorate

Traditionally Liberal Democrat supporters have been regarded as socially and politically indistinct. We find that Liberal Democrat supporters tend to be similar to Conservatives, in terms of social and demographic profile, although they are slightly more likely to belong to non-conformist religious denominations and to work in the public sector. In political terms however, a shift in the perception of the Liberal Democrats occurred after 1992. From 1974, all sections of the electorate tended to believe the Liberals were politically closer to the Conservatives than to Labour. By 1997 this view had reversed dramatically - and Liberal supporters who did not vote Liberal Democrat overwhelmingly favoured Labour. This is also reflected in the political attitudes of their supporters.

The potential reservoir of Liberal Democrat voters is substantial. Typically they have enjoyed the benefit of popular leaders, and popular policies. If the party could convert sympathy into votes it would be a major political force. However, they have proved largely unable to do this, due to a 'credibility gap'. This arises because the nature of the first-past-the-post voting system means a vote for the Liberal Democrats is often a wasted vote. The key to the party's fortunes therefore lies in its geography of support.

Analysing this geography of Liberal Democrat support, we find that the party has successfully expanded from its traditional heartlands into new areas of Liberal Democrat representation. While success in the traditional heartlands has been based on historical traditions of Liberalism, in the emerging heartlands the party has built on by-election victories and success in local council elections. Success in one area can then spill over into neighbouring areas giving an impression of 'creeping liberalism'. It is apparent that future Liberal Democrat is built incrementally on a foundation of electoral credibility, based on a combination of historical tradition and rigorous local activity.

5. Party strategy

Rational choice models of electoral behaviour would suggest that as the Labour Party moved towards the centre after 1992, the Liberal Democrat vote would be squeezed. In order to maximise votes the party decided to abandon equidistance, and attempted to develop an identity outside that of the traditional left-right spectrum. Drawing on evidence from our interviews, we argue that the party sought to offer a distinct and radical alternative that would be seen as *'neither left nor right, but forward'*. Indeed most of our interviewees reject the notion of the simplistic left-right continuum of politics

In order to overcome the credibility gap, the party has needed to build on local concentrations of support. This has been facilitated by a highly sophisticated strategy of targeting key seats, which has delivered them an increased number of seats in Parliament. Hampered by the voting system and often overlooked by the media, the Liberal Democrats have concentrated their resources on winnable targets. In the 2001 election, Liberal Democrat efforts were rewarded by a large swing in seats regarded as Liberal Democrat/Conservative marginals. However, we find that targeting has serious limitations, not least because the incremental success at the expense of the Conservatives may not last. The party has become increasingly concerned with maximising its national share of the popular vote, and in consolidating a number of second places in order to lay the foundations for future electoral success.

Research in case study constituencies revealed that the party must tailor its message to suit different local contexts. We argue that the Liberal Democrats are faced with a series of 'micro-contests' at the constituency level, requiring different strategic approaches.

6. Conclusion

The project highlights a number of important features of the basis of support for the Liberal Democrats, their organisational structure and their electoral strategy. In particular we identify five recurring themes. These are, the cementing of the Liberal Democrats position as an alternative anti-conservative opposition; the crucial role of credibility in accounting for Liberal Democrat support; the geographical 'creeping liberalism'; the dual identity of the party and the reliance on issue-based moblisation. Perhaps the most significant of these is the demonstration that electoral credibility is the single most important factor in explaining Liberal Democrat success, both in the minds of the party elite and in the behaviour of the electorate.

Full Report of Research Activities and Results

1. Background

In 1994 the Liberal Democrats ended their official stance of equidistance between Conservative and Labour parties in Britain. The party's immediate future as part of an unofficial anti-Conservative bloc was guaranteed. In 1992 the Liberal Democrats received 18% of the popular vote and won 20 seats in the Commons; in 1997 the party received fewer votes (17%) but won 46 seats - their best performance since 1929. Despite Labour's landslide, the Liberal Democrats role in the anti-Conservative bloc seemed set to continue. Liberal Democrat representation was granted on the Joint Consultative Committee of the Labour cabinet; Lord Jenkins was asked to oversee the commission into reform of the electoral system; the Liberal Democrats entered into coalition with Labour in the Scottish Parliament and a partnership agreement with Labour in the Welsh Assembly.

Under new leadership, the Liberal Democrats went into the 2001 election for the most part still fighting the Conservatives rather than Labour, and hoping to convert latent support into votes and seats. The results of the 2001 election (their vote share increased for the first time in five elections, and they gained an extra six seats) demonstrated that the Liberal Democrats continue to play an important role in British politics. Nevertheless, many aspects of the Liberal Democrat political and electoral outlook are under-researched (MacIver, Curtice *et al.*, and Seyd & Whiteley are exceptions). Our research sought to analyse the party and the nature of its support at a key time in its political development.

2. Objectives

Five major objectives were identified in the original research proposal (see Project Details). Each was been met in full.

Objective 1. The project has been very successful in extending knowledge and understanding of the Liberal Democrats, in the areas of party structure and organisation (see section 4.1), electoral support (section 4.2) and strategy (section 4.3). This knowledge has been widely disseminated through conferences and publication (sections 6 and 7). Specifically, published pieces in the *British Elections & Parties Review* (BEPR) and *Party Politics*, have addressed the changing role of the Liberal Democrats in British party politics. The strategic decision making process has been gauged in a paper to be delivered to the *American Political Science Association* (APSA) Conference in August 2001. The nature and distinctiveness of Liberal support has been explored in several pieces of work - in BEPR, *Party Politics*, the *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* (the attached Nominated Publication A) and *Political Geography* (the attached Nominated Publication B).

Objective 2. Party elite responses to changing political agenda and the electorate were assessed through a series of semi-structured interviews with senior party strategists, election campaigners, policy makers and parliamentarians. The relationship between the top and bottom of the party has been assessed through analysis of these interviews and those with activists at the constituency level of the parties, with members of Specified Associated Organisations (SAOs) of the party, and senior party figures, as well as quantitative analysis of surveys and electoral results. Such analysis is included in a paper due to be presented at the *European Consortium for Political Research* (ECPR) Conference in 2001.

Objective 3. Attitudes to the changing nature of political settlements have been analysed through interviews with party elites in Scotland and Wales - both at the

federal executive and constituency level. Nominated Publication B (NPB, attached) and the ECPR paper discuss the party's reaction to the changing reality of British politics. The BEPR and *Party Politics* articles discuss potential new agenda such as the environment and Europe.

Objective 4. The political attitudes of Liberal Democrat supporters and voter recruitment were explored using survey data and are the focus of the BEPR, *Party Politics* and NPA (attached) articles. Electoral strategies were the main focus of interviews with party elites, locally and nationally, and are discussed in BEPR and NPB (attached). The APSA paper explores strategy in more detail, particularly in the aftermath of the 2001 election.

Objective 5. Future prospects were central to the qualitative interviews with party elites and key personnel and features in all articles derived form the project.

3. Methods

Our research combined qualitative and quantitative methods. The first round of quantitative analysis informed the design of interview schedules. The qualitative data was then used to inform and improve quantitative analysis, including statistical modelling, of Liberal Democrat voting. This is perhaps best illustrated by NPB (attached), which developed powerful models of Liberal Democrat support as a result of the findings of the qualitative phase of research (see section 4.2.3). The following data sources and methods were used:

3.1. Quantitative Analysis

The following data sources were employed:

- British Election Study survey series (1974-1997) was widely used in the analysis of Liberal Democrat supporters and their attitudes (see section 4.2)
- British Household Panel Study was used to investigate the volatility of Liberal Democrats support (see NPA - attached).
- General election results, contemporary and historical, were used extensively along with other constituency level data in the analysis of the geography of Liberal Democrat support (see section 4.2.3 and NPB).
- Local Elections data were used in the context of understanding Liberal Democrat performance in General Elections (section 4.3.2).
- Census data and other constituency level data, such as levels of religious non-conformity, were used to investigate factors affecting the geography of Liberal Democrat support.

Data were analysed at the individual and constituency levels, including individual and aggregate levels of Liberal Democrat voting. Methods used range from tabular analysis and descriptive statistics, to principal components analysis and linear and logistic regression models of Liberal Democrat voting. Multilevel models of Liberal Democrat voting have been fitted, but to date, we have been unable to improve on the single level models reported in the attached papers.

3.2 Qualitative methods

Interviews were conducted in eight case study areas and amongst key players at the national level. Overall 67 interviews were conducted, including 36 in constituency case studies and 31 amongst carefully selected personnel nationally (Table 1). Contact was made through local constituency addresses (for the case studies), through Party HQ or the Houses of Parliament (for the party elite). SAOs and other

interviewees were approached at the Liberal Democrat conference in September 2000 or through contacts in the party.

Table 1. Number of interviews conducted.

Target group[1]	Number of interviews conducted
Case studies (inc MPs)	36
Additional MPs	12
Strategists/party officers	7
Other (including SAOs)	5
Scottish and Welsh Parties	7
Total	67

The interviews were semi-structured discussions normally lasting 45-60 minutes. They covered a wide range of areas including personal political experiences, issues and ideology, the relationship with other political parties, electoral strategy and party organisation and control (see appendix 1). Interviews were tailored for particular interviewees (e.g. whether local case study or national strategist). As well as the differential interview schedules for party elite and case studies, special interviews were constructed for key party figures in Scotland and Wales, by-election victors, those with specific interests, and candidates in 'target seats'. All interviews were fully transcribed, coded and analysed using the qualitative software *Atlas-ti*.

A key methodological tool in our research was the use of eight constituency case studies enabling an analysis of party life in different locations and under different electoral circumstances. These case studies comprised traditional heartland seats (Devon North and Montgomeryshire); expanding heartland seats (Colchester and Sheffield Hallam); Conservative held marginals (Bridgwater and Cheadle); and Labour held marginals (Aberdeen South and Oldham East & Saddleworth). In each constituency, interviews were conducted with the Liberal Democrat candidate in the 1997 election (and the 2001 parliamentary candidate if different), the 1997 election agent, local party organisers (usually the constituency chair or similar) and a local councillor (usually the leader of the Liberal Democrat group on the relevant council).

3.3 Ethics and confidentiality

All respondents were asked permission to use the material and to indicate whether they could be identified. Each interviewee was also asked to sign a copyright waiver (see appendix 2). Some requested that their interview not be deposited with Qualidata; others requested a moratorium on their data. In accordance with their wishes, such transcripts were withheld from the public domain. Some interviewees were happy to let anonymised transcripts into the public domain, but the removal of names, places, dates and times would have stripped the transcripts of meaningful content, while a simple replacement of names would not adequately protect the identity of the individuals involved. In such cases, full transcripts were withheld.

4. Results

4.1 The Party structure and organisation: a dual identity?

Our research investigated how the party is organised and how the various tiers of the party interrelate. We were particularly interested in the apparent paradox of a tradition of 'community politics' and increased professionalism in the party.

The Liberal Democrats are a relatively small party, and as such the party's key identity depends largely on its leadership. According to a senior party strategist, Paddy Ashdown's 'credit rating' was such that he was able to force his 'project' on the party 'despite their natural wariness and suspicion'. This 'top-down' approach is consistent with the mainstream literature on party organisation and party systems (see Katz & Mair, 1994, 1995; Mair, 1994; Lijphart, 1994; Panobianco, 1988; Taagepera & Shugart, 1989), which suggests that a modern political party find the pressure to centralise irresistible. While the tendency to catch-all status 'nationalises' political parties (Kirchheimer, 1966) the Liberal Democrats remain regionally disparate. Their best hope of challenging Conservative and Labour parties relies on the dual identity of strong national leadership and 'community politics'. This is particularly important in view of the 'credibility gap' (see section 4.2.3), which means that a party placed third nationally must build on local bases of support in order to achieve increases in parliamentary representation. One interpretation of Cox (1997) suggests third parties can breakthrough at the local rather than the national level by establishing strong community networks and organisations. The Liberal Democrats then, might resist Duverger's law ('the simple majority single ballot system favours the two party system', 1954: 217) by forging links with local communities.

In terms of formal structure, power lies in the federal nature of the party, informally however, it is less clear where real power rests. When asked whether the party was a bottom-up or top-down organisation, many interviewees were genuinely unsure if the party could fit either, neither or both models. One PPC stressed the formal and informal bases of power:

> I'm under no illusions that the leader controls the party. We have a federal executive but ultimately one person has to take a decision. But in terms of the general flow of policy in terms of our behaviour, our attitudes, our culture, the heart of the party - that rests with the party conference and beyond that in the hearts of the people who go out delivering leaflets on a cold, wet day.

The grassroots are widely perceived to be crucial for the party's health but there are potential tensions between mass and elite levels. For example, one MP asserted that the Ashdown era characterised a power struggle within the party:

> Our party tends to default towards pavement politics; towards fixing the streetlights and the cracks in the pavement....Once in a while we do get individuals who come along who can galvanise the whole party, but when that happens, the party can get scared. The party was scared of Ashdown's very clear vision to lead us towards government and towards co-operating with government and he had a virtually 24-hour, 7-day a week struggle to maintain the party's confidence.

This duality has implications for how constituency parties organise and campaign. In effect the Liberal Democrats face a series of micro-contests - the Conservatives forming the main opposition in most areas, Labour in others. This can prove problematic when developing a nationally coherent strategy. However, many constituencies were found to be reliant on a small number of individuals and professional assistance from the central party was widely appreciated. Ultimately, the relationship between centre and grassroots is reciprocal, with the leadership acting as a figurehead for the party more widely, giving personality and direction, yet answerable to the grassroots, with Cowley Street offering campaign advice and resources. As one agent put it:

> I think the strength of the party - and also the weakness - is the fact that the party centrally has got a lot of power, but it doesn't get that power without the grass

roots... That's what I like about the party, (it) is not afraid of saying the leadership is wrong.

New institutional arrangements have introduced another potential arena for conflict between the different levels of the party. For example, coalition in Scotland and Wales has meant compromise on policy issues that can conflict with the federal party's position (e.g. GM crops). The continuing professionalisation of the party is likely to further stretch this relationship, and the ability to bring cohesion and peaceful coexistence (although not necessarily uniformity) remains a key challenge for the leadership.

4.2 The Party and the Electorate

4.2.1. A Profile of Liberal Democrat Voters

One key element of the project was to explore the social and political profiles of Liberal Democrat supporters (NPA attached). This work was important in two ways; by contributing to the understanding of the nature of Liberal Democrat support and the strategic direction of the party. For example, which groups, socially or politically, can be seen as the natural heartland of support for the party? These questions were followed up in the qualitative interviews (see section 4.3).

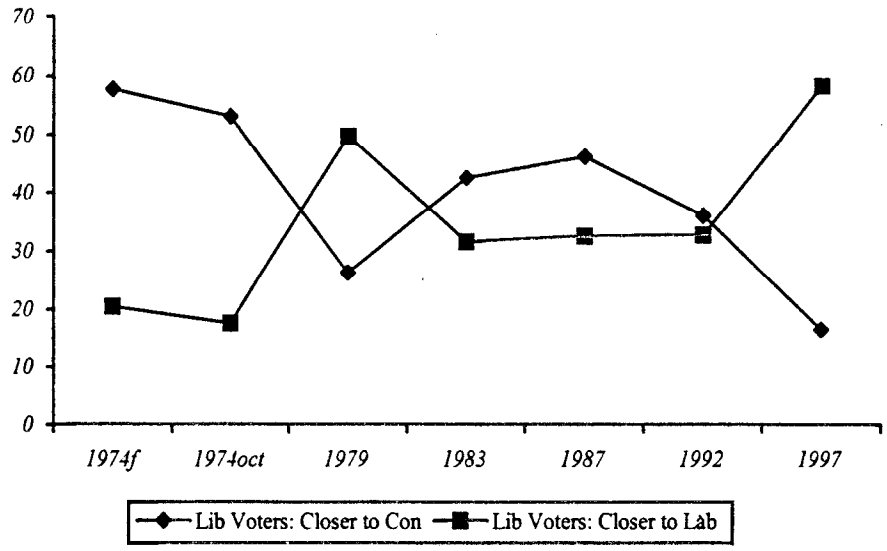
Traditionally attempts to model third party support in Britain have not been successful since third party support is by its nature less distinct, and less consistent, than that for the two major parties (Crewe, 1985; Curtice, 1996). This is confirmed in our research which modelled Liberal Democrat support in contrast to voters of the other major parties for elections since 1974 (NPA attached). Socially, Liberals tend to be drawn from similar social backgrounds as Conservatives. The models explain relatively little variation in Conservative-Liberal voting but show some significant differences between Liberal and Labour voters. As the Conservative-Liberal and Labour-Liberal odds-ratios for elections since 1974 reveal, Liberal Democrat and Conservative support comes mainly from the middle classes (Table 2), while Liberals tend to recruit disproportionately from the educated public sector (NPA attached).

Table 2: Odds Ratios, 1974-1997[ii]

	1974f	1974o	1979	1983	1987	1992	1997
Con/Lab	7.0	7.0	4.2	4.8	4.0	3.8	1.6
Con/Lib	1.5	1.2	1.4	1.1	1.2	0.9	1.1
Lab/Lib	4.6	5.7	3.1	4.3	3.4	4.5	1.5

Analysis of the perceptions of Liberal Democrat voters shows that in all but one election between 1974 and 1992, Liberal voters viewed their party closer to the Conservatives than to Labour. The political change in 1997 was dramatic (Figure 1). Moreover, for the first time since 1974 Liberal identifiers who did not vote Liberal were more likely to switch to Labour than the Conservative. Just as the Liberal Democrats had abandoned equidistance by 1997, so had the voters. This has implications for their electoral strategy (see section 4.3)

Figure 1 Liberal Voters: Which party are the Liberals closer to? (%)



If Liberal voters tend not to be mobilised on the basis of class or demographic interest, they might be mobilised on the basis of political values (issue based mobilisation). This hypothesis was supported by a number of interviewees, who saw natural Liberal Democrat supporters as 'well-educated, and free-thinking'. The political attitudes of the electorate are the subject of two published papers (Russell & Fieldhouse, 2000; Fieldhouse & Russell, in press). Analyses of the attitudes of voters reveal that having a popular leader and popular policies helps the Liberal Democrats but they are hard pressed to convert this latent sympathy into support. For example, in 1997, there was a remarkable consensus among all voters in favour of the Liberal Democrat policy of hypothecated taxation. Although the issue of education remained salient, support for hypothecated taxation failed to deliver votes. Half of all respondents who favoured a rise in income tax to pay for education in 1997 voted Labour and fewer (21%) voted Liberal Democrat than Conservative.

The key to their failure to recruit potential voters lies in the public perception of their chances of winning, either locally or nationally. A key factor affecting Liberal Democrat voting is not social characteristics or even political beliefs but geographical location. This was borne out in 2001, with differential swing to and from the Liberal Democrats. In Liberal Democrat/Conservative seats their vote increased by an average of nearly 6% whereas in seats where they were not in close contention, their average share of the vote fell.

4.2.3 The Political Geography of Liberal Democrat Support.

In electoral terms the greatest obstacle to Liberal Democrat progress is credibility. While Liberal Democrat policies may be popular with large sections of the electorate they are unlikely to form a government under the first-past-the-post electoral system and lose many potential voters as a consequence. This 'credibility gap' is consistent with the empirical patterns of Liberal Democrat support and was widely recognised by party activists, strategists and MPs.

In order to bridge the credibility gap the party must demonstrate their competitiveness in a locality. Until 1997 such credibility was derived primarily form local traditions of Liberalism in the 'heartland' areas of South-west England, Rural Scotland and Liberal pockets such as Montgomeryshire. These heartland areas are typically rural, with high levels of non-conformist religious affiliation. They fall outside the areas where trade unionism and the Labour Party became most influential in the early twentieth century. In Rokkan's (1970) terms these are places where the state-vs.-church, centre-periphery and rural-urban cleavages survived the emergence of the dominant class cleavage. Our analysis (NPB attached) reveals historical voting patterns and the level of non-conformism remain significant factors in explaining Liberal Democrat success in heartland areas.

The party has struggled to win seats outside those heartland areas but in 1997 the Liberal Democrats won a number of news seats in less established areas. Whilst many of these 'emerging heartlands' were contiguous to heartland seats, others were in areas where the party had made incremental and sustained progress in local elections, being seen as the main challenger to the Conservatives. Others were gained in by-elections and subsequently held in the general election. The key in those seats was to bridge the credibility gap.

The importance of a strong local government base to the success of the party in the seats they captured from the Conservatives in 1997 is evident (Table 3). Of the 30 seats gained in 1997 they were the largest party in local councils in 24.

Table 3: Council representation as a basis for Westminster success[iii]

	LD largest party on Council, 1997	% of seats held on Council, 1997	% of council seats won 1994-7	% of vote in council seats, 1994-7	% in general election, 1997
'Heartland' Seats (18)	6/18	32.6	45.4	33.1	44.0
'Emerging Heartlands' (30)	24/30	55.2	62.3	42.3	43.3
Other Seats (593)	84/593	17.8	17.1	19.2	14.4

Where the party were in a position of power in local government, and the initial credibility gap had been overcome, they were in a much stronger position to persuade voters that a vote for the Liberal Democrats in the general election was no longer a wasted vote. As one MP put it:

> Our biggest problem is credibility...once you've shown you can win then you find that people will vote for you much more readily.

Dorling *et al.* (1998) argued that spatial proximity rather than social proximity may deliver success for the party in local elections. At the constituency level there also appears to be a spatial clustering of the seats won by the party in recent general elections (NPB attached). This spatial pattern suggested a 'creeping liberalism' which one MP described as 'yellow virus'!

The credibility hypothesis is confirmed by our interviews as well as by some powerful statistical models of Liberal Democrat voting and Liberal Democrat success.

Modelling historical, demographic, local political context and tactical variables, we successfully accounted for the pattern of Liberal Democrat voting in 1997 (explaining 87% of the variance), and also Liberal Democrat victories. The model was able to correctly predict no less than 40 of the 46 seats won by the Liberal Democrats in 1997[iv] (NPB, attached). It is apparent that future Liberal Democrat success will be built incrementally on a foundation of electoral credibility based on a combination of historical tradition and local activity.

4.3 Party Strategy

Strategically being a third party in a two-party system presents the Liberal Democrats with significant problems. Under first-past-the-post, the party has failed to match its vote share with representation in Parliament. In order to counter this the party has attempted to increase its number of seats through selective targeting (Denver & Hands, 1997, Denver *et al.* 1998) while increasing its share of the vote nationally. This strategy was the subject of interviews nationally and in case study constituencies.

4.3.1 In search of votes

Rational choice models of electoral behaviour would suggest that as the Labour Party moved towards the centre after 1992, the Liberal Democrat vote would be squeezed. In order to maximise votes the party could either maintain equidistance between the other major parties, or else identify themselves as distinct from Labour and Conservatives. In the event the party decided to abandon equidistance but attempted to develop an identity outside that of the traditional left-right spectrum. Interview evidence suggests the party sought to offer a distinct and radical alternative that would be seen as *'neither left nor right, but forward'*. Indeed many in the Liberal Democrats reject the notion of the simplistic left-right continuum of politics. As one MP noted:

> Too many people see politics in terms of a one-dimensional structure, the traditional left-right economic structure. Actually we are in politics for something slightly different from that... We have a different view of what I call the 'tolerance axis'.

While many commentators placed the party to the left of Labour, senior strategists and MPs appreciated the danger of such a label. In particular it could cost the party votes from disaffected Conservatives. As one MP put it:

> I always talk about the party as being on the radical centre, because centre could simply just mean somewhere in between the left and the right.... (There are) aspects of Liberal Democrat policy that are radical and therefore make it more difficult to just put on that left/right continuum

In search of distinctiveness, the party has embarked on a course of programmatic renewal that sits ill at ease with orthodox models of party behaviour (Downs, 1956, Panobianco, 1988). The party has chosen to 'brand itself' using issues, such as education and taxation, which have resulted in the party's image becoming increasingly radical and distinctive rather than centrist and non-controversial. In doing so, strategically, the Liberal Democrats have aligned themselves as an anti-Conservative party in recent years. As one MP put it the party 'competes with Labour but fights the Tories'.

In the 2001 General Election, the party found itself fighting the Conservatives in the majority of its existing and target seats. It became clear that the party's strategy in

the run-up to the 2001 election would be a refinement of the 1997 strategy. One MP claimed:

> The fact is most of the seats which the Liberal Democrats either hold or potentially can win, can be gained at the expense of the Conservatives. Therefore you're trying to squeeze the Labour party and you're seeking tactical votes from Labour supporters and therefore you want to be seen as close in terms of values if not in terms of style... the forces of progress and reform against the forces of reaction.

It might seem that the most promising strategy of the party would be to continue as a distinct but clearly anti-Conservative party. Following the 2001 election, the key battlegrounds remain Conservative-Liberal Democrat contests (Table 4). However, Labour is still 'the enemy' in local contests. At some stage the party needs to confront this dualism.

Table 4: Change in 2001 seats based on uniform 2-way Swing.

	LD-Con Swing	Con-LD Swing	LD-Lab Swing	Lab-LD Swing
	LD Losses	Liberal Democrat Gains	Liberal Democrat Losses	LD Gains
2.5% swing	11	7	0	1
5% swing	16	15	2	1
7.5% swing	24	25	3	7
10% swing	31	34	5	7

4.3.2 In search of seats

The credibility gap thesis (see 4.2.3) suggests the party's best electoral strategy is to continue to build incrementally. The method for doing this is to persuade voters in specific constituencies that the Liberal Democrats have a chance of winning and are the best placed party to overturn the incumbent. Targeting is integral to this process and was a crucial factor in the Liberal Democrat 1997 campaign, enabling the party to mobilise tactical voting to its advantage. The strategy was repeated successfully in 2001. Targeting is crucial to the Liberal Democrats as it allows the party with their limited resources to better concentrate their firepower. Under the first-past–the-post system, targeting is one way of ensuring that votes are distributed more effectively. As a council leader asserted:

> The only way which you can punch your weight in the plurality system if you have a national share of the vote which is lower than the other 2 parties, is to target... Now one of the reasons why we got more seats with a lower share of the national vote in 97 was for the first time the targeting was ruthless

However, despite the success of targeting, our interviews conducted in the run-up to the 2001 General Election confirmed that there were limits to targeting as a long-term strategy and that the party may need to reallocate resources in order to build for the future. One strategist noted:

> Targeting seats is still very important, but I think we also recognise that we aim to increase our share for next time as well... we want to make sure we're in position to gain many more [seats] in say the election in 2005. So we're not as sharply focused on targeting next time as we were last time

While the party increased its number of MPs, its vote share and second placed finishes fell between the 1980s and 1997. To make a substantial breakthrough in the future, they now needed to ensure a strong credible performance in many more seats. Thus the strategy of maximising seats and votes would complement each other. The 2001 results suggest that some progress has been in this strategy (52 seats from 46, 110 second places from 104).

4.3.3 Local Strategies

Analysis of the geography of Liberal Democrat support, and case study constituencies revealed that the party must tailor its message to suit different local contexts. We argue that the Liberal Democrats are faced with a series of 'micro-contests' at the constituency level, requiring different strategic approaches. For example, in many key constituencies the party is in close competition with the Conservatives, but in some Labour are the main opponents. Local strategies are associated with marginality, the scope for tactical voting and the relationship between the local constituency parties. For example, in Liberal Democrat-Conservative marginals the image of an anti-Conservative party could be unproblematic (e.g. Sheffield Hallam). In contrast in Labour-Liberal Democrat marginals (Oldham East and Saddleworth) the local party was forced to fight an anti-Labour campaign, against a backdrop of the perceived closeness between the parties at the national level. One MEP told us

> In the north frankly, where if there's Liberal Democrats up against, say a controlling Labour group, then there's never been any acknowledgement that we have a close understanding at a national level.

Locally specific factors also played a part. Poor Liberal-Labour relations in Colchester (a Liberal Democrat/Conservative marginal) hampered the party's plan to squeeze Labour support. The key was to portray the contest as a battle between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives, and claim that Labour were irrelevant.

If the Liberal Democrats are to make significant progress in future elections they must fight a series of two-way contests and tailor their electoral strategy according to which party they are competing against. Given the social and political profile of the party, they must become the most popular centre-left party in Conservative areas and the most popular middle-class party in Labour strongholds. The Liberal Democrat aim, therefore, is to marginalise the weaker of the two major parties in key seats and become the most attractive alternative for that party's voters. Whether this strategy can be successful in the long term not only relies on the electoral effectiveness of the Liberal Democrats, but on the performance of the other major parties.

6. Activities

Conference Papers Presented

"Yellow Fever? The Political Geography of Liberal Voting in Great Britain" PSA Conference 2001 Manchester, April 2001.

"Not only fickle but inconsistent? The Anatomy of Liberal Support in Britain, 1974-97" - EPOP Conference 2000 Edinburgh, September 2000.

"Identifying an Attitudinal Heartland of Liberal Democrat Support in the 1997 General Election: An exploration of Equidistance, Constructive Opposition & Third Party Politics" - EPOP Conference Northampton, September 1999.

Seminar Presentations:

"Not only fickle but inconsistent? Liberal Support in Britain, 1974-97" - Department of Government, University of Manchester, October 2000.

"The Anatomy of Liberal Democrat Support" - Cathie Marsh Centre of Survey and Social Research, November 2000

"The British Liberal Democrats - reflections and prospects" - European Policy Research Unit, One day Conference, Manchester May 2001.

Conference Papers (forthcoming):

"Target Practice? The strategy of the British Liberal Democrats in the 1997 and 2001 general elections" *American Political Science Association* Annual Conference, San Francisco, August 2001.

"Dual Identities? The Organisation of the British Liberal Democrats" *European Consortium for Political Research* General Conference, 2001, Kent, September 2001

"High Water Marks or Rising Tides? The Liberal Democrats 2001 performance in perspective" *Elections Public Opinion & Parties/Political Communications* Conference 2001, Brighton, September 2001.

7. Outputs

Book proposal

- "*Neither Left nor Right But Forward: The Electoral Politics of the Liberal Democrats*" Detailed proposal currently under consideration of MUP. Proposed publication date; summer/autumn 2002.

Articles in refereed journals

- "Identifying an Attitudinal Heartland of Liberal Democrat Support in the 1997 General Election" in P. Cowley, D. Denver, A. Russell & L. Harrison (eds.) *British Elections & Parties Review 10* (London: Frank Cass) 85-99.
- "Latent Liberalism? Sympathy and Support for the Liberal Democrats in Britain" *Party Politics* (in press vol. 9)
- "The Anatomy of Liberal Support in Britain, 1974-97" British Journal of Politics and International Relations (in press).
- "Yellow Fever? The Political Geography of Liberal Voting in Great Britain", *Political Geography* (accepted for publication)

Articles Commissioned/Not yet submitted

- "High Water Mark or Rising Tide? The Liberal Democrats 2001 general election performance in perspective" *Representation.*

- "Target Practice? The strategy of the British Liberal Democrats in the 1997 and 2001 general elections" to be submitted to *European Journal of Political Research*

Newspaper coverage:

- *Observer*, 19/9/99 "Lib Dem Conference '99 - Special Report" by Patrick Wintour - used some of our findings about equidistance presented in Northampton paper.
- *Guardian Analysis* 19/9/00 "The strange case of the Lib Dems" by David Walker 19/9/01 - made extensive use of our Edinburgh Conference paper. Quotes and Graphs used and referenced.

Other

- Qualitative database of interview transcripts lodged with *Qualidata*.

8. Impacts

The main impact of our research has been on the academic community. It has been responsible for extending knowledge and understanding of the Liberal Democrats at a critical time in British politics. The published articles (including those in press) and the book will amount to a considerable body of material that ought to be seen by a wide audience. The research has also been received with interest from outside the academic community, in the media and in the party itself. Contacts have been made with party personnel and political journalists (especially, David Walker and Lucy Ward at *The Guardian*) which promise to yield further outputs.

The commissioned article for *Representation -the journal of representative democracy* will reach a wide audience since the journal has a strong non-academic element to its readership.

9. Future Research Priorities

The outcome of the 2001 general election showed much of our understanding of the party's priorities to be accurate. The distinctiveness of policy, the advantage of incumbency, the platform for success associated with local election and by-election performance and the tactical context of micro-contests were all instrumental in explaining the increase in Liberal Democrat seats, vote share and second places.

The model of Liberal Democrat party behaviour built by the project ought to be rigorously tested in the coming years. In particular its durability should be measured in the second term of the Blair government and the apparent period of "effective opposition" for the Liberal Democrats.

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[i] In several cases interviewees held a number of different positions within the party and were therefore interviewed accordingly.

[ii] The odds ratios were calculated by dividing the ratio of voting in the Professional and Managerial classes by the ratio of voting in the Manual working class for each pair of parties.

[iii] Due to boundary changes the party notionally held just 18 seats prior to the 1997 election. They also lost two of their heartland seats in the 1997 election.

[iv] Due to missing ecological data for some Scottish constituencies, the number of Liberal Democrat seats in the model was 45 rather than 46.