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Parties under pressure : explaining choices made by parties in the wake of heavy electoral defeat

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8 The Liberal Party, 1970-1974

8.1 Introduction

Such have been the difficulties for the British Liberal Party that in most descriptions of the British party system, it only counts as half a party. Disadvantaged by the electoral system and irrelevant to the formation of government in a Parliament usually dominated by a single-party majority, the implicit description as “half a party” in a two-and-a-half party system is not so far off the mark.¹ The Liberal Party had not always been in this marginal position: when it first arose from the Whig faction in Parliament in the 19th century, the Liberal Party was one of Britain’s two major parties. However, history had seen it not merely displaced by the Labour Party in the centre-left role, but nearly wiped out. Throughout the post-World War II era in British politics, the Liberal Party’s activists worked with surprising optimism first for their very survival as an independent party, then for a return to power which they believed was just around the corner.²

This process naturally ebbed and flowed. The electoral defeat of 1970, which is the focus of this chapter, represents one of those ebbs, with a loss of half the party’s seats (from 12 to 6) on a single per cent of the vote lost. The leadership of Jo Grimond between 1955 and 1967 had seen the Liberals develop the beginnings of a distinct identity and brought them a much-needed uptick in their electoral fortunes at by-elections and local elections. This success slowed down in the late 60s, until the 1970 election set the Liberals back to single-figure seat numbers. This traumatic election set the party thinking anew about its role in British politics, leading to a slow but sure change that can be traced forward all the way to the formation of the SDP-Liberal Alliance in the 1980s.

Within the framework of this study, the Liberal Party can be said to have been dealt the worst hand. As a party with low electoral base attachment in the First Past the Post System, it is expected that the Liberal Party will have both their own characteristics and the electoral system going in the direction of extension. The question, however, is whether it is that simple. A closer look at further factors such as ideological attachment reveals that the party can be argued to be more attached to this ideology, introducing a pressure towards reinforcement.

In section 8.2, after the background of the party has been sketched, the party will be measured up according to these variables, deriving specific expectations. To test these expectations, this chapter will then look at the 1970 election defeat and the two electoral cycles following that using archival sources from the time period. The second

1. A. Siaroff, “Two-and-a-half Party Systems and the Comparative Role of the ‘Half’,” *Party Politics* 9, no. 3 (2003): 268.

2. See W. Wallace, “Survival and Revival,” in *Liberal Party Politics*, ed. V. Bogdanor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 43–72.

electoral cycle is a mere eight months long as a result of the failure of the February 1974 election to deliver a Parliament with an overall single-party majority. The dissolution for new elections in October of the same year made the second electoral cycle unusually short. For this reason, unlike in the other chapters, the two electoral cycles will not be considered separately. The results of this analysis will be presented in section 8.4, following a brief description of the 1970 election in section 8.3. The concluding section 8.5 will summarise the argument and point out various interesting details to be taken away for the comparative analysis in chapter 9 of this dissertation.

8.2 The Liberal Party in 1970: setting the stage

The Liberal Party is by origin a cadre party, finding its origin in a loose parliamentary alliance.³ It arose from the 19th century Whig faction in the British Parliament, allying with Radical MPs to form the Liberal Parliamentary Party in the decade following 1859. The philosophical and ideological tradition they represented has been identified by Brock with applying reason in politics. Liberal Prime Ministers like Gladstone and Lloyd George have earned their place in the history books.⁴ However, deep divisions in the party between the followers and opponents of Lloyd George caused its fall from power in 1922, presaging its ultimate displacement by the Labour Party as Britain's major left-of-centre party.

Until after the Second World War, the Liberals maintained a double-figures presence in Parliament. This changed in 1950, when divide-and-conquer strategies from Tory Leader Winston Churchill, himself a former Liberal, saw the Liberal vote collapse entirely with only nine seats being retained.⁵ The nadir of Liberal fortunes came a year later in 1951, when only six seats were held onto. From that election onwards, the party's support was concentrated in the 'Celtic Fringe' of the United Kingdom, a region consisting of Scotland, Wales and areas of South West England.⁶ This defeat combined with the party's glorious past colours the unique character of the British Liberal Party, and is crucial to understanding the complicated events of the 70s.

It is important to emphasise the small size left over after the party's fall from power. Though data for the time period before the 1970 election is unavailable (or at least never for all three parties at the same time), the Liberals up until 1974 seem locked into a roughly one-to-ten margin with the Conservatives with 190,000 members to the Conservatives' 1.5 million in 1974.⁷ The Labour Party, due to affiliation by unions, is vastly larger than the Tories at 6.5 million in 1974.⁸ In terms of paid staff, the margin is smaller but still the major parties have at least double the resources the Liberals had at their disposal.⁹ These

3. C. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900-1984*, Macmillan (London, 1984), 2; P. Norton, "The Liberal Party in Parliament," in *Liberal Party Politics*, ed. V. Bogdanor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 149.

4. M. Brock, "The Liberal Tradition," in *Liberal Party Politics*, ed. V. Bogdanor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 23.

5. D. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 139.

6. Although the Liberals always held representation outside the Celtic fringe until the 1970 election, see *ibid.*, 196.

7. Webb, "The United Kingdom," 847.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, 849-850.

numbers dwarf the Liberal Party in all respects. In addition to its lower number of votes and seats, this poses significant challenges to the party. Especially in the British electoral system (see 2.4), which severely disadvantages minor parties like the Liberal Party, this small size imposes heavy constraints. The lack of party finance laws means that the Liberals have less funds at their disposal.¹⁰ This in turn leads to a reliance on volunteer activists or big donors. Finding candidates is also made more difficult and was in fact largely driven by local factors.¹¹ This difficulty with relying so much on volunteers is also reflected in the fact that most NEC members were volunteers, local councillors or candidates for Parliament at most. The minutes made mention of the difficulties of the officers of the party to fit meetings in London on weekdays into their schedule¹², as well as in the difficulties of getting reliable parliamentary party attendance at the NEC.¹³

Another general factor of the party's background that should be taken into account is the party's complex organisation. The party prided itself on its highly democratic, federal structure with a decentralised power structure. Though the constituency associations were "organs of the party" and were mandated to exist in every constituency by the constitution, it was these associations which admitted members to the party and who kept membership records: there was no national membership.¹⁴ In addition, the constituent parties in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland were fiercely independent. The Liberal Party Constitution only applies to them "insofar as its provisions are accepted by those parties"¹⁵, and therefore functions fully only for the English part of the party, the Liberal Party Organisation (LPO).¹⁶ Scotland, in particular, appeared allergic to any sign of being subordinated to the 'English' LPO.¹⁷

This combined into a party organization where many key actors were potentially involved in the recovery process. Given the reliance on volunteers of the extra-parliamentary organisation, it should come as no surprise that the highly autonomous Liberal Parliamentary Party (LPP) had an important role. Members of the LPP attended various party bodies.¹⁸ In particular, a Liberal MP always chaired the extra-parliamentary Standing

10. *Ibid.*, 867. The funding for opposition parliamentary parties was only introduced in 1975.

11. M. Steed, "The Electoral Strategy of the Liberal Party," in *Liberal Party Politics*, ed. V. Bogdanor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 79.

12. Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the NEC and Parliamentary Party held on Tuesday 24th September at the Cavendish Hotel, Eastbourne" (1970), p. 112, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 112.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Liberal Party, "Constitution of the Liberal Party as adopted at Brighton 1969" (1969), LIBERAL PARTY/ADDENDA/1, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, sections A.2, B.2 and C.

15. *Ibid.*, Section A.1.

16. D. Kavanagh, "Organization and Power in the Liberal Party," in *Liberal Party Politics*, ed. V. Bogdanor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 124.

17. For example Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held on 11th of December 1970 at the Albany Hotel, Nottingham" (1970), p. 128-132, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London; See also Kavanagh, "Organization and Power in the Liberal Party," 125.

18. Liberal Party, "Constitution of the Liberal Party as adopted at Brighton 1969," section A.4.(a). Thorpe noted in the minutes from September 1970 cited above that the reverse was also true: members of affiliated organisations could also send a delegation to the parliamentary party meeting.

Committee which ruled on policy.¹⁹ The leader, who was elected by his fellow MPs, also drafted the manifesto, albeit in consultation with the Standing Committee.²⁰ Though the extra-parliamentary party voiced its opinions through the Liberal Assembly, the party's national congress, and the Party Council, extra-parliamentary decisions were never binding on the party's MPs. Although there was also a link between these bodies and the Standing Committee²¹, in effect the LPP had a large degree of control over the policy and the political tactics of the party.

The extra-parliamentary party was governed by the National Executive Committee (NEC). Its job was simply to "direct the work of the party"²², which combined with the decentralised structure of the party to produce a largely coordinating body. The NEC had no responsibility for policy.²³ Another major power, that of candidate selection, rested with the local associations, overseen nationally not by the NEC but by the Candidates Committee, which had heavy representation from the LPP and the candidates themselves.²⁴ Relationships with the LPP were not always good. Whenever such a conflict arose, the NEC could only bank on the moral authority of being the representative of the membership. It is unsurprising, therefore, that it played this role in these cases.²⁵ Expressing the views of the extra-parliamentary organisation, however, was not primarily the role of the NEC. That fell to the Liberal Assembly, the annual national congress of the party, and the more frequent Party Council. Though the resolutions were not binding on MPs and were communicated directly to (non-Liberal) government ministers rather than through the party's own MPs, they had a certain authority within the party itself. Kavanagh notes that Liberal Party Assemblies made key strategic decisions.²⁶ They regularly passed resolutions on the party strategy. The Party Council did much of the preparatory work.

The upshot of this decentralised organisation, which the Liberals themselves considered to be eminently democratic, was that a coalition for a certain strategy could be expected to be difficult to find. At the very least, it needed the support of both the extra-parliamentary and the parliamentary wing of the party to implement, as various parts of the party had varying degrees of influence on the various dimensions of the strategy. The leadership of the Liberal Parliamentary Party was absolutely crucial because of its influence over policy and strategy – but it was fed by the extra-parliamentary organisation, as we shall see, at certain crucial moments.

This section serves to set the stage for the analysis. In doing so, it links the various independent variables of the model formulated in chapter three to their respective values and the expectations they produce. On the basis of these measurements, which will be discussed further in sections 8.2.1 through 8.2.4 below, concrete operational expectations

19. Norton, "The Liberal Party in Parliament," 150.

20. Liberal Party, "Constitution of the Liberal Party as adopted at Brighton 1969," sections A.4.(a) and F.4.

21. *Ibid.*, section F.

22. *Ibid.*, section I.4.

23. Kavanagh, "Organization and Power in the Liberal Party," 137.

24. Liberal Party, "Constitution of the Liberal Party as adopted at Brighton 1969," section H.

25. Such as when Thorpe unilaterally declared the Liberal Party willing to enter a national coalition in a party-political broadcast, as described in more detail below.

26. Kavanagh, "Organization and Power in the Liberal Party," 137.

will be formulated regarding the strategy chosen by the Liberal Party after 1970. Following this setup of the key variables, the key actors in the Liberal organisation shall also be discussed in order to set the stage for the discussion of the party's shock defeat in 1970 and the following crisis.

8.2.1 Electoral base attachment

The Liberal Party scores low on electoral base attachment. Having originated as a cadre party, the Liberal Party does not have a very clearly delineated electoral base. Curtice notes that survey research showed some tendency towards middle class support, but that any relationships that were found were weak. In Britain's class-dominated party system, this meant the Liberal Party had relatively weak demographic roots.²⁷ Next to the working-class Labour Party and the upper-class Conservatives, the Liberal Party's lack of a clear base in a class stands out even more. In fact, where the Liberal Party is strongest, in South West England, surveys showed that working-class support was stronger than middle-class support.²⁸

Indeed, party identification with the Liberals was rather weak.²⁹ As a result, voters were not particularly loyal to the party either: often, their vote for the Liberals served as a temporary retreat from either of the two main parties. In Curtice's words: "[the Liberal voter] is, above all, a temporary defector from one of the major parties".³⁰ Liberal policies were not widely known and instead the party was judged on its style and centrist credentials.³¹ The timing of a by-election or solid work on a local level could do more for the Liberal vote than its national image.

In addition, support was geographically dispersed, putting the party at a disadvantage in Britain's First Past the Post electoral system. Apart from its heartlands in the so-called 'Celtic fringe' of Southwest England, Scotland and Wales, the Liberal Party support was spread thinly across the country.³² That having been said, the Liberals did tend to win most of their seats in rural areas – which is remarkable given the fact that the membership of the party and areas where it succeeded in council elections to provide it with a sizeable number of councillors were largely urban in nature.³³ All these factors result in a lack of formal links to any particular base group.

In addition, the party's Liberal ideology and its focus on the application of reason led to a strong individualism that was to some extent antithetical to targeting a specific base. This means, in terms of our operationalisation, that the party did not just lack any formal or personal links to strengthen its attachment to its electoral base, but that that attachment was actually weakened by informal norms to the contrary. This leads to the lowest possible level of electoral base attachment. To the Liberals, their attachment to

27. J. Curtice, "Liberal Voters and the Alliance: Realignment or Protest?," in *Liberal Party Politics*, ed. V. Bogdanor (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 101.

28. *Ibid.*, 102.

29. *Ibid.*

30. *Ibid.*, 105.

31. *Ibid.*, 107.

32. *Ibid.*, 108.

33. Kavanagh, "Organization and Power in the Liberal Party," 128.

Liberalism as an ideology was what made them willing to work for the party and they were absolutely convinced that in time voters would see it was best for them too.³⁴ This contrasts with the class basis of the Labour and Conservative Parties.

Stated in terms of our model, this should contribute to an extension strategy. Since the Liberal Party has no loyalty to any particular group of voters, it becomes easier for the party to extend its vote than to focus exclusively on reinforcing the vote that it already has. In fact, the degree of ideological resistance to advocating the interests and views of one group above the others should lead to a preference for this particular sort of strategy. After all, reinforcing the base requires paying special attention to voters like one's current voters, and that would go contrary to the ideological idea that Liberalism should solely be concerned with voters as individuals and with pursuing the public interest.

8.2.2 Ideological Attachment

There is not much in the way of a single, organised Liberal ideology to be attached to. At its genesis, the Liberal Parliamentary Party from which the Liberal Party originated consisted of Whigs, Radicals and a vast mass of moderates.³⁵ They are still visible in the post-war party, despite the defection of some of the Radicals to the Labour Party and some more centre-right members joining the Conservatives as Liberal Unionists. The youth wing in particular had a rather radical bend, even to the point of advocating direct action, that brought them at loggerheads with the rest of the party.³⁶ Overall, the Liberal Party was repositioned in the post-war era as a non-socialist centrist alternative to both major parties. Nevertheless, as a party president put it, Liberals "do not take directions from [their] leaders".³⁷

However, for the purpose of this study the Liberal Party can be seen as a party strongly attached to ideology. In chapter four, ideological attachment was operationalised in terms of the degree to which a party, and in particular its elites, lets itself be guided by its ideology.³⁸ This is definitely the case for the Liberals. A large factor towards this is the lack of career prospects for many Liberals. Lacking hope of advancement, Liberal activists are altogether more inclined to put in their effort for the cause they believe in rather than their own benefit, often having stuck with the party through thick and thin.³⁹ Indeed, Dutton notes the existence of a surprising optimism in many Liberal activists as a way of sustaining the motivations of many party members.⁴⁰ Significantly, the party refused to entertain even the hypothetical idea of a compromise for government office, continuing to work for a purely liberal government. This emphasis on opposing both Labour and Tories is a clear indicator of high ideological attachment.

This Liberal belief system was strengthened by the efforts of Jo Grimond, party leader between 1955 and 1967. A prolific writer, Grimond set out to clarify the party's muddled

34. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 171.

35. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900-1984*, 3.

36. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 198-199.

37. Quoted in *ibid.*, 176.

38. Following the definition of ideology in P. Mair and C. Mudde, "The Party Family and its Study," *Annual Review of Political Science* 1 (1998): 220.

39. Wallace, "Survival and Revival," 48.

40. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 171.

image. He sought to cast the party as unashamedly progressive, seeking realignment in the party system.⁴¹ A very influential idea that developed during the Grimond years would be the idea of community politics, a vague local brand of liberalism which involved activism on very local issues and empowerment of communities. This was an outgrowth of a focus on local elections adopted by Grimond: in his own words “every time a local Liberal councillor gets a bus-stop moved to a better place he strikes a blow for the Liberal Party.”⁴² However, Grimond was not the main architect of the concept, which was championed in particular by the increasingly radical young liberals.⁴³ Though Cook notes that the model was “not particularly Liberal, nor indeed British”,⁴⁴ various local successes secured the idea’s influence and it can be regarded as part of an ideological tradition in the party of some standing by 1970, even though the idea was appropriated by the more radical Young Liberals.⁴⁵

The Liberal Party does not have a very clear ideological programme in the sense that it has a codified ideology. However, despite all this, there are various reasons the party can be qualified as strongly attached to its ideology. First of all, there is the zeal of party activists. Secondly, the idea of community politics, having recently been taken into the party’s ideological discourse, was being increasingly deployed to structure the party’s actions. Finally, and most importantly, the party appears strongly attached to the differentness of Liberalism, even if only cast as being very much “not socialism” and “not Conservatism”, as evidenced by the resistance elicited by even the slightest idea of compromising to work with either party. Making this distinction too sharp is clearly disadvantageous for a party which, like the Liberals, is unlikely ever to win a majority under FPTP. Nevertheless, this is what the Liberal Party stuck to, revealing a considerable degree of ideological attachment. In the terms of the model, this would lead to a reinforcement strategy, particularly in the field of the party programme, given how strongly the party’s ideological discourse seems to frame its actions and narrative.

8.2.3 External environment: electoral and party system

The external challenges to the Liberals are important to understanding this particular case. The Westminster system with its First Past the Post constituencies imposes severe constraints on smaller parties by underrepresenting them and disadvantages them by tactical voting, especially if, like the Liberal Party, its support is evenly spread across the country.⁴⁶ Although the Rose index of proportionality for the 1970 election is atypically high at 91.5⁴⁷, the system still disadvantaged the Liberals even at this election, with only

41. *Ibid.*, 181.

42. Quote from 1960 cited in A. Watkins, *The Liberal Dilemma* (London: MacGibbon / Kee, 1966), 108.

43. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900-1984*, 149.

44. *Ibid.*

45. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 198.

46. G. V. Golosov, “Party nationalization and the translation of votes into seats under single-member plurality electoral rules,” *Party Politics* 24, no. 2 (2018): 123.

47. Calculated by the author based on data from H. Döring and P. Manow, “Parliaments and governments database (ParlGov),” Information on parties, elections and cabinets in modern democracies, 2018, accessed December 11, 2018, <http://www.parl.gov.org>.

1% of the seats on the strength of 7.5% of the vote.⁴⁸ With only a handful of MPs elected in this way, it is hard for any party to use its influence in a house dominated by hundreds of government and opposition MPs.⁴⁹ The party has to make do with whatever MPs it can get elected. In this regard, it is worthwhile to note that most seats held by Liberal MPs were taken from the Conservatives and that these seats were concentrated in rural areas.

The Liberals in Parliament operated under severe constraints that gave them less opportunity to profile the party. Time in the House of Commons is dominated by the government and the Official Opposition.⁵⁰ The Liberals, lacking such recognition, had limited opportunity to introduce their own bills, since they had to use the facilities available for individual backbench MPs to do so. This limited the Liberal Party's visibility and necessitated a certain opportunism and willingness to be disruptive from their MPs which was not always forthcoming.⁵¹

Contrary to their own optimism, the Liberals were not an imminent threat to the two-party system. They did, however, pose a significant spoiler effect, letting in one major party or the other, or were perceived to do so. Both major parties, both Labour and Conservative, claimed the other was let in by the Liberal advance and regularly accused them of a spoiler effect. The Liberals, on their part, were not entirely sure whether to side with either of the parties. Their election literature often portrayed the two major parties as virtually identical, most famously using the slogan "Which twin is the Tory?".⁵² However, there existed in the Liberal ranks a sense of being a progressive party which led most members to develop a strong antipathy to the Conservative Party, although at previous stages in the party's history the same could be said for being anti-socialist and therefore anti-Labour.⁵³

Finally, we should make note of the fact that the Liberals did not even stand a particularly good chance of holding the balance of power in 1970. Even when the party was on the rise, the majoritarian Westminster system was not disposed towards coalitions. Neither major party seems to have even considered the possibility of allying themselves with the Liberals. Neither, as noted in section 8.2.2 above, did the Liberals themselves. Polls justified this stance: they revealed in the 60s that many voters would consider voting for the Liberal Party if they stood a realistic chance to win a majority and form a government.⁵⁴

The implications in terms of the model are as follows. The Liberal Party's electoral base is very dispersed in almost every sense and the party's problems are largely a function of it lacking a base. This is related to the electoral system. As argued in chapter three, core voters in a First Past the Post System are restricted in their opportunities to defect

48. The Rose index is calculated by subtracting the sum of the differences between each party's voteshare and seatshare at a given election, divided by two, from 100. See R. Rose, ed., *International Encyclopedia of Elections* (Washington: CQ Press, 2000)

49. Norton, "The Liberal Party in Parliament," 151.

50. *Ibid.*, 157.

51. *Ibid.*, 153.

52. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 193; Steed, "The Electoral Strategy of the Liberal Party," 87.

53. Wallace, "Survival and Revival," 57.

54. Curtice, "Liberal Voters and the Alliance," 103.

Table 8.1: Overview of the Independent Variables: the Liberal Party in 1970

Internal factors	Measurement	Expected Strategy
Electoral base attachment	Weak	Extension
Ideological attachment	Strong	Reinforcement
External environment		
Electoral system	First Past the Post	Extension
Previous election	Above average (+2,6%)	Extension

by the geographical element of the system.⁵⁵ In addition, it becomes more attractive to go after unaligned voters who will decide the election. This is compounded in the case of the Liberal Party by a geographical element: the party's small electoral base is relatively dispersed, which according to Golosov combines with the party's size to put it at a disadvantage.⁵⁶ Therefore, the Liberal Party cannot afford to prioritise those that already vote for it or those represented by its membership. The former, being rural, either already live in rural seats won by the Party or in Conservative safe seats. The latter, being more urban in nature, mostly live in Labour safe seats. The party cannot afford to be picky. The Westminster system therefore leads, as with the major parties, towards an extension strategy as the party's only route to power is to appeal to those it can win over to gain more seats.

8.2.4 Overview and expectations

Table 8.1 gives an overview of the values of the independent variables in the case of the Liberal Party. As may be seen, propositions 3 (on electoral base attachment) and proposition 4 (on ideological attachment) point in two opposite directions. Based on its weak electoral base attachment, the party should be more likely to pursue an extension strategy, whereas its strong ideological attachment should predispose it towards a reinforcement strategy. Employing propositions 5a through 5c to split the effect, the party seems likely to pursue a reinforcement strategy on the programmatic dimension and a reinforcement strategy elsewhere. In addition, the FPTP electoral system, as argued above, constrains a reinforcement strategy, which should lead to a shift towards an extension strategy in the second cycle.

8.3 The 1970 General Election defeat

In 1970, the Liberals went into the election with a new leader. Following Grimond's resignation in 1967, the Parliamentary Party elected Jeremy Thorpe, MP for North Devon. Thorpe had previously been involved in the party's fundraising and over the campaign

55. See R. Rohrschneider, "Mobilizing versus chasing: how do parties target voters in election campaigns?," *Electoral Studies* 21, no. 3 (2002): 367–382.

56. Golosov, "Party nationalization and the translation of votes into seats under single-member plurality electoral rules," 123.

proved to possess flair and showmanship.⁵⁷ Over a range of by-elections during the 1966-1970 Parliament and local elections, the party had not been able to sustain its gains of the early 60s, with a by-election in Birmingham Ladywood in 1969 as the only exception.⁵⁸ Although polls remained between 7 and 11 per cent of the vote, the electoral picture was starting to look worrisome.⁵⁹

In addition, the Liberals were facing serious structural challenges. Their financial situation had become so poor that they were only able to employ seventeen full-time election agents acting on the party's behalf in parliamentary constituencies to organise its campaign efforts there.⁶⁰ More worryingly, the party's few distinctive policies were in danger of being co-opted or outflanked. Groundbreaking by-election victories for Scottish and Welsh Nationalists threatened the party's support in Scotland and Wales by outflanking it on its longstanding policy of devolution.⁶¹ In addition, a major point of distinctiveness introduced by Grimond, the party's support for joining the European common market, was co-opted by both major parties.⁶²

At the same time, the Conservative Party had moved to a more free-market position. The 1970 election focused on the economy, contrasting this position to Labour's Keynesian economics. The Liberals were caught in the middle, having no clear profile on the issue.⁶³ In the end, the Tory move to the right paid off: in a result that surprised the pollsters, the Labour government was thrown out as the Conservative Party secured an outright majority. In the event, the Liberal vote fell by slightly over one per cent from 8.6% to 7.5% of the vote. This is not much, and as can be seen in figure 8.1⁶⁴, the party was in fact still above the average performance of the last five elections up to and including 1966 by 1,3%, down from 2,4%. Going on the operationalisation of the identity of the defectors given in chapter four, they probably mainly lost non-core voters. However, this was enough for the party to lose six of the twelve seats it had won at the previous election.

The defeat was "traumatic" for the Liberal Party.⁶⁵ The loss in seats and the failure in many seats to poll the 20% needed to stand a realistic chance at the next election dashed the optimism about a Liberal revival.⁶⁶ However, a point of light was that the trend had been bucked in urban and sub-urban areas like Rochdale, Liverpool Wavertree and Southport by hard-working and well-regarded local Liberal councillors.⁶⁷ When compared to the optimism described in section 8.2 above, the contrast with the national result is painfully obvious. The 1970 election result therefore served as a reminder of a harsh electoral reality: the Liberal Party was on the periphery of British politics, without a

57. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 196.

58. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 194; Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900-1984*, 147.

59. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 194.

60. *Ibid.*, 195.

61. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 195; Wallace, "Survival and Revival," 63.

62. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 195.

63. *Ibid.*

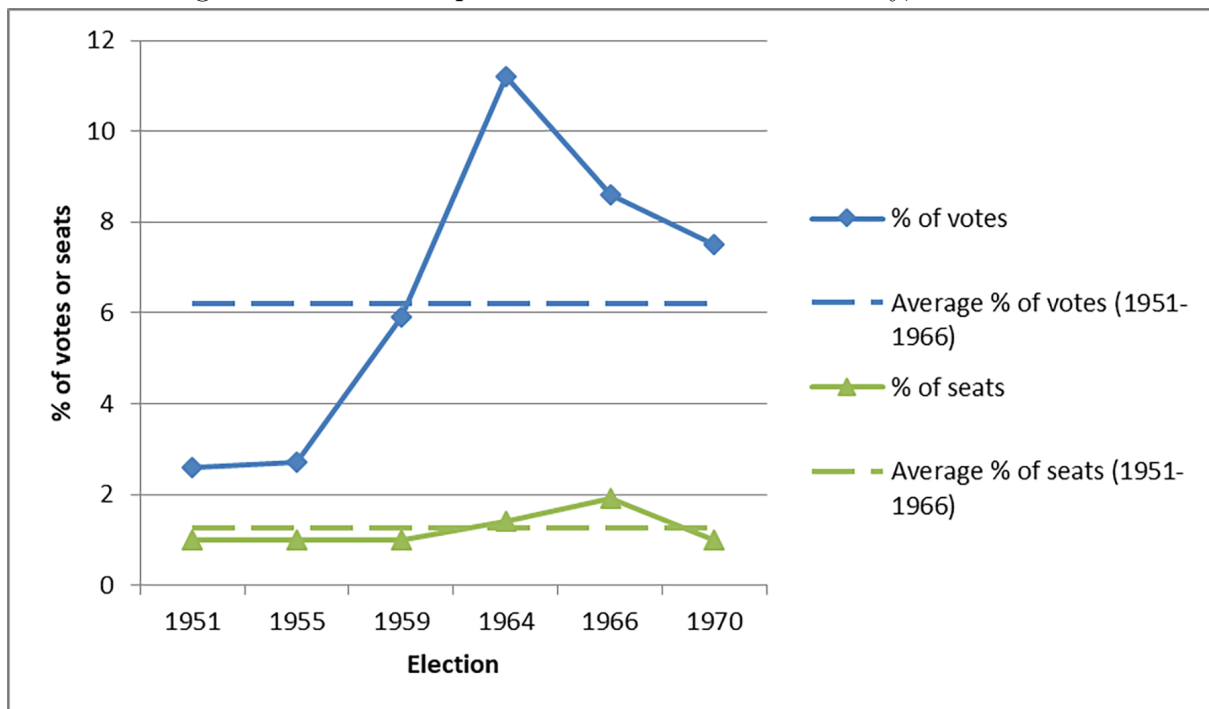
64. Based on data from Döring and Manow, "Parliaments and governments database (ParlGov)."

65. S. Mole, "Community Politics," in *Liberal Party Politics*, ed. V. Bogdanor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983), 258.

66. Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900-1984*, 151; Mole, "Community Politics," 258.

67. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 196.

Figure 8.1: Electoral performance of the Liberal Party, 1951-1970



solid base of supporters, at the mercy of the vagaries of an electoral and party system that disadvantaged it. It was from this nadir of Liberal fortunes that the party departed as it searched for a way to regain the momentum it had enjoyed during the Grimond years.

8.4 The recovery strategy

The first stage of the model after an electoral shock is the ‘whether’-stage. At this point, the question arises whether there was a recognition of the need to change anything at all. Whether a party feels the need to change is the result of the existence of a coalition for change among those actors making the key decisions, influenced by the extent of the defeat and previous experiences. In addition, the fact that the Liberals were strangely optimistic about the possibility of a breakthrough gives us even more reason to consider the option that they did not feel the need for change immediately. One major factor that might have impacted on this is the fact that even though the party lost half its seats, definitely qualifying as a crisis, it only lost a single percentage point of its share of the popular vote. This could strengthen voices for business-as-usual, since the development of the share of the vote can be interpreted as a minor setback.

Let us consider the immediate reaction in the NEC to the defeat. Discussing the campaign, the consensus seemed to be that morale was high despite the losses.⁶⁸ Lack of

68. Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, “Minutes of the National Executive Committee Meeting held 4th July 1970 at the National Liberal Club” (1970), p. 93-99, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 96.

resources was a prime candidate for a diagnosis.⁶⁹ There was also a discussion whether the lack of unity was a strength or a weakness. Although two members of the NEC reported that they would be moving for a review of strategy and organisation at the party council, the NEC itself did not pass a resolution about this potential overhaul, and no resolution was even proposed.⁷⁰ The reaction of the NEC was therefore optimistic despite the huge loss in seats. In fact, the resolution that was passed at the meeting was a reaffirmation of Liberal policies and practices so far, including a reaffirmation of the policy rejecting cooperation with either major party.⁷¹

In addition, the NEC reaffirmed its support for electoral reform, noting that the result of the election proved the need to change the electoral system. Though framed in general terms as opposition to a government without a majority of the voters behind it and the denial of representation to “millions of voters”, this can be seen as part of the response to the defeat.⁷² It was justified to blame the defeat in part on the electoral system that disadvantaged the party. This would also reduce the necessity of further changes. The 1970 Assembly adopted an extensive resolution on party strategy and tactics, which lays the groundwork for some of the early reaction to the defeat by explicitly stating its intent “to maintain the independence of the Liberal Party in opposition to both Conservatism and Socialism”.⁷³

The party, then, seemed divided on whether its current course had to change in response to the defeat. However, the defeat definitely showed that the electoral system posed great challenges to the party and that a liberal breakthrough was certainly not as close as they thought. However slow and scattered, a response to the crisis developed gradually over the 1970-1974 period.

8.4.1 Organisational changes, 1970-1974

In organisational terms, the Liberals saw themselves as a very democratic organisation. This owed much to their decentralised party structure and the space given to the multitude of opinions within the party. Since members, in the eyes of the Liberal decision-makers, already had a large say within the party, it is perhaps not surprising that further expansion of membership influence was not really on the agenda. Although there had been some bitterness over the ascent of Thorpe to the leadership, Stark notes that the matter of leadership elections did not resurface until 1975, well after the 1970-1974 crisis.⁷⁴

If there were struggles over the party organisation, it was largely between the various institutional actors. The Liberal Parliamentary Party and the NEC butted heads more than once over their relationship to each other.⁷⁵ The NEC resented it whenever the LPP

69. Liberal Party, NEC, “Minutes of the National Executive Committee Meeting held 4th July 1970 at the National Liberal Club,” 96.

70. *Ibid.*

71. *Ibid.*, 95-97.

72. *Ibid.*, 95.

73. Liberal Party, Liberal Assembly, “Resolutions adopted at the Liberal Party Assembly 1970” (1970), LIBERAL/8/4, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 5.

74. L. P. Stark, *Choosing a Leader: Party Leadership Contests from Macmillan to Blair* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 71.

75. Liberal Party, NEC, “Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the NEC and Parliamentary Party held on

went beyond the expressed statements of party policy without consulting the executive, especially on the matter of political tactics. However, the matter was not resolved.

There were also concerns that the dispersed nature of the party organisation hampered its effectiveness, particularly in campaigning. A report by retiring North Cornwall agent, John Spiller, reported that the rarity of full-time agents contributed negatively to the party's electoral fortunes.⁷⁶ This observed organisational weakness might be part of the reason why the party took concrete steps to strengthen the coordinating functions of its organisation. Most importantly, the party created a national membership scheme.⁷⁷

These concrete reforms can be seen as part of the slight concentration of powers in the hands of the national organisation. The move to create a national membership ensured that the party knew where its members were and could more easily use them as resources.⁷⁸ In addition, the Assembly requested that the regional parties develop strategies to be integrated into a national whole, with organisation tailored to this new strategy.⁷⁹ These reforms, as well as the thrust of the Spiller report, represent a slight internal democratisation, shifting power away from the basic unit of party organisation – the association – to the national level. This forms part of an overall extension strategy, since it increases the opportunity of influencing the democratic decision-making process for the party elite at the expense of ordinary members.

8.4.2 Programmatic changes 1970-1974

One problem in analysing the programmatic component of the Liberal Party's recovery strategy is that there was limited opportunity for strategy. The party's policies were not very well-known to voters. In Parliament, the limited amount of time available under the Ten Minute Rule for Private Members' Bills posed an obstacle to implementing their policies and making them known. It is illustrative of the lack of capacity for the LPP to get things done that the Council archives contain correspondence with Conservative Ministers directly about policy resolutions, rather than expectations on the parliamentary party to try to get them implemented.

Especially when it comes to the parliamentary party, therefore, all this begs the question whether there was anything strategic about the programmatic choices made in Parliament. Occasionally, there is a definite sign of political strategy involved with the activities of Liberal MPs, such as with three 1972/1973 bills on industrial relations and the opposition

Tuesday 24th September at the Cavendish Hotel, Eastbourne," 112; Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held 29th June 1974 at 1pm at the National Liberal Club" (1974), p. 168-176, LIBERAL/1/16, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 174-176; Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the Joint Meeting of the NEC and Parliamentary Party held 11th July 1974 at 6pm at the House of Commons" (1974), p. 178-179, LIBERAL/1/16, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 178-179.

76. John. Spiller, "Memorandum on Liberal Party Organisation." (), p. 22-37, LIBERAL/2/9, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 30-31.

77. Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held 28th of November 1970 at 10am at the National Liberal Club" (1970), p. 119-126, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 123.

78. *Ibid.*

79. Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at the Liberal Party Assembly 1970," 5-6.

to the government's 1971 Immigration Act.⁸⁰ These formed the basis of two party-wide campaigns in those years supported by the NEC, trying to win over voters on these issues and gain attention for key Liberal policy pledges.⁸¹ For example, the most extensive focus of parliamentary activity, the Industrial Relations campaign, was concerned with implementing 1970 pledges like industrial democracy in the form of works councils.⁸² It is also connected with the first resolution reacting to the defeat in which the NEC called for the party to strongly oppose the incoming government's policies in this area.⁸³ It could be argued that this is part of a reinforcement strategy highlighting the party values, especially since industrial democracy and co-ownership had been part of the new Liberal identity rapidly built up by Grimond during his leadership, much like the concept of community politics.

There is very little strategy amidst most of the resolutions of the party council. At any particular Council session, a multitude of different resolutions were discussed. There seems to be little in terms of a general direction emanating from these resolutions. They are concerned with topical issues, or with policy details, rather than purposefully developing certain areas of party policy.⁸⁴ There is, therefore, a lot of "noise" involved in using the Council and Assembly resolutions as indicators of programmatic changes.

There is one exception to all this: the party was very purposeful in its determination to make the idea of community politics an absolute cornerstone of its political and electoral agenda. Though the NEC did not mention the theme in its first meeting⁸⁵, the 1970 Assembly passed a strategy resolution to make community politics the party's "prime strategic emphasis".⁸⁶ A NEC working party set up to implement the resolution then focused primarily on community politics and urban areas.⁸⁷ This led to the publication of a community politics guide for those unfamiliar with the concept.⁸⁸ A community

80. Liberal Party, "Liberal Candidates Handbook: Pathways to Power" (1974), LIBERAL/15/17, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 318; 326.

81. Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held on Saturday, March 20th, 1971 at 1pm at the National Liberal Club" (1971), p. 144-150, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 147; Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held on Friday, 21st of May 1971, at 7:30pm at the Municipal Annexe, Liverpool" (1971), p. 157-162, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 158; Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held on Saturday, 26th of June 1971 at 1pm at the National Liberal Club" (1971), p. 163-169, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 167.

82. Liberal Party, "Liberal Candidates Handbook: Pathways to Power," 318.

83. Liberal Party, NEC, "Minutes of the National Executive Committee Meeting held 4th July 1970 at the National Liberal Club," 96.

84. See for example: Liberal Party. Party Council, "Resolutions Passed at the Meeting of the Liberal Party Council held at Leeds on 28th of July 1973" (1973), p. 63-65, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 63; Liberal Party. Party Council, "Resolutions Passed at the Meeting of the Liberal Party Council held on 27 January 1973 at Birmingham" (1973), p. 163-164, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 163-165.

85. Liberal Party, NEC, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held on Saturday, 26th of June 1971 at 1pm at the National Liberal Club," 167.

86. Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at the Liberal Party Assembly 1970," 5-6.

87. Liberal Party, NEC, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held 28th of November 1970 at 10am at the National Liberal Club," 122.

88. Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held on Friday, 23rd

politics co-ordinator was appointed to lead the charge.⁸⁹ This focus was subsequently reaffirmed by the Council, which requested that the general election be fought around the theme⁹⁰, a point of view echoed by the 1973 Assembly.⁹¹ Andrew Ellis, a member of the Standing Committee, produced an extensive paper for the Council containing detailed policy implications to be explored for use in a general election campaign themed around community politics in this way.⁹²

The electoral manifesto presented in February 1974 cemented this by including a prominent defence of the theme in its first pages.⁹³ However fluid and diffuse the concept of community politics is, therefore, it proved to be a major theme for the party and its intensification forms the main part of the party's programmatic recovery efforts. The amount of trust the party had in community politics stems from both internal and external sources. First of all, it had been inaugurated into the ideological traditions of the party relatively quickly, as it had gradually taken shape under successful former leader, Jo Grimond. Secondly, since there was a greater degree of liberal success at the local level, it seems logical that the party – with such a strong representation of councillors – would search for the solution there. Both link up with the Liberal conviction that their ideology was a strength to lead to this reinforcement strategy. Convinced as the Liberals appeared that their ideology would win out in the end, a concept such as community politics which had been linked to local successes seemed an obvious choice to focus on.

Oddly enough, the manifesto for the October 1974 election does not mention the community politics theme even once.⁹⁴ The campaign handbook for activists and candidates produced for that second election, however, mentions that various themes related to community politics “permeate all the policies (...) in this handbook”.⁹⁵ It therefore still functioned as a basis on which party policy was built, but it was no longer referenced very explicitly at least in the manifesto. Perhaps, having a shot at the balance of power convinced the Liberals to render a more concrete policy offering as a potential coalition

of July 1971 at 7:30pm at the National Liberal Club” (1971), p. 170-176, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 176; Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, “Minutes of the NEC meeting held on Saturday the 21st of August 1971 at 1pm at the National Liberal Club” (1971), p. 177-182, LIBERAL/1/6, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 179-180.

89. Liberal Party. Party Council, “Minutes of the Meeting of the Liberal Party Council held on Saturday 14 April 1973 at 1am at the Ship Hotel, Reading” (1973), p. 97-108, LIBERAL/2/4, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 103.

90. Liberal Party. Party Council, “Private Business Motions introduced at the Liberal Party Council held 24th of November 1973” (1973), p. 18-19, LIBERAL/3/1, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 19.

91. Liberal Party. Liberal Assembly, “Resolutions adopted at Southport 18th - 22nd September” (1973), 73A, p.15-16, LIBERAL/8/4, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 15-16.

92. A. Ellis, “A Community Politics Theme for the General Election,” Paper circulated to the Liberal Party Council, dated 14 January 1974, revised 4 June 1974 (1974), p. 286-291, LIBERAL/3/2, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 286-291.

93. Liberal Party, “Change the Face of Britain: the Liberal Party Manifesto 1974,” 1974, accessed November 21, 2017, <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/lib74feb.htm>.

94. Liberal Party, “Why Britain needs a Liberal Government: the Liberal Party Manifesto October 1974,” 1974, accessed November 21, 2017, <http://www.politicsresources.net/area/uk/man/lib74oct.htm>.

95. Liberal Party, “Liberal Candidates Handbook: Pathways to Power,” ix.

deal. Nevertheless, it remains clear that the focus of the Liberal Party on its by-then trusted theme of community politics had intensified as a result of the crisis, leading to this reinforcement strategy. This is important for the analysis, since it is deviant from the rest of the strategy. However, this deviation matches the pattern of the party's low electoral base attachment and high ideological attachment in such a way that it provides support for proposition 5 that the former impacts upon the tactical and organisational dimensions more strongly, while the latter impacts the ideological dimension more strongly.

8.4.3 Tactical Changes, 1970-1974

The greatest shift in Liberal thinking as a result of the 1970 election result, however, occurred in the field of political tactics. This had been a long-standing debate in the Liberal Party on where to stand, although Steed considered this debate "sterile".⁹⁶ This question arose because of the rule in the British electoral system by which polling beneath 12.5% of the votes in a constituency lost the party a 150-pound deposit.⁹⁷ This would make it expensive to run in a large amount of seats where the party stood no chance. In addition to this, the expenses of supporting a campaign in each constituency also figured into the equation.

It should be understood that the aim at this point was not in question: the party dogmatically held to the idea of a majority Liberal government.⁹⁸ The only question was how to get there, via focus on winnable seats or with as broad a front as possible. The Spiller report reveals that this debate was alive and well in the party after 1970. The terminology is interesting because it corresponds almost perfectly with the descriptors of both ends of the tactical dimension: a broader focus or a narrower one. Spiller himself proposed a sort of compromise which seems to have originated from a Conservative tactic he observed: a narrow front within a broad front, in which the party would fight every seat (a costly endeavour) but concentrate most of its resources where it could win.⁹⁹

The 1970 Assembly, in the strategy resolution of that year opted for "the broadest possible front".¹⁰⁰ In 1973, the Assembly again reaffirmed this commitment, this time to a "broad front".¹⁰¹ It is good to remind oneself of the fact that it was altogether unclear if the party could follow up on this intention in practice.¹⁰² After all, as has been noted above, the Liberals hardly had the luxury of having many potential candidates due to their size, and certainly not evenly divided between the constituencies which had the power to decide their own candidates. In this case, they did follow up on the intention

96. Steed, "The Electoral Strategy of the Liberal Party," 79.

97. *Representation of the People Act 1918*, 8 Geo. V. c. 64., section 26(1) and 27(1) as originally enacted.

98. As shown by the resolutions adopted by the Liberal Assemblies of 1970 and 1973 and the NEC: Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at the Liberal Party Assembly 1970"; Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at Southport 18th - 22nd September"; Liberal Party, NEC, "Minutes of the National Executive Committee Meeting held 4th July 1970 at the National Liberal Club," 95-97.

99. Spiller, "Memorandum on Liberal Party Organisation.," 31.

100. Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at the Liberal Party Assembly 1970," 5.

101. Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at Southport 18th - 22nd September," 15-16.

102. As late as July 1974, the NEC doubted whether the 600-candidate target would be met. Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held on Friday 26th July 1974 at 7:30pm at the Victoria Road Church Institute, Leicester" (1974), p. 138-145, LIBERAL/1/16, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 143.

to pursue a broad front, leading to the broadest slate of Liberal candidates in years, with the Liberals fielding 517 candidates in February 1974, and an almost full slate of 619 in October that year.¹⁰³ By comparison, the front of 1970 was rather narrower with a mere 332 candidates fielded, just over half of the seats.¹⁰⁴

Centralised control over the party's candidates was somewhat of a luxury. Though the NEC set ambitious targets, their relative insignificance and reliance on volunteer activists made it hard to find candidates. This is a significant fact, because it explains why the Liberals did not move much on their selection rules. They simply could not, and not just because of the high degree of control local associations had on selection. Even if they had found more candidates, it was hard to predict what the parliamentary party would look like, since the FPTP system made Liberal fortunes everywhere quite unpredictable. The archival record underscores this: even though they had decided upon a broader slate of candidates, the NEC minutes in mid-1974 note that it was hard to find candidates to bring the party close to the full slate it intended.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, the party succeeded, perhaps because of the enthusiasm generated by the prospect of a breakthrough, which was a possibility after the February 1974 result which saw the Liberals hold the balance of power.

The Liberals, therefore, consistently opted for a broad front. In addition, the Assembly directed that more attention be given to the major cities, where the Liberals were not strong electorally.¹⁰⁶ The resolutions do not include a reasoning for a broad front. However, there is a likely candidate explanation. As seen earlier, the Liberals had a strong tradition of individualism. They lacked a well-defined constituency. In such circumstances, attempting to broaden the base seems the logical solution, since this would open up the possibility of gaining the durable support of the groups won over by this strategy. This was certainly the case for urban voters: the party was not strong electorally in the cities except perhaps occasionally in local elections, but its membership was primarily urban. There was, therefore, a reasonable prospect that by focusing on winning over voters outside the largely rural areas where the party already held seats, the party would be able to help increase its core vote.

More importantly, however, the electoral objectives of the party itself began to shift. While still committed to a Liberal government as the end goal, there was a large shift in the attitude towards the other parties. In the 1970 strategy resolution and in resolutions tabled at earlier Assemblies, the Liberals had still rejected any cooperation with the major parties.¹⁰⁷ Believing Liberal breakthrough to be around the corner, the Assembly defined the party's role as one acting both inside and outside the political establishment. This began to shift over the 1970-1974 period.

As the party continued to succeed in by-elections between 1972 and 1974 and won a local election victory in Liverpool in the 1973 local elections, becoming the largest

103. Steed, "The Electoral Strategy of the Liberal Party," 86; Cook, *A Short History of the Liberal Party, 1900-1984*, 158.

104. Steed, "The Electoral Strategy of the Liberal Party," 81.

105. Liberal Party, NEC, "Minutes of the NEC meeting held on Friday 26th July 1974 at 7:30pm at the Victoria Road Church Institute, Leicester," 143.

106. Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at the Liberal Party Assembly 1970," 5.

107. *Ibid.*

group on the local council amidst a national win of around 900 council seats, it looked more likely that the Liberals would hold the balance of power in the new Parliament.¹⁰⁸ The 1973 Assembly resolution on strategy declared that the party should look into the possible scenarios for government participation or influence on government policy in case the party held the balance of power.¹⁰⁹ A November 1973 Party Council paper discusses the possibilities at length. The document itself was open-ended, posing questions for the party to consider. It did, however, state a rudimentary negotiating position, including electoral reform.¹¹⁰ This allowed Thorpe, after the February 1974 election, to negotiate with the Conservative Leader Ted Heath, although he was ultimately unsuccessful.

This sparked further discussion in the party. At Brantwood in June 1974, the Standing Committee discussed the issue again.¹¹¹ This time, it was concluded that the party should make clear the terms of its support before the general election rather than afterwards.¹¹² The same month, Thorpe infuriated the NEC by commenting in a broadcast that he would enter into a government of national unity.¹¹³ Interestingly, while the NEC privately reprimanded Thorpe, his action publicly forced a resolution of the NEC on his terms.¹¹⁴ The Liberals ruled out any coalition with either the Labour or Conservative Party separately, but agreed they would join a national government.¹¹⁵

Though the steps were clearly incremental, the shift from a total rejection of any cooperation whatsoever to support for a national government and open discussion on other options is significant. It presages later coalitions and inter-party agreements which the Liberals would enter into with Labour and further down the line, the SDP-Liberal Alliance. This relaxation of its strict role assumptions must be seen as part of an extension strategy – in order to increase the breadth of the party’s appeal, it could no longer remain in the margins with the balance of power in its sights. As part of a broader package including the broad front and the attempt to make headway in the cities, it appears to be related to the mechanics of the electoral system and their consequences for party competition. After all, opportunities for a small party to make the difference were few and far between, and to make a meaningful impact, the party simply had to shift its strategy. The party’s low electoral base attachment might also have figured into its preference for

108. Dutton, *A History of the Liberal Party since 1900*, 201-202.

109. Liberal Assembly, “Resolutions adopted at Southport 18th - 22nd September,” 15-16.

110. A. Butt-Philip, M. Steed, and W. Wallace, “What About the Balance of Power?,” Paper circulated to the Liberal Party Council in February 1974 (1974), p. 365-371, LIBERAL/3/2, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 365-371.

111. Liberal Party. Liberal Party Organisation, “After the Next Election: Report on the Standing Committee’s Discussion at Brantwood” (1974), p. 277-280, LIBERAL/3/2, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London, 277-280.

112. *Ibid.*, 280.

113. Liberal Party, NEC, “Minutes of the NEC meeting held 29th June 1974 at 1pm at the National Liberal Club,” 174-175.

114. Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, “Resolution passed by National Executive Committee, 29.6.74” (1974), p. 181, LIBERAL/1/16, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London; Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, “Resolution passed by National Executive Committee, 29.6.74” (1974), p. 182, LIBERAL/1/16, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London.

115. Liberal Party. National Executive Committee, “Resolution passed by National Executive Committee, 29.6.74” (1974), p. 181, LIBERAL/1/16, Liberal Party Archives, British Library of Political and Economic Science, London.

a broad front.

8.5 Conclusion

What happened after the Liberal defeat of 1970? The diffuse character of the response, the labyrinthine party organisation and the slow pace at which the recovery strategy picked up make a judgment on the case relatively difficult. Many of the changes summarised in table 8.2, especially those that concern the choice of coalition partners, only reveal their true importance when seen as part of a development that continues after 1974 with the Lib-Lab Pact, during which Thorpe's successor David Steel led his party to support the Labour government after it had lost its majority in 1977, and the Alliance with the SDP from 1981, eventually merging into the Liberal Democrats in 1988. Overall, it can be said that the Liberals followed a slow but sure shift away from the traditional position of rejecting any sort of accommodation with the major parties, leading to an extension strategy as expected on the basis of the identity of defectors and the constraints of FPTP. This was not the case in all parts of the strategy, though: in the field of party programme, the increasing emphasis on the idea of community politics, which had become firmly entrenched in Liberal discourse, constitutes a reinforcement strategy, focusing more on an issue that by now had become traditional.

The fact that the nature of the defeat as a crisis can be disputed due to the fact that the loss of votes did not match the loss of seats makes the Liberal case a means of testing the propositions on what makes parties decide whether to act. Though the literature has called the 1970 defeat "traumatic", the immediate action such a trauma would imply was not forthcoming.¹¹⁶ The NEC, the Liberal Parliamentary Party and other organs seem to have been intent on carrying on or at least not to make major changes.¹¹⁷ This may be due to the limited loss of votes, which made it possible to direct the blame for the seat loss to the electoral system rather than the party itself. More importantly, assembling an internal party coalition for change was made more complicated by the complex structures of the party organisation and the dispersed distribution of powers within them. Neither the NEC, the LPP nor the party council could effectively take the lead on its own.

Here another factor comes into play as well: the party's small size. The small size of the Liberal Party, combined with the FPTP electoral system, severely constrained the party's options. In fields such as candidate selection, organisation or even tactics, the party had a narrower array of alternatives open to it than the model assumed. This poses the question whether the model can serve to explain the actions of small parties like the Liberal Party or whether it is more suited to explaining the recovery strategies of major parties.

The small size of the Liberal Party and its dispersed support base can nevertheless be linked to the outcome of an overall extension strategy, especially in tactics. The Liberal Party's support is not just relatively small but also dispersed across the country

116. Mole, "Community Politics," 258.

117. Liberal Party, NEC, "Minutes of the National Executive Committee Meeting held 4th July 1970 at the National Liberal Club"; Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at the Liberal Party Assembly 1970," 5.

Table 8.2: Overview of the Liberal Party recovery strategy, 1970-1974

Cycle	Organisational	Programmatic	Tactical	Overall
<i>First cycle, 1970-1974</i>	Internal de-democratisation (<i>extension</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creation of national membership (<i>extension</i>) • Integration of regional party strategies into national whole (<i>extension</i>) 	Highlight traditional values (<i>reinforcement</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Party-wide campaigns on immigration and industrial relations (<i>reinforcement</i>) • Community politics strategy (<i>reinforcement</i>) 	Broader targeting (<i>extension</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1974 election fought on "broadest front possible" (<i>extension</i>) • Focus on major cities (<i>extension</i>) • Discussions on balance of power situation (<i>extension</i>) 	Extension
<i>Second cycle, February-October 1974</i>	Internal de-democratisation (<i>extension</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unchanged from previous cycle. 	Highlight traditional values (<i>reinforcement</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community Politics not explicitly mentioned in manifesto; campaign guide mentions it "permeates all policies" (<i>reinforcement</i>) 	Broader targeting (<i>extension</i>) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support for cooperation with major parties in national government; other options discussed (<i>extension</i>) 	Extension

both geographically and demographically. Quite apart from the fact that its ideological individualism leads to the rejection of having a base at all, an extension strategy is the logical result of its small size, especially since its electoral goals also involved forming a single-party majority government. After all, the party, due to its small size, cannot be picky about the voters it does or does not want. Wherever they won seats, be it in the countryside or in the cities, such as in Liverpool, the Liberals tried to latch onto the votes they won. Had they taken any different route, they would have lost their optimal course of action. Seen this way, the decision to pursue a broad front and focus on being able to campaign everywhere through a more coordinated organisation is indeed the result of the Liberal Party's relationship to its voters.

How, then, should the 'odd one out', the programmatic reinforcement strategy focusing on the traditional issue of community politics, be seen? The resolutions of the Liberal Assembly and the Party Council show that the programmatic efforts towards community politics were strongly informed by party members simply believing this idea to be right in ideological terms.¹¹⁸ In other words: the strong attachment to Liberal ideology and the tradition of the party produced the strong focus on community politics. To many Liberals, community politics had become the core of the party. In addition, community politics was a convenient strategy to a party which was considerably more successful at the local than at the national level.

This analysis provides evidence for proposition 5a through 5c formulated in chapter 3 that the programmatic strategy is determined by ideological attachment whereas the organisational and tactical components are impacted more by electoral base attachment. In the case of the Liberal Party, this is clearly suggested by the evidence. The way the party related to its support in the country, both as a result of its dispersion and of the disadvantages imposed by the electoral system, led to a strategy that ended up as a tactical and organisational extension strategy. At the same time, the party's strong attachment to its ideological tradition led to the party championing what it regarded as its traditional issues. This provides further support for propositions 5a through 5c that the effects of electoral base attachment and ideological attachment on the recovery strategy are differential, with the former impacting the tactical and organisational areas and the latter impacting more strongly on the programmatic dimension.

118. Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at the Liberal Party Assembly 1970," 5-6; Liberal Party Council, "Private Business Motions introduced at the Liberal Party Council held 24th of November 1973," 19; Liberal Assembly, "Resolutions adopted at Southport 18th - 22nd September," 15-16; Ellis, "A Community Politics Theme for the General Election," 286-291.

