

General Election 2017 – Lib Dem campaign review

Executive summary

The review panel was appointed just after the September 2017 party conference and asked to perform its task speedily as three months had elapsed since polling day. Of necessity, the report is therefore less detailed than the comprehensive review of the 2015 election and should be read alongside that report for the purposes of any ‘lessons learned’ exercises for the future.

On account of the brisk timeline, the review was carried out over three intensive days’ work interviewing some 58 separate participants. They comprised a range of people from across the country, from seats won and lost, candidates, key HQ staff, volunteers and media personnel who watched our campaign from outside. The panel also reviewed 6,500 emails from party members.

Analysis

The election was a success in that our number of MPs increased, but a disappointment in vote share and lost deposits. A notably strong performance in Scotland saved the day in seat outcome and political perceptions. But much remains to be done if we are to return to our strength of the 1990s and 2000s. Nevertheless, a huge amount of work went into mounting a ‘snap election’ campaign – from staff and volunteers around the country who went way beyond the call of duty.

The 2015 election had been a complete disaster for the party. This election, just two years later, came out of the blue and though ‘snap’ candidate selections were hastily organised in most seats in 2016, we were far from prepared for a June 2017 election, in common with the other parties.

As well as the election surprising all three parties, so too did the result. Substantial poll shifts, and two terrorist attacks, made for a bumpy ride and the end result left Theresa May weakened and Jeremy Corbyn strengthened, while smaller parties – ourselves, Greens and UKIP all suffered.

Early on Lib Dems reached 11% in the polls and hopes rose that our differentiating stance – our opposition to Brexit – made us relevant with an issue of importance to 48% of voters. However, unlike many previous campaigns our vote fell during the election, ending up at 7.4%.

The panel looked at six aspects of the campaign: organisation; message; communications; money and resources; outcome in target seats; and outcome in non-target seats. Their report considered what went well and what needs improvement and remedial action for the future.

Organisation

Positives:

- Hard-working staff drove a good start, strong manifesto launch, and ace fundraising (including digital)
- Early candidate selection, candidate and ALDC helplines, and regional chairs’ meeting all worked well
- The response to the Dementia Tax fiasco was executed well

Negatives:

- Organisation was unclear: we need Campaign Chair leading on strategy, Chief Executive on execution
- Campaigners’ feedback should be analysed more and used to inform decisions

Recommendations:

- (1) *General Election Planning Manager role needs recreating as soon as possible (now done)*
- (2) *The loss of experienced staff since 2015 should be stemmed by any practical means possible*
- (3) *New members, new agents/organisers and new staff all need basic training on how campaigns work*
- (4) *A comprehensive overhaul of training throughout the party is now needed*
- (5) *A specific person should be put in place to organise and look after HQ volunteers*
- (6) *Candidates and agents need more training in compliance and its importance*
- (7) *Campaigns and media staff need to work to a clear digital strategy*
- (8) *Greater HQ understanding of and support for the devolved nations is needed*

- (9) *The new CEO should restructure HQ and put it on a campaigning footing ASAP*
- (10) *A skills audit of staff and volunteers should attempt to get the right people in the right roles*
- (11) *Canvassing techniques need reviewing to identify more effective conversations with voters*
- (12) *A system needs organising to support new MPs and help candidates and seats after elections*
- (13) *An election manual is needed for scheduled and snap elections to avoid reinventing the wheel*
- (14) *Priority needed to increasing diversity of candidates and to fielding varied faces on media*

Message

Positives:

- Members felt we had we a clear, simple and distinctive message
- This motivated them and gained us new members and donors
- It struggled, nevertheless, to get public cut-through

Negatives:

- Our message on a second Brexit referendum proved to be too process-oriented at that time
- The Leader's views on gay sex were very unhelpful and a bad diversion from campaign themes
- Our proposals on cannabis proved unpopular with voters in our less cosmopolitan key seats

Recommendations:

- (15) *We must distil clear messages based on the party's values, voters' priorities and key issues*
- (16) *We need clear reasons why people should vote for us and how we will positively affect them*
- (17) *Messaging should be tested through robust research and polling, and changed if necessary*
- (18) *Answers to hung Parliament questions need working out comprehensively well in advance*
- (19) *Messages decided by the party should drive the manifesto, not the other way around*
- (20) *The party's campaigning needs must take priority over policy preoccupations*
- (21) *Analysis of areas of weakness and likely attack must define and produce clear responses*
- (22) *Decisions on messaging should be made jointly between Directors of Campaigns and Comms*

Communications

Positives:

- Crisis comms was well structured and resourced, preventing media staff from being distracted
- Centrally driven social media worked well
- National literature offered an important and effective tool for delivering national messages

Negatives:

- Local social media needed more central support and co-ordination

Recommendations:

- (23) *Protests should be made to Ofcom regarding its guidelines for broadcast balance in elections*
- (24) *National literature could sometimes be more positive in nature*
- (25) *PEBs are important, perhaps more for activists than voters, and must be properly resourced*

Targeting seats

Positives:

- The massive programme of literature to target seats, pushed some over the winning line
- ALDC staff were redeployed to target seats
- We made a net gain in seats!

Negatives:

- Target seats must begin campaigning again at the start of a Parliament – even after losing
- Tactful lack of candour about *Tier 1 vs Tier 1 Plus* caused confusion and, in a few cases, anger

Recommendations:

- (26) *Modelling and segmentation work should be factored even more into targeting seats*
- (27) *Target seats need development plans, actively supported (not passively monitored) by LDHQ*
- (28) *A second tier of seats (not expecting to win) must be developed to win in future elections*
- (29) *Seats need more information about what national literature is being sent in and when –ideally giving seats some input into design and content (as in 2015)*
- (30) *Return address for Welsh/Scottish mailings should not be in England (and none should go to LDHQ)*
- (31) *There was insufficient polling capacity for some seat polling and results took too long coming*
- (32) *National and target seat tracking polling is vital throughout the campaign*
- (33) *Efforts to get activists to help in another seat need making further in advance (eg mid-week)*
- (34) *Party/regional officers need to be more realistic about the distances people can sensibly travel to help*
- (35) *If members cannot get to target seats, we must offer other things to do to help (eg phone)*
- (36) *Candidates leading teams to help in target seats works really well and must be built up*
- (37) *We must explain to (eg new) members why we target and how they can help us that way*
- (38) *We must target at elections, but work on a broader canvas between elections to build for the future*
- (39) *Elections at all levels are important and LDHQ needs to be seen to support them at all levels*

Money and Resources

Positives:

- We were really successful at fundraising, both from large donors and smaller donations online
- Raising around £5 million during the campaign was a huge success

Negatives:

- A clear budget needed discussing and agreeing by the campaign team before the campaign

Recommendations:

- (40) *When not in ‘snap’ elections earlier spending on campaigning produces more votes for less money*
- (41) *Money spent late in an election is usually poorly spent as it is difficult to do effectively*
- (42) *We must not impoverish the party after elections when donors cease giving – so budgets and financial control needs to reflect and plan for this post-election lean period*
- (43) *We must spend more on digital campaigning, especially in seats, and if needs be less on print*

Non-target seats

- Positives:**
- Concentrating efforts on target seats can win more seats

- Negatives:**
- But eventually we must grow more seats to be the prospects for the future
 - Losing 375 deposits was costly: we must remedy this *and* create a guarantee scheme

Recommendations:

- (44) *We must identify long-term prospects and maintain vote share there for future campaigns*
- (45) *Issue campaigns across the country involving regional/state parties and ALDC are vital in this*
- (46) *New members need training on election campaigning, to ensure their time is well spent*
- (47) *Non-target seats may include held or target wards which need work during a GE campaign*
- (48) *We must grow our campaigning capacity and skills across the country*

WITH THANKS TO THE REVIEW TEAM:

Chair: Gerald Vernon-Jackson (Candidate, Portsmouth South)
Alison Suttie (House of Lords, former GE Manager at HQ)
Cllr Kevin Lang (Campaigner and councillor in Scotland)
Kamran Hussain (FPC member and Yorks/Humber Region)
Helena Cole (Federal Audit & Scrutiny Committee)

Nick Rijke (Public Affairs view, USA)
Cllr Heather Kidd (Candidate, Shropshire)
Drew Heffernan (Non-target Local Party Chair)

Mark Jeffery (volunteer clerk to the review)